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Defending Das Institut

The Stakes of U.S. Anti-LGBT Violence

Locusts and Wild Honey

March 10th, 2023

All over the U.S. imperial core, the trumpets of war are being sounded against queer communities. More than that: reactionary forces are, to put it as bluntly as possible, planning to exterminate us. Consider the following:

- More than 300 anti-LGBTQIA+ bills have been filed in 2023 alone. It's only March. Some of these bills include anti-crossdressing laws (similar to those used in New York in the 60s to justify raids on gay bars), all out bans on *any* gender affirming care for minors, the outlawing of LGBT-inclusive education, and even a basis for the state to kidnap trans children from supportive parents.
- At CPAC—the self-described “largest and most influential gathering of conservatives in the world”—Daily Wire host Michael Knowles called for “transgenderism” to be “eradicated from public life entirely.” This was met with thunderous applause.
- At the same time that queer folks are being demonized as “pedophiles” and “groomers” by right-wing pundits,

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Republican politician Ron Desantis is advocating for pedophilia to be punishable by death. He has also requested private medical data on trans people in Florida universities.

- Ronny Boy is aiming for the White House against fellow Republican Donald Trump who himself is promising to “protect children from left-wing gender insanity.”

I could go on but it seems fairly obvious to me that the plan is to use a combination of violent suppression, state-sanctioned terrorism, and even murder to wipe us out or, if that fails, force us into some kind of nationwide panopticonic closet.

This should be horrifying but not surprising. Genocide permeates the logic of North American settler societies from the stolen land it sits on to the populations brought here in chains to the resources it has violently stolen from the rest of the world. So it is no great shock that it rears its head again as the queer communities begin to gain their footing in the contemporary United States.

Queerness, however, pre-dates the modern world and the U.S. by... forever. In the Ancient Mediterranean (the so-called “Cradle of Western Civilization”), Egyptian manicurists and same-sex partners Niankhkhnun and Khnumhotep were buried in a couple’s tomb together back in 2400 BC; and little needs to be said about the permeating gayness of Greece and Rome. Even when one looks to the Bible, Jesus himself undermines Old Testament prohibitions against kinds of gender transition (Deuteronomy 23:1, 22:5) and celebrates first-century “eunuchs who have been so from birth,” “eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others” and “eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:12).

Outside of Southern Europe, Northern Africa, and Southwest Asia, same-sex relationships and gender conformity are

heavily documented both in the past and the present. The Indigenous North American term “Two-Spirit” refers to a host of tribe-specific gender nonconforming categories that people can inhabit; the Maori have their own word *Takatāpuito* positively describe sexual and gender nonconformity; and in Oaxaca, Mexico, the Zapotec people generally accept *Muxes* (what non-Zapotec would call trans women) as a third gender.

The point is: We have always been here, and we will always be here.

However, after centuries of European imperialism and colonialism, much of the world has been made to believe that the cis-hetero nuclear family is the “natural” order of human identity and relationships. It would not be until the 19th century that an institutional and academic project based around progressive sexology (what would one day be called gender & sexuality studies) would emerge in the German Weimar Republic. This was *Das Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* (‘Institute of Sex Research’).

Founded in 1919 by Magnus Hirschfeld, Arthur Kronfeld, and Friedrich Wertheim, *Das Institut* was a combination research library, archive, museum, medical center, lecture hall, and more. Some of the things they provided were (if you’ll permit me another list):

- Public education around sexual and gender diversity, sexually transmitted diseases, safe BDSM practices, approaches to sex and gender in other cultures, etc.
- Birth control
- Gender affirming care
- Employment for local gay and trans communities

And it was through *Das Institut* that the first formal archive of works on homosexuality was ever compiled, facial

feminization and masculinization surgeries were pioneered, and the gender spectrum was ‘scientifically’ mapped for one of the first times in recorded history. Undergirding this research and service too were the more political motivations of women’s emancipation, LGBT rights, and sexual freedom; the motto of the organization being *per scientiam ad justitiam* (‘through science to justice’).

Brandy Schillace puts it well when she writes: “That such an institute existed as early as 1919, recognizing the plurality of gender identity and offering support, comes as a surprise to many. It should have been the bedrock on which to build a bolder future.” But it all came to an end when the Nazi Regime came to power. In 1933, Nazi troops raided *Das Institut* and, in one of the first and largest of its kind, held a public burning of more than 20,000 books on the history and science of sexuality and gender—some of them one of a kind. In one swift move, one of the most important steps forward for LGBTQIA+ inclusion in Europe (and the world) was essentially wiped off the map. This was, of course, simply a prelude to the genocide that would come next.

As Lucy Diavolo argues, “The Nazi youth harassment of Hirschfeld and the violent attacks against his institute are a frightening mirror of modern-day attacks on LGBTQ centers.” In this way, *Das Institut* for us today is not a building or even a single institution but rather a network that spans our queer studies programs, our community centers, our health clinics, our sapphic reading groups, our MLM Internet forums, and beyond. All of these distinct but connected collectives are working to establish spaces, literatures, histories, cultures, medicines, and sciences for those of us who are considered nonconforming in our gender and sexuality. Our *Das Institut* is a global network—especially so thanks to the Internet—but I speak here specifically of the fascistic threats in the U.S. like the terroristic invasions of drag events, book banning and burning, and the various other preludes to extermination

outlined above. In response, we must then *defend Das Institut* in all its forms. We must, alongside other antifascists (like those armed comrades already defending drag shows), ensure that never again will *Das Institut* be destroyed. We will not let reactionary terror and state violence forcibly set our communities back as they did from 1933-1945 in Germany. We are entitled to our existence and will defend ourselves at all costs.

“*Let It Be Known that Homosexuals Are Not Cowards*”
—Willem Arondeus, gay Dutch resistance fighter, before his execution by the Nazis for destroying records of Dutch Jews.