

book review essays



It's Complicated

The History of Sexuality in Eastern Europe Flourishes

Review essay by **Maria Bucur**

Kristen Ghodsee, *Why Women Have Better Sex under Socialism: And Other Arguments for Economic Independence*, New York: Hachette, 2018, 356 pp, \$17.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781645036364;

Kateřina Liřková, *Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style: Communist Czechoslovakia and the Science of Desire, 1945–1989*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 293 pp, \$31.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781108341332;

Agnieszka Kořciańska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence: The Construction of Expert Knowledge of Sexuality in Poland*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2021, 268 pp, \$42.00 (paperback), ISBN 9780253053091;

Agnieszka Kořciańska, *To See a Moose: The History of Polish Sex Education*, New York: Berghahn, 2021, 354 pp, \$145.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781800730601;

Anita Kurimay, *Queer Budapest, 1871–1961*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020, 336 pp, \$32.50 (paperback), ISBN 9780226705798.



Some aspects of our humanity are simultaneously universal and individually articulated in extremely diverse ways. Sexuality is one of them. Broadly speaking, just about everyone is born with the physiological attributes to experience sexuality and with the capacity to develop those attributes. How each person ends up engaging with sexual potentialities becomes, however, a complicated process of experiential learning, appropriation of norms, and sometimes rejection of expectations. We each learn to listen to external stimuli and rules, as well as our own bodies, and also to understand and appreciate pleasure and pain. The very intimacy of our sexuality makes it that nearly universal attribute we share, yet for each person sexuality retains sociocultural specificity as we learn to flout, hide, dissimulate, experiment, and a myriad of other attitudes in relation to the sexual norms into which we are born.



Intimacy is also why, though a deeply personal and everyday aspect of our existence, sexuality is seldom the subject of individual shared ponderings by most people. There is an enormous body of evidence about sexuality from: fictionalized depictions; medical practice and research, inclusive of psychology and psychiatry; state policy; and religious dogma and other institutionalized forms of normativizing sexuality. But there is far less historical evidence about the individuated experience of sexuality that most people practice, with the obvious exception of birthing. And what people are comfortable sharing with those outside of their circle of intimacy varies widely across time and place. In short, the historical evidence we have about sexuality as practice and not as abstract ideology is uneven and provides a patchy kaleidoscope for the historian.

Furthermore, since Anita Hill's 1991 congressional testimony about sexual harassment by US Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas and her public humiliation on prime-time television, we have come to embrace intersectionality. Today we better appreciate that what people are willing to share about sexuality is always imbricated with their experience and understanding of many other sociocultural norms and practices, from religion to ethnicity, race, class, able-bodiedness, and gender. We understand better how a stance considered progressive in one context can have toxic meaning in another context or in relation to other categories of analysis, as we strive to intersect them into one comprehensive whole.

And that is why "it's complicated"; although it might sound like fence-sitting, it is in fact how I see the perspective that emerges collectively from the books discussed in this review article. These five works primarily address Eastern Europe in the twentieth century, although some venture into the nineteenth and also the twenty-first.

In 2008 I described gender history in the area I still call Eastern Europe as an "archipelago of stories."¹ At that time I did not imagine that in a little over a decade we would be seeing the flourishing of sexuality history in this area. This growing body of literature forces us to recognize that we cannot fully appreciate social practices in (Eastern) Europe as a dynamic, constant process of learning and contestation if we do not render sexuality as a core element of our analysis. Because, after reading these books, what becomes most obvious about sexuality in Eastern Europe is the direct impact it has had on politics (and vice versa); the powerful role it plays in connecting individual lives to kinship and larger social norms; and the ways in which cultural artifacts and practices are constantly in dialogue with sexual norms, even when the most common feature is silence and cloaking. Simply put, it is hard to imagine writing about Eastern European history without paying attention to sexuality as a core component of how people organized their existence, interacted with the socioeconomic norms of the day, and engaged with each other.

