

Habilitation thesis reviewer's report

Masaryk University	of Social Studies
Faculty	
Field of study	Sociology
Applicant	Kateřina Liřková, Ph.D.
Unit	Faculty of Social Studies of Masaryk University
Habilitation thesis (title)	<i>Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style. Communist Czechoslovakia and the Science of Desire, 1948-1989</i>
Reviewer	prof. Steven Saxonberg, Ph.D.
Unit	Faculty of Social Studies of Masaryk University

Reviewer's report (extent of text up to the reviewer)

The book makes fascinating reading about an important topic that has been neglected by researchers on the communist era. This book contributes to a recent trend for Czech sociologists to analyze the gender aspects of the communist era and is filled with many interesting empirical examples. The most important contribution is to go against the myths of the communist regimes being completely totalitarian and preventing any type of even semi-autonomous activities or scientific development. She shows clearly that the sexologists influenced policymaking and did not blindly follow the regime and they took the initiative to many projects.

My main critical points are as follows. First, I think the book could have been better organized. I would have preferred to either have chapters organized around decades or organized around topics. As it is, I have trouble following the logic of the book and understanding how everything hangs together. For example, the topic of divorce comes up in several chapters, so why not a chapter just on divorce? Or alternatively, why not one chapter on each period and each chapter follows the same topics – such as divorce and other topics – to see how the general trend changes in each period. Instead, some chapters deal mostly with a particular topic while others deal with a particular period. An example of the problem of a lack of a clear organization is that she repeats the example of the man who abused a cow and then a goat and then a dog twice in two separate chapters and it seems that the paragraphs are nearly word-for-word the same.

Second, I would like to see a clearer focus. In the beginning of the book it seemed like the focus would be on the development of sexology as a profession and the end of the book also gives this impression. However, much of the empirical material is about other topics, such as what arguments couples make in requesting a divorce, how their arguments change over time and how the judges reason and how the reasoning of judges change over time. While these are interesting topics, it moves the focus away from the development of sexology. Perhaps what the author really wants to do is analyze the changing discourse on sex in Czechoslovak society during the communist era, and this includes the discourse among the population, policymakers, legal system, etc, as well as among sexologists. But if this is the case, all

groups should be discussed when analyzing each topic. As is, the choice of which groups to analyze in each section/chapter seems a bit adhoc.

Third, it would be good if the author connected the developments more toward developments in society. She does so at the end of Chapter 4 and in the conclusion, but it would have made the book more interesting if she had done so more consistently throughout the book. For example, she does not make the clear connection between normalization and the communist regime's conscience policy of wanting to depoliticize the population and make people more isolated as one of the main reasons for the shift in the discourse on sex and love and the greater emphasis on the family in the 1970s. She does a very good job of this at the end of the book, so doing so more consistently would make the book stronger.

Fourth, the book would benefit from connecting the empirical data more clearly to social scientific theory. Since much of the book deals with sexology, then neo-institutional theories would be very applicable. She shows how sexology developed during the pre-communist era and many of the same people were involved in the communist era. She points out that the communists could not start from scratch, but she also shows how the sexologists must somewhat adapt their writings to the changes in the political climate. This fits in very well with theories about path dependency and institutional change.

Fifth, even though the language is generally very good, some Czechisms are in the text. For example, in Czech, but not English you can write "this author undertands..... as...." This makes no sense in English. Or once she wrote about the "not unambiguous...." I had to read this many times to try to figure out what she meant. If it is "unambiguous" then it means clear, so why not just write "clear." But she wrote it is NOT unambiguous, which means it is not clear, which in turn means it is ambiguous, so why not just write "ambiguous"? But then in the context of the sentence I realized that she probably meant really "unambiguous" but probably use the Czech grammar of the double negative. However, in English as in math, a double negative is a positive. Also, she used the Czech format for decimals writing using a comma instead of a period, for example writing 4,7 when it should be 4.7. Also sometimes it would have been good if the author explained her terms. For example, throughout the book she uses the term "the long 1950s." This seems illogical as any decade per definition lasts 10 years, so how can one decade be "longer" than another? She probably meant that certain policies or the political climate of the 1950s began before 1950 and ended after 1959, but she should state clearly what she means, when it began, when it ended, and why it is "long." I would guess she means from 1948 when the communists came to power until the mid-1960s when the reform process began, but I am only guessing and I should not have to guess. And it is not clear even from my guessing when in the 1960s one can say the reform process began, as it took place in several steps. Moreover, couldn't one then just as well talk about the "long 1970s"? If she means a period of certain policies, then perhaps the 1970s really lasted from 1969 until 1987 when Husak resigned.

Sixth, although as far as I can see most of the facts are correct, sometimes I disagree with her. A clear example is that she claims that the Communist Party won a "landslide majority" in the 1946 elections, although they did not even get their own majority as they received around 40% of the vote. This is perhaps a minor detail. A more important issue is that I disagree with the assertion that she makes that family policy is the only reform from the Prague Spring that survived the normalization period. In the area of economic reforms, although most of the market reforms were eliminated, the basic shift from heavy industry to consumer products

continued. In the political area, the federalization reform remained in effect and Slovak politicians continued to enjoy much greater influence than they did before the Prague Spring reforms (in fact the leader, Husak, was a Slovak).

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence

1. Do you think you could explain the development of Czechoslovak sexology in the communist era in neo-institutional terms? If yes, how could you do so, if no, why not and what theoretical approach could explain it better?
2. To what extent do you think that the arguments that couples used in applying for divorce was influenced by the public discourse on sexology? Did the arguments they used change over time because the views of the population changed or did the arguments change because the married couples understood that different types of arguments were more likely to be successful in different periods?
3. To what extent do you think that the sexologists modified their views to go in line with shifts in official regime policies? For example, some of the sexologists changed their views quite a bit over time, so it would be interesting to speculate on how much of this change truly represented a change in their views and how much represented the perceived need to support official policy.

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis submitted by Kateřina Lišková entitled “Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style. Communist Czechoslovakia and the Science of Desire, 1948-1989” *meets* the requirements applicable to habilitation theses in the field of Sociology.

In Bratislava on May 19, 2017