



## **Radical Bodies, Radical Desires: Sex and Gender in Weimar Berlin**

---

Summer Semester 2025: 14 April– 18 July 2025

### **CATEGORY**

History and Cultural Studies

### **COURSE STRUCTURE**

2 contact hours à 45 min per week (summer semester: 14 weeks)

### **WEEKLY SCHEDULE**

#### **Time**

Tuesday, 16-18 c.t. (4:15 pm – 5.45 pm)

#### **Place**

Hausvogteiplatz 5-7, Room 0323-26

### **COURSE LANGUAGE**

This course is taught in English, including the readings. For the understanding of the texts and the discussions in class, language-level B2 is required.

**Language requirements** (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages)  
English B2

### **TARGET GROUP**

International exchange students of all subjects with a strong interest in the course topic. Berlin Perspectives courses are designed for undergraduate students. Master students may participate if their home university agrees. Regular degree-seeking students can select the course within the elective part of their study program (überfachlicher Wahlpflichtbereich üWP).

Students should have taken a gender studies and/or a literature class before and have an interest in working with both primary sources and critical texts.

### **CREDITS = 5 ECTS**

The Berlin Perspectives courses are offered by the Career Center as part of the elective program üWP. Registration takes place via Agnes.

All courses are accredited according to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

## **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

The Weimar Republic (1918-1933) was a period of remarkable cultural transformation and social upheaval in Germany. Against the backdrop of economic and political turmoil, gender and sexual nonconformity flourished in Berlin and other urban centers, challenging traditional norms and giving rise to vibrant LGBTQ+ communities.

This interdisciplinary course examines how gender and sexuality were experienced, represented, and contested in Weimar-era Germany. Drawing on a diverse array of primary sources - including theater, visual art, literature, film, and theoretical texts - we will explore how marginalized individuals and communities navigated, expressed, and politicized their identities.

Key topics will include:

- The emergence of sexual science and the conceptualization of the "third sex"
- The proliferation of queer spaces, subcultures, and social movements in 1920s Berlin
- Intersections of gender, sexuality, race, class, and disability
- Artistic and literary depictions of gender fluidity and erotic desire
- Medicalization, criminalization, and the state's response to gender/sexual nonconformity
- The rise of fascism and the violent backlash against LGBTQ+ rights

Through close engagement with primary sources and cutting-edge scholarly work, students will gain a nuanced understanding of the complex, often contradictory dynamics that defined gender and sexuality in Weimar Germany. This course will equip students with the critical tools to analyze the interplay between cultural production, social movements, and the politics of identity.

## **COURSE OBJECTIVES AND LEARNING OUTCOMES**

The objective of this Bachelor-level course is to equip students with an understanding of the cultural landscape of Weimar-era Berlin, with a particular focus on the contested arena of sexual and gender identity. By the end of the course students will be able to:

- Compare and contrast constructivist and essentialist theories of gender and sexuality
- Contextualize specific works of Weimar-era art, literature, and film in the broader German historical and cultural context
- Trace the development of contemporary Western LGBTQ+ rights movements with an understanding of their past history
- Synthesize historical, theoretical, and literary perspectives for a nuanced understanding of the intersection of culture, science, and politics in the Weimar era
- Discuss and analyze literature, art, film, and theoretical texts with an understanding of the conventions of genre criticism
- Use the analytical frameworks developed throughout the course to think critically about contemporary media, cultural, and political landscapes

## READINGS

- Bauer, Heike. "From Fragile Solidarities to Burnt Sexual Subjects: At the Institute for Sexual Science." *The Hirschfeld Archives: Violence, Death, and Modern Queer Culture*.
- Beachy, Robert. "The German Invention of Homosexuality."
- Butler, Judith. "'Women' as the Subject of Feminism"; "The Compulsory Order of Sex/Gender/Desire"; "From Interiority to Gender Performatives." *Gender Trouble*.
- Foucault, Michel. "Right of Death and Power over Life." *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1*.
- Grossmann, Atina. "Introduction." *Reforming Sex: The German Movement for Birth Control and Abortion Reform, 1920-1950*.
- Isherwood, Christopher. "On Ruegen Island (Summer 1931)." *Goodbye to Berlin*.
- Reimer, Anne K. "From Fashion Icon to Incarnation of the Abject: The Dancer Anita Berber in 1920s Berlin." *Transgressive Womanhood: Investigating Vamps, Witches, Whores, Serial Killers, and Monsters*.
- Stryker, Susan. "My Words to Viktor Frankenstein Above the Hills of Chamounix."
- Weitz, Eric. "Conclusion." *Weimar: Promise and Tragedy*.

## ASSIGNMENT INFO

### Workload and assignments

In order to be granted 5 ECTS, participants will be asked to

- actively attend all sessions (a minimum of 75% attendance is required for classroom and online sessions)
- prepare and revise the classroom/online sessions
- hand in the following **assignments**:
  - Weekly discussion posts
  - Group Presentation (exact dates TBD)
  - Midterm Essay
  - Final Paper + Presentation

Failure to fulfil one of the mentioned components results in failure of the class.

### Assessment Components

The final grade will be composed of the above-mentioned assignments.