Kristen Ghodsee's provocative *Why Women Have Better Sex under Socialism* presents scholars of socialism (and thus historians studying life under state socialism in Eastern Europe) with the thesis that the gender-emancipatory rhetoric and policies of these regimes positioned women to become sexually liberated, empowered to experience the pleasure that comes with having easy access to reproductive control, marital relations based on equality, and access to education and professional development on the same footing as men. The book is presented as a study in contrasts, between lived experience under "unregulated capitalism," specifically the United States at the

beginning of the twenty-first century, and socialist ideas about women's emancipation, together with examples of both state socialism and socialist regimes in multi-party states, the latter constituting "regulated capitalism." The author's idealism and resolute commitment to the emancipatory ideas about women's role in society held by socialist thinkers, past and present, position her as a scholar-activist.² The argument she presents on behalf of women's better sex under socialism is more hopeful aspiration than comprehensive analysis of existing historical evidence, which is slowly and unevenly becoming visible through the work of historians such as the ones discussed here. Ghodsee trains her eye (and wants us to train our eye) on the possible departures from women's institutional oppression with the arrival of state socialism. She wants us to imagine the ability of a woman to better enjoy intimacy when she does not have to be afraid of the consequences of casual sex; when she can live in an apartment of her own; when she can pursue a profession without having to worry about marriage as her only ticket to economic resources; or when she can enjoy maternity leave if she chooses to have a child. These notions are as much a point of departure for further research as they are a polemical point of critique in relation to the neoliberal regimes in postcommunist Europe, which have abandoned commitment to women's specific economic, public health, and social welfare needs.

We see Ghodsee's challenge reflected in other studies that have come out during the past half decade. Published around the same time as Ghodsee's book, Kateřina Lišková's *Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style* declares from the title its focus and perspective on the question of whether better sex was to be had under state socialism. With a focus on Czechoslovakia's public policies on sexual matters, the book teases out how sexology as a biomedical profession operated under communism. The picture that emerges suggests that sexuality was a site of significant state intervention in relation to various forms of challenges from below, especially around the events of the 1968 Prague Spring. "Liberation," however, remains a questionable claim, at least in my reading of the evidence and analysis.

The author presents us with a close reading of how biomedical professionals, whether sexologists, gynecologists, psychologists, or psychiatrists, developed an understanding about human sexuality and norms that translated into diagnostics, advice, and public recommendations overall, be they connected to specific policy or to educational materials. Lišková's narrative arc describes quiet beginnings in the early years of state socialist rule. Czechoslovak experts interested in sexuality were heirs to Magnus Hirschfeld's extraordinary work of challenging the heteronormative binary. Josef Hynie is credited with bringing that perspective to Czechoslovakia, and the Institute for the Study of Sexual Pathology in Prague became a precious archive of the work Hirschfeld and other sexologists had done before the Nazi takeover. By the same token, eugenics and a biopolitical perspective on social policy were mainstream positions in pre-communist Czechoslovakia. In short, the early developments in the area of communist sexology in Czechoslovakia were tributary to German schools of thought and public policy on the topic, both on the radical right (eugenics) and also on the radical left (nonbinary gender).

The communist regime did not seem to take an active interest in the matter in the 1950s, and sexologists pursued their interests quietly during that period. The newly

established regime was focused more on modernization and growth that could be translated into material evidence of the superiority of the communist order and economic models over preexisting and contemporary capitalist examples. This allowed for discourses of gender equality to flourish, and for both communist propaganda and sexologists themselves to boast about the emancipatory potentialities of the new policies with regard to women's position in society. But emancipation was only "from" capitalist structures and norms, and not "for" free choice overall. As in all other state socialist regimes established after World War II, emancipation was inextricably connected to mobilization for building the workers' paradise. Sexuality played a role in imagining that universe in so far as it contributed (or not) to growing the labor force, and in so far as it contributed (or not) to the productivity of the existing labor force.

