

Habilitation Evaluation, Masaryk University

Katerina Liskova,

Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style: Communist Czechoslovakia and the Science of Desire, 1948-89

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This is a spectacular manuscript, fluidly and engagingly written. It is brilliantly conceived and will interest a wide audience among both sociologists and historians. It speaks to scholars of postwar Europe, the social history of the Eastern bloc and – obviously – the histories of sexuality and gender, but also the histories of the “psy-ences,” of expertise, and of therapeutic cultures. The primary source base is amazing – completely untapped heretofore, and rich and vivid. It includes hundreds of medical studies and essays (many including intimate details from patients), popular magazine articles, citizens’ letters and petitions, survey findings, legal codifications, government committee minutes, sexological conference proceedings, marriage manuals, demographic data, and divorce court records. The book contributes to the broader project of understanding the four decades of Soviet bloc communism as an “alternate modernity” from which we can learn much. It also gives us new insights into the sociology of expertise itself – as for instance when Liskova discusses the regulatory role of expertise and its construction of objects and definition of problems or when she notes that “expertise often leaps over political periods, sometimes stumbling zombie-like into the near future, other times germinating ideas that take hold within subsequent political priorities....” The contextualizing political asides are always lucid and informative as well.

The book starts from the intriguingly counterintuitive finding that sexual politics in communist Czechoslovakia developed in the opposite direction from the trends in western European nations in the post-WW2 period. While most of the West saw a re-consolidated gender and sexual conservatism characterizing developments in “the long 1950s” (from the late 1940s into the first half of the 1960s), and then was confronted with the liberalization of sexual mores and feminist and gay rights challenges to conservative ideas about gender roles at the end of the 1960s and through the 1970s into the early 1980s, Czechoslovakia went in the other direction. The long 1950s saw a passionate government and expert commitment to advancing both gender equality and sexual liberties, while the 1970s, the era of so-called Normalization and crackdown on dissent in the wake of the Prague Spring of 1968, brought a sharp backlash against ideas of equality between the genders, and – while validating an eroticized, sexually adept form of domestic coupledom – insisted on restoring hierarchy between men and women. Just as significant, while in the long 1950s, romantic love was held up as a great ideal and it was seen as facilitated by both partners’ embeddedness in their workplaces and in wider social networks, the era of Normalization brought with it an enforced privatization of the nuclear family, a rupture with the surrounding society, and a denigration of romantic wishes as immature and unrealistic. Although women did continue to work outside the home, women’s work and independence from their husbands were both problematized, and women were enjoined to subordinate themselves to husbands and dedicate themselves more attentively to childrearing and home care. A further interesting twist involves Liskova’s recurrent finding that numerous reformist ideas were actually developed initially already in the 1960s, but often they were not put into policy and practice until the 1970s – but then with repressive implications. Finally, and despite the overall trend identified in communist Czechoslovakia as one arcing from early postwar utopian egalitarian and liberationist perspectives toward socially isolated and politically inert nuclear families in the post-68 era as the converse of the Western trajectory from conservatism to liberation, Liskova points out that ultimately, East and West shared much as *both* saw shifts toward therapeutized individual self-fashioning, whether under Normalization in the East or neoliberalism in the West.

Taken as a whole, the book raises compelling, widely resonant questions about the complicated triangular relationships between economic arrangements, political conditions, and intimate lives. An additional special strength is the attention throughout to the interplay between experts and their audiences – not just government reliance on expert opinion but also massive popular reception and utilization of expert ideas for one’s own private purposes. The profusion of innovative primary source evidence, much of it intrinsically poignant – about everything from the changing reasons ordinary people gave for seeking a divorce or an abortion, to the relationship between available housing, newlywed loans, and birthrates, to the consequences of the evolution of theories about the connection between fertility and female orgasm or about the importance of the father’s role in child development, to the welter of surveys and studies inquiring into women’s views of marital sex, to the preoccupation of experts with policing and molding the behavior of socially maladroit heterosexual males – along with the consistently enlightening and nuanced explications and analyses that Liskova provides, make the book a model for future studies. Theoretical work by such iconic touchstones as Pierre Bourdieu, Gil Eyal, Nikolas Rose, or Eva Illouz is deployed only where needed, always with a light touch and with good effect. The uniqueness of the Czechoslovak case is remarked on, but what stands out more are its universal implications.

The book is well structured. The first chapter embeds the Czechoslovak case helpfully in broader East European trends, offering revelatory comparisons with developments in Poland, Hungary, and East Germany. As Liskova notes, “the comparative view reveals that gender and/or sexual politics was reformulated whenever a regime revised its broader policies, be it during de-Stalinization (as was the case in Poland), goulash communism (in Hungary), Normalization (in Czechoslovakia) or Honecker’s rule (in East Germany).” Interestingly, developments were more similar in Czechoslovakia and Poland, and different from those in Hungary and East Germany – making the point that the imposition of Soviet socialism per se is not an adequate explanation for the particular trends in governments’ efforts to manage their citizens’ intimate lives. At the same time, flow of expert “knowledge” about sex across the East-West divide is also emphasized. But the biggest point is that Liskova is able to document the utter centrality of the management of sexuality to the socialist project. She is also able to pinpoint a nuance that gets lost in too many cursory overviews: in the Soviet bloc, sexual frankness, indeed comfort with sexual liberties, could often be combined with conservative assumptions about gender roles.

Chapter 2 starts with a discussion of population policies and with a peculiar and intriguing character, a (Jewish) eugenicist named Frantisek Pachner, and his plans for premarital screenings, encouragement to early marriages, legalization of children born out of wedlock, and incentives for reproduction via loans and workplace promotion – but also scarier ideas like compulsory registration of pregnancies. This chapter does a good job of explaining the cacophony of ideas jostling for supremacy in the liminal years before and immediately after the Communist takeover was completed – including not just sexological experts but also female legislators pressing for easier divorce and citizens advising the Ministry of Health or the Prime Minister about the difficulties of reconciling marriage and work or proposing that husbands should pay wives for domestic labor. But one of the chapter’s main tasks is to lay out the egalitarian and romantic – and publicly engaged – marriage ideal of the long 1950s against which subsequent developments would prove to be a retreat. Key characters here are the contrasting sexological advice writers Vladimir Bartak and Josef Hynie. In addition, the chapter introduces ordinary individuals’ deployments of the marital and sexual ideals of the era within divorce courts and arguments about adultery. And then the chapter also turns to remarkable material on ordinary individuals’ knowledge about and practice of contraception (primarily coitus interruptus and condoms) and abortion, as well as a discussion of the phenomenon of abortion commissions. There is a tremendous amount of data here, and I want to emphasize that this is completely original and important information that scholars have

long sought in vain. Liskova is providing riveting material that will also be of service as a point of comparison for scholars of sexuality in other nations, including across the West.

Chapter 3 concerns the object of the female orgasm and its vicissitudes. Here Liskova documents experts' convictions that orgasm was beneficial for conception, and hence how it came to be that infertility experts became the ones most concerned with marital dissatisfaction. Yet the chapter also explains that while initially, in the 1950s, experts pooh-pooed the value of acquiring special sexual technique – instead male participation in housework and overall commitment to the quality of the marital relationship were the keys – and while through the 1960s experts oscillated in their attention to biological and social factors, by the 1970s technique had become all-important, coinciding with the crackdown on dissent and re-privatization of family life. As Liskova puts it: “The metaphor of ‘closed doors’ behind which sex could and should be cultivated, captured Normalization’s ‘new normal’: people should be contained away from the privacy of their own families, away from the public sphere, and more importantly, away from the streets and squares that were filled with the protests of 1968.”

Chapter 4 delves into the privatized family of the Normalization era. It includes a terrific extensive discussion on evolving ideas about childrearing, but also shows eloquently just how much intimate behaviors are shaped by economic and political conditions. It discusses the eroticized domestic ideal of the 1970s and the fascinating shift from an understanding of the family as socially embedded to a concept of the family as a haven *from* society. There is indeed much here that would seem to echo the 1950s West. The chapter also contains much persuasive evidence documenting the stark novelty of 1970s experts' insistence that women should subordinate themselves to their husbands – as well as evidence demonstrating an abrupt decline of faith in romantic love. The chapter is really useful for capturing the texture of life under “late socialism” – replete with a wealth of material from divorce courts – and it contains an intriguing section on the implementation of marital counseling and its connections with the broader Normalization project. The summary pages at chapter's end are excellent also.

Chapter 5 explores those figures that did not fit into the nuclear heterosexual family. The material on sexologists' support for decriminalization of homosexuality and creation of safe havens for homosexuals in a prejudiced society is intrinsically interesting, as is the penile erection research of Kurt Freund and the progressive uses to which it could be put. Also noteworthy is the strange but revealing phenomenon of heterosexual male “deviance” or “delinquency” and how its perceived content changed – and most interesting is the policing of inappropriately sexually aggressive and, more frequently, sexually hapless and socially awkward heterosexual masculinity – and the reconditioning (via chaperoned dance parties with female psychiatric patient guests and enforced TV watching) to which patients deemed to be nonparticipatory in nuclear family life were subjected, especially in the psychiatric hospital in Horni Berkovice in the mid-1970s.

The conclusion makes great points about convergence between West and East in the development of therapeutic societies, and also offers the good insight that this convergence must have “helped ease the transition into Western modes of being after the socialist political economy collapsed in 1989.”

Overall, this is a beautiful book, and Liskova is fully deserving of promotion. She is internationally respected, and well understood to be a major figure in the sociology and history of the Eastern bloc as well as the sociology and history of gender and sexuality.