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How many times have you heard that communism was puritan, sexually backwards and that it certainly censored sexual content? Or that changes of social mores, if they occurred at all in the countries of the Eastern bloc, were not initiated until the 1970s, under the influence of the Western sexual revolution? These widespread opinions are seriously challenged by the latest book by Kateřina Lišková, a Czech sociologist and gender studies lecturer at the Masaryk University in Brno. In her „**Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style: Communist Czechoslovakia and the Science of Desire, 1945–1989**“, the author argues that, in continuation of pre-WWII and wartime traditions, human sexuality was subject to rapidly developing research in the 1950s Czechoslovakia. The aim of this research was to promote gender equality and love between partners as the key elements of sexual pleasure. However, this discourse changed in the 1970s, when sexologists, in cooperation with gynecologists, psychologists and lawyers, began to propose that the key to sexual satisfaction are traditional gender relations in marriage. According to Lišková, this message coincided with the political „normalization“ in Czechoslovakia after the suppression of the Prague Spring. Now, privatized notions of social relations focussed on family life and individual aspirations replaced involvement in building a community concentrated around public matters, which had been typical for the decades following the war. Lišková is primarily interested in the role of experts in these processes. She asks how sexological knowledge was produced in cooperation with the state, and how it subsequently supported the accomplishment of the state’s social, economic, cultural and political objectives.

While reading this book, it seems particularly striking that it clearly contests the Western thesis according to which all liberation (including a sexual one) starts as an effect of grass-roots actions by individuals and groups that liberal democracy calls the civic society. Based on the example of socialist countries in Central Europe and especially Czechoslovakia, Lišková shows how states engage in the production of expert knowledge on sexuality, and thus in constructing sexual norms: at times oppressive and at other times emancipatory. She points out that from the time when the communist parties took over power in the region after Second World War up until the early 1960s (i.e. in the so-called „the long ’50s“), sexual politics based on the emancipation of women, gender equality, love and respect in relationships (especially in marriages) were an important element of socialist modernization discourse. Concern for women’s sexual pleasure reflected by intensive research on female orgasm conducted in Czechoslovakia soon after the war, as well as unobstructed access to divorces and, later on, also to abortion (1956 in Poland and 1957 in Czechoslovakia), were, next to programs of women’s professional activation, promoted as the answer to traditional gender roles, rooted in earlier (pre-WWII) religious practices and hierarchical class relations. Communist post-war interventions in marriage and family laws were a synonym of progress which, despite the reversal to conservative undertones over the next decades (i.e. after 1968) in the politics of the authorities, expert opinions and court judgements, was never fully quashed until the end of socialism.

For Lišková, the example of socialist countries is important not only because it reveals that the dynamics of social changes, including sexual life patterns, never follow a uniform path. Neither does it follow the Western norm, according to which the starting point of progress was marked by the sexual revolution of the ’60s and ’70s, initiated in the USA and in Western Europe and only with time joined by the rest of the world. The focus on state socialism is important also because it questions another popular thesis on the homogeneity and unchangeable nature of socialism. By juxtaposing the knowledge production processes occurring in Czechoslovakia, Poland, the GDR and in Hungary, Lišková proves that
even though they were similar in many aspects and shared both the post-war liberalization of marital and family law (civil marriages, easier access to divorce, equal rights for children born in and out of wedlock) and the commitment to emancipation of women, they differed in respect to the directions of their development, reflecting the varying and changing political and cultural conditions. While Czechoslovakia and Poland were marked by a re-traditionalization of marital and family law in the ’70s and ’80s, which was accompanied by conservative notions of sexuality, the GDR and Hungary remained quite liberal in this period and embraced a more open sexological discourse.

Lišková’s book comprises five chapters exploring: (1) general transformations in gender and sexuality politics in socialist Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and the GDR; (2 and 4) sexological discourse in Czechoslovakia in the long ’50s and in the period of normalization (including marriage counselling, divorce rulings, debates about fertility, abortion, upbringing of children); (3) debates about female orgasm and (5) on male sexual deviants in Czechoslovakia between 1945 and 1989. One of the book’s advantages is that it draws from diverse sources: from marriage self-help books to court judgements in divorce cases, press articles, state documents, surveys and letters written by citizens in reaction to the changed sexological discourses. From this broad range of sources, a multi-dimensional image of the discussed phenomena emerges, which is all the more enhanced by the author’s in-depth analysis of texts, accounting for the time when they were written and for modifications in their content, as well as by her exploration of how these publications functioned within the public space. Of great value is also her thesis that the past should not be celebrated as a lesson for the future, but rather treated as a still unfinished project of building a better, more progressive present and future (p. 260). Lišková’s message seems to be rather monolithic and essentialist, boiled down exclusively to gender and sexual orientation.

At the end, two small critical remarks, inspired by the author’s methodological postulate that calls against simple dichotomies and advocates looking at the broader contexts and various social actors. Firstly, what I found most striking in Lišková’s book is the almost complete omission of the class aspect in her analyses of sexologists’ opinions concerning patients’ sexual disorders and decisions concerning their treatment, but also of other assessments regarding the sexual predispositions of males and females in socialist Czechoslovakia by doctors, therapists, lawyers. The author does not ask (or does so only seldom) whether and how the social background of patients or simply addressees of the knowledge on sexuality was accounted for in the process of diagnosing and proposing solutions to their problems. She does not seem overly interested in whether and how this affected the sexological discourse: the language of self-help books, the applied therapeutic measures, the justifications of court judgements in divorce cases or cases concerning sexual deviations. Again, she does not problematize potential differences between Slovak and Czech approach to sexuality. Given the religious context, that is the traditionally stronger Catholicism of Slovaks, it may be inferred that the local sexological discourses must have differed. Without taking such factors as class, education, place of residence, religiosity of the addressees of sexological message into account, Lišková’s message seems to be rather monolithic and essentialist, boiled down exclusively to gender and sexual orientation.

Secondly, the book’s clear division into revolutionary post-war decades (the long ’50s), driven by the emancipatory utopia, and the traditionalistic decades of late socialism (normalization), builds, contrary to the author’s intentions to break down dichotomies, a polarized depiction focused on two great narratives – of progress and reaction. It blots out not only the discontinuities and ruptures – as

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no era and no discourse is ever unambiguously emancipatory or backwards – but also the counter-narratives, dents and points of resistance of which Foucault wrote that they emerge in response to the hegemony of the dominant discourse. It could be said, therefore, that the strong points of Lišková’s work – its call to break away from polarization, the postulate of historicization and contextualization of researched phenomena – are at odds with another strong suit of her book: its involved, political profile, setting out from the imperative to not only describe reality but to change it, Marxist in spirit. The question is whether this history could be told differently, so as to avoid a similar clash of positions.

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