In Czechoslovakia, as in the other countries discussed here, the communist regime's official policies saw women not as autonomous individuals, but, just like men, as cogs in the larger machine of production, industrialization, growth, and socialist harmony. Reproductive work was rendered valuable in the larger universe of growing the size of the productive population in the future, in addition to the shorter-term contributions women would be making upon returning to work as soon as socialized childcare allowed them to. Individual sexual behavior was subject to limitations based on those overall priorities, which were sometimes presented in emancipatory rhetoric, but undergirded a logic of productivism and mobilization, rather than rights and liberties. When sexologists—their research, medical practice, and public advice—underscored those priorities, they were left to their own devices, with some measure of censorship present to ensure adherence to the acceptable language and arguments of the regime. They were neither more nor less controlled than other experts in the area of public policy.

During this period, the author draws our attention toward the decriminalization of abortion, the lowering of the cost of divorce for women, and the increased financial burdens for deadbeat fathers, all of which, we are to imagine, enabled women to experience liberation in their sexual lives. Such correlations are indirect and seem to connect more closely with the productivist modernizing project of the state socialist regimes in Eastern Europe, rather than with any intention to improve women's sex lives. If decreased fear of sex as part of an abusive marriage was the outcome of these measures, for instance, it was not by design. If women enjoyed heterosexual sex more because they knew that they would not be sentenced to an unwanted birth, that was also more the result of balancing short-term productivism (keeping women in the workforce) against long-term productivism (reproducing the labor force for the next generation).

A turn toward more prescriptive gender roles along maternalist patriarchal perspectives started to take place in the 1960s, even as the so-called sexual revolution was ramping up in the capitalist West. In Czechoslovakia, however, it seems that fears about inadequate population growth, together with anxiety about the diminishing level of satisfaction of many citizens with the communist regime, produced a new set of institutions and public policies. Sexology as an area of medical expertise began to take on more robust training and research features in the 1970s, after the political establishment began to see advantages to that, especially in trying to pacify the population after the tragic events of the Prague Spring.

Lišková presents an interesting argument about the mix of government interest in biopolitics as a means to achieve “normalization” through sexological research and practice. This alliance produced a perspective on female sexuality that, by the 1980s, focused exclusively on biology. In particular, in trying to identify the causes of female orgasms and especially the failure to achieve them, sexologists moved away from socio-psychological context (e.g., lack of privacy due to inadequate housing) and began to focus exclusively on biology. By “biology” Lišková means the essentialist tropes sexologists used in the 1980s in depicting emancipated women as unable to play their “proper” role of submissive receptacles to their macho, active husbands. The responsibility of both sexual partners as active “givers” rather than “receivers,” a staple of sexological arguments in earlier decades, was replaced by a narrower focus on what women should be doing for men.

Communist Czechoslovakia ended the criminalization of homosexuality in 1961. Removing it from the penal code did not, however, bring about government endorsement of same-sex desire. It eliminated some of the stigma and fear, though without an open acknowledgment of the normalcy of homosexuality. Sexologists sometimes played a positive role in sheltering gays and lesbians. Yet some sexologists also stigmatized nonheteronormative sex as the result of failures in social upbringing and women’s emancipation.

Overall, the Czechoslovak case appears to take a path of early public commitments to gender equality on the part of the government, accompanied by sex-positive medical research and advice. Subsequently sexologists realigned their position to shore up the heteronormative family, as directed by official policy, focused on sex for reproduction and marital harmony. Sexologists followed in the footsteps of this new conservatism and provided their own explanations for it by underlining the negative correlations between women’s socioeconomic emancipation and their responsibilities as sexual partners. Court documents of divorce trials show that husbands produced arguments about women’s failures to perform their duties (as housekeepers of their uninvolved husbands, for instance) without being corrected or admonished for their expectations that ran against the principle of gender equality, which had supposedly become a cornerstone of state socialism.