## YOUR INSTRUCTOR

### Felix Helbing, PhD

Felix Helbing completed his PhD in Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Pittsburgh. He specializes in the intersection of gender, sexuality, and labor in the Soviet Union of the 1920s. Additional research interests include early Soviet philosophy, the development of medical narratives of the body in the late 19th century, and gender and sexual anxiety in fin-de-siecle Europe.

# COURSE SCHEDULE

2 hours à 45 min per week (summer semester: 14 weeks)

## UNIT ONE: Bodies in Crisis

### Week 1: Theorizing Bodies in Crisis

Course Introduction, Expectations, Policies. Overview → Weimar Republic. Post-WWI cultural crisis. Destabilization of traditional gender dynamics. Post-WWI arts.

### Week 2: The New Woman: Theory and Reality

Post-War femininity. Mass consumer culture. Self-determination. Representations in media.

In class:

"Enough is Enough! Against the Masculinization of Woman!"

*Metropolis* (1927), excerpts

Contemporary advertisements and arts

Read before class:

Grossmann, Atina. "Introduction." *Reforming Sex: The German Movement for Birth Control and Abortion Reform, 1920-1950*.

### Week 3: Modernism and the Body

Representations of the body in Weimar-era art.

Excursion: Berlinische Galerie tour

## UNIT TWO: Scientific Bodies, Sexed Bodies

### Week 4: Sexual Science and Homosexual Emancipation

Development of homosexual identity category. Political movement for increased rights and depathologization. Paragraph 175.

In class:

*Different from the Others* (1919), excerpts

Documents from the Institute for Sexual Science

Read before class:

Beachy, Robert. "The German Invention of Homosexuality."

### Week 5: Trans Theory and Experience

Monstrosity, queerness, bodily autonomy, and self-actualization.

In class:

*Nosferatu* (1922), excerpts

Selections from *Das Dritte Geschlecht*

Read before class:

Stryker, Susan. "My Words to Viktor Frankenstein Above the Hills of Chamounix."

## **Week 6: Bodies and Biopolitics**

Medicalization and pathologization of the body and sexuality. Fragmentation of identity.

In class:  
Collage  
Discussion

Read before class:

Foucault, Michel. "Right of Death and Power over Life." *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1.*

## **UNIT THREE: Urban Spaces and Queer Life**

### **Week 7: What is Queer Space?**

LGBTIQ+ life in Berlin of the '20s

Excursion: LGBTIQ+ Berlin Walking Tour with Finn Ballard

Midterm essay due.

### **Week 8: Performance and Gender**

Discursive construction of sex and gender. Gender as performance. Subversive acts.

In class:  
Songs of Claire Waldoff, Marlene Dietrich

Read before class:

Butler, Judith. "'Women' as the Subject of Feminism"; "The Compulsory Order of Sex/Gender/Desire"; "From Interiority to Gender Performatives." *Gender Trouble.*

### **Week 9: Queer Networks and Community**

Building community. Intersectionality. Respectability and rebellion. Liminality.

In class:  
*Girls in Uniform* (1931), excerpts

Read before class:

Isherwood, Christopher. "On Ruegen Island (Summer 1931)." *Goodbye to Berlin.*

## **UNIT FOUR: Art, Oppression, and Resistance**

### **Week 10: Political Aesthetics of Sex and Gender**

The political challenge of abjection.

In class:  
Berber and Droste, *Dances of Vice, Horror, and Ecstasy*, selections

Read before class:

Reimer, Anne K. "From Fashion Icon to Incarnation of the Abject: The Dancer Anita Berber in 1920s Berlin." *Transgressive Womanhood: Investigating Vamps, Witches, Whores, Serial Killers, and Monsters.*

## **Week 11: From Persecution to Destruction**

Rise of fascism. Degenerates and degenerate art.

In class:

*Babylon Berlin*, excerpts

Read before class:

Bauer, Heike. "From Fragile Solidarities to Burnt Sexual Subjects: At the Institute for Sexual Science." *The Hirschfeld Archives: Violence, Death, and Modern Queer Culture*.

## **Week 12: Memory and Legacy**

The "doomed" narrative and its challenges.

Read before class:

Weitz, Eric. "Conclusion." *Weimar: Promise and Tragedy*.

## **UNIT FIVE: Reflections and Conclusions**

### **Week 13: Final Project Workshop**

Students will conduct peer review and workshop each other's final projects. Students will share their proposals with the class.

### **Week 14: Presentations and Reflections**

Presentations of final projects; reflections on what was learned throughout the course.

## **TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS**

- Registration on Moodle (HU's e-learning platform)

### **in case of online sessions**

- Fully functional device (laptop, tablet, PC)
- Stable internet connection
- Software: Zoom (video/audio)
- *Recommended* hardware: external headset for better sound quality

## **EXPECTATIONS & POLICIES**

**Preparation for lively discussions:** be on time, have at least the required readings completed, and points in mind for discussion or clarification.

**Assignments:** complete all assignments according to the specified requirements on the schedule including handing them over to the lecturer.

**Commitment:** pay particular attention to the lecturer and respect differences of opinions in this international classroom.

**Academic guidelines:** Comply with academic integrity policies. Plagiarism in even a small assignment will result in failing the entire course.

**Attendance policy:** Students must contact their class teachers to catch up on missed work – to excuse absence please contact the lecturer.

The course and its syllabus are subject to change. Last update: 10 February 2025