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HOW TO STUDY SEX UNDER SOCIALISM? TO THE QUESTION OF METHOD¹

The study of the sexual life of people under state socialism seems today to be one of the central themes in studies of the history of Central and Eastern Europe. There are several reasons why this topic has become so relevant in the last couple of decades, and especially in the 2010s.

On one hand, researchers note that the bill banning the 'propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations', signed by Vladimir Putin in 2013 played a significant role in the increase in the popularity of issues of sexuality. The recent conservative turn seems to have started in Russia even earlier, but the 2013 law and the protests which took place after it, as well as the increase of the aggression toward LGBT people in society, brought the issue of sexuality in Russia into the global media spotlight. People started to discuss both the current situation and its roots, and the space of the academy in this case was no exception². Studies of non-normative sexuality, also from a historical perspective³, with a focus on the countries of the former Eastern Bloc, became a focus of particular attention.

At the same time, the reference to 2013 does not shed light on the fact that a gradual increase in interest in the history of LGBT people and people with queer identity in socialist countries like Russia, began even before the above-

¹ Review of the books: K.R. Ghodsee, *Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism: And Other Arguments for Economic Independence*, New York 2018; K. Liskova, *Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style. Communist Czechoslovakia and the Science of Desire, 1945–1989*, Cambridge 2018.

² R. Mole, *Introduction to "Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities"*, "Slavic Review" 77, 1, 2018, pp. 1–5, here 1.

³ Last book on the topic, which tries to summarize the existing data: *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities*, R. Mole (ed.), New York 2019.

mentioned ‘gay-propaganda law’. Thus, one of the leading authors on the history of LGBT in Russia and the Soviet Union, Dan Healey, began his research on the history of homosexuality in Russia in the 1990s, and the researcher on the Russian and Soviet lesbian experience, Francesca Stella, turned to study the situation of lesbians in post-Soviet Russia in 2000s.

On the other hand, the discussion about sexuality, sexual practices and sexual pleasure under state socialism, as well as discussions about ‘the woman question’ in countries with such a system, with the situation of other minorities and the moderate level of inequality in these states, responds to the current agenda in the USA and in the Western world all in all, which includes criticism of developed capitalism and benchmarks for modifying the country and the regime and bringing it out of the protracted crisis, which is accompanied by a sharp increase in inequality and a decrease in life chances. In this case, the academy also answers those questions that are raised in society, including by new leftwing politicians, such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the USA or Sahra Wagenknecht in Germany. The topic is taken up, among others, by scholars of leftwing political views, for example, Francisca de Haan, a historian from the Central European University, founding editor of the journal ‘Aspasia: The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern and South Eastern European Women’s and Gender History’.

Studies of gender and sexuality in countries on the other side of the Iron Curtain are mushrooming, both within and against the framework of the so-called critique of a ‘Western progress narrative’. This led to the fact that not only the classical history of Europe with its set of symbolic events and the idea of progress and the paramount importance of European civilisation, but also other countries and cultures exist and has their history of progressive movements and revolutions, including sexual revolutions. Researchers have been trying to overcome hierarchies that appeared in historiography, including the narrative according to which sexual liberation was an invention of European society in the second half of the twentieth century⁴.

One of the books that made it possible to meet popular and academic reflections on how society should be organised and where it is possible to look for examples of such an organisation outside of the western example, is the popular work of Kristen Ghodsee of 2018⁵. In a popular form, she summarises her previous studies mainly concerning East Germany and Bulgaria. Examples from the history of the USSR are also mentioned, but they seem to refer to rather

⁴ See: *De-centring Western Sexualities: Central and Eastern European Perspectives*, R. Kulpa, J. Mizelińska (eds.), Surrey 2011.

⁵ K.R. Ghodsee, *Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism: And Other Arguments for Economic Independence*, New York 2018.

outstanding and exceptional women, like the Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova or the activist Alexandra Kollontai, which are difficult to compare with average citizens even from their community. In these examples, Ghodsee seeks to show that under conditions of economic state support, women under state socialism had a happier personal life and better sexual experience.

In the same year as Ghodsee's book, a book by the Czech researcher from Brno, Kateřina Lišková, called 'Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style. Communist Czechoslovakia and the Science of Desire, 1945–1989,'⁶ was published. The book constituted a new stage in the discussion, described above. This work is devoted to unique studies of sexuality conducted in Czechoslovakia between the 1950s and 1970s, and on expert discourses on sexuality created by the authors of these studies. These expert discourses reached, among other things, the press and the mass media (especially radio), and researchers also published books for the general public. Studies conducted in Czechoslovakia at that time (especially in the 1950s and 1960s) were revolutionary: for example, it was there that one of the first serious studies of the female orgasm and specific women's problems with experiencing pleasure from sex.

I listed these two very different books (a popular and a more academic one) in one review for the following reasons. It seems to me that they have a common flaw: the authors of these books take a specific case and on its basis make a step towards broad conclusions about the specifics of sexual life under a socialist system. Ghodsee does it openly in the introduction; in the case of Lišková, it's rather the title that hints at such a generalisation.

Both Lišková and Ghodsee focus on particular countries within the Eastern bloc, the countries which Soviet people considered almost as foreign countries, luxury consumption spaces that were very different from what was happening on the territory of Russia — the main centre of socialist distribution and state building. These countries tended to have generally more liberal legislation, less government control and surveillance of the population.

In addition, in these countries, many progressive institutions and ideas originated before they became socialist: for example, in Czechoslovakia, which Lišková describes, the science of sexuality began in 1921 — it was at this time when an entire big research institute on 'sexual pathology' was created. The Institute was shut down by the Nazis and subsequently reopened under the Socialists in 1953. One way or another, it seems that we are talking about the continuation of an already established tradition, the continuity of generations of scientists, and not the science of sex that started at zero with the Communists⁷.

⁶ K. Lišková, *Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style. Communist Czechoslovakia and the Science of Desire, 1945–1989*, Cambridge 2018.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

It is possible that combining liberalisation in these countries with developed traditions of the past and the benefits of state socialism gave rise to a peculiar situation with sexuality, which is described by both authors. But can we draw conclusions on sexuality under state socialism on the basis of these special cases in principle?

To make broad generalisations about the specifics of state socialism and its influence on private life, in order to understand what was happening with the sexual life of people under socialism, it is necessary, I think, to combine the analysis of several aspects at once.

Firstly, as Ghodsee showed, it is important to take into consideration the conditions in which sexual life appears. Blooming sexual life seems to be impossible without confidence in one's own life, but also without personal space, which was a real problem in Soviet Russia before the appearance of *Khrushchevki*. A relaxed sexual life is impossible in the absence of access to quality contraceptives — there are sources which shows the fear that Soviet women experienced before an unplanned pregnancy, even with the opportunity to have an abortion. Also, for a better sexual life, a person seems to need protection from the possibility of domestic violence, which was not well set up in the Soviet Union and remains a serious problem in contemporary Russia⁸. Domestic violence is not only an economic problem (families of all types of income balance can have it), it also has juridical, psychological and social aspects.

In other words, the first aspect is the context in which the sex life of people flows, and it is a question not only of the economic, but also of the social, medical, juridical, and even maybe ecological aspect.

The second aspect that needs to be taken into account when answering the question about the sexual life of people during state socialism is discourse. In order for citizens to have a rich and developed sex life, they need a language that would allow this life to be described, discussed and reformed with the help of this reasoning. The question whether there was such a language (or languages) in the entire Eastern Bloc, what kind of discussions about desire and satisfaction were really public and included the majority of the population remains a big research question.

The third aspect is the real practices of real people living under socialism. And here I would like to cite a brilliant study by Finnish author, Anna Rothkirch, on the sexual practices of three generations of St. Petersburg residents. She wrote it on the basis of collected autobiographies in which people describe

⁸ The problem of the domestic violence in the Soviet Union is still not well researched. There are few specialized texts on it, for details see: M. Muravieva, *Bytovukha: Family Violence in Soviet Russia*, "Aspasia" 8, 1, 2014, pp. 90–124, here 92, 116.

their real sexual experience, both which was described quite ordinary (married family life, monogamous heterosexual partnership) and extraordinary (sexual experiments and practices on the verge of social rejection). The study shows well where for Soviet people of different generations ran the border between the normal and the particular, and how it shifted from decade to decade⁹.

It is only by combining these three aspects, and in a comparative way, without fixing on specific local stories, that we can answer still relevant research questions: what was the sex life of people under Eastern bloc state socialism like, what common features can be traced under this kind of social structure, and is it a sexual life to be envied?

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⁹ A. Rotkirch, *The Man Question. Loves and Lives in Late 20th Century Russia*, Department of Social Policy, Research Reports 1/2000, University of Helsinki.