Agnieszka Kościańska’s companion volumes, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence* and *To See a Moose*, take us through a somewhat parallel story of how sexology and public policy intertwined in communist Poland. There are important similarities between the Czechoslovak and Polish cases, and also significant differences. In addition, Kościańska’s analyses take us to the present and into the cauldron of anti-genderism, providing essential context for fully comprehending the path taken by Polish policymakers in recent years with regard to reproductive control, sex education, and overall discourses about heteronormativity.³

Gender, Pleasure, and Violence presents a complex and fascinating picture of Polish sexology in the twentieth century. The author’s detailed research and nuanced analysis renders palpable the robustness of the community of experts and their output, showing that sexuality was a topic of sustained interest in the medical community. The author sees many Polish sexologists as global pioneers in their approach, which combined psychological and cultural elements earlier than many US counterparts. Embracing a

sex-positive perspective early on, Polish sexologists provided both expertise and educational materials for wider consumption that depicted sexual pleasure as a natural component of our humanity, which needed to be understood, nurtured, and valued.

That this premise was imbricated with an analysis of the socioeconomic conditions in which sexual desire develops represents another crucial element of Polish sexology. What promoted the proper context for nurturing sexual pleasure appeared frequently in sexologists' analysis, and a focus on women's needs in this area represented a recurring theme. An important feature of the methods deployed by these experts was the focus on listening to patients and developing analyses based on dialogue, rather than distanced clinical observation, the method preferred by some sexologists in the United States. The author sees this approach as progressive and more sensitive to the actual needs of the research subjects. While that seems to be the case in some instances, I am not convinced that the method itself is progressive. One would have to dig somewhat deeper and inquire whether the questions being asked were open-ended or leading, and what sorts of normative presumptions, if any, about "good sex" were present in the line of inquiry.

The diverse perspectives among Polish sexologists range from emphasis on the need for gender equality as a condition for fulfilling everyone's sexual needs, to the need to uphold patriarchal gender norms, especially in the home, as a way to generate the relaxed atmosphere in which sexual pleasure can be achieved. These perspectives coexisted in research, providing the public with divergent advice. If women, on the one hand, had needs that their husbands should strive to tend to as part of a marriage based on equality, but at the same time women needed to remain submissive and feminine in order to fulfill the needs of their husbands, was that an emancipatory context for them? Seen from the opposite end, if men were told that their sexual aggression needed to be controlled, but was also actually natural and provoked by uppity emancipated women, did men see any reason to change their behavior overall and listen to women's sexual needs above their own?

The Polish context is further complicated by the outsized role of the Catholic Church for individual sexologists, public opinion and policy, and especially popular practice. In fact, Kościńska's work, especially *To See a Moose*, provides fascinating and explosive evidence that we need to revisit the overall history of state socialism in Poland in terms of the role that Catholicism played in society, politics, and education. What emerges from this book is a clear sense that the Catholic Church had a significant public presence during late state socialism, not only as a site of resistance against communism, but also against the secularization and modernization of gender norms. Within such a context, the emergence of the strong conservative politics of postcommunist Poland appears less as a departure and more as a crowning achievement of a strongly patriarchal, heteronormative set of traditionalist values.

It is remarkable to read, for instance, about the success of Catholic censors in convincing the communist regime to take out of production a sex-positive education book for high school students in the 1980s. Not all Catholic public intellectuals harbored the same categorical traditionalist perspective on sexuality—only after marriage, only for the purpose of reproduction—as the conservative perspective that became predominant in Catholic publications. But those conservative voices managed to have

direct impact on the availability of content with which they disagreed at the same time that the state-socialist regime was proclaiming gender equality as a core value. Catholic discourse consistently conflated women's sexuality with their roles as wife and mother in an unapologetic patriarchal maternalist discourse, with little pushback from the regime.

The hardening of anti-feminist stances of some Polish sexologists developed on a timeline parallel to that in Czechoslovakia. Kościańska's analysis of sexual violence makes for a good comparison with Lišková's discussion. They both show differences of opinions among sexologists and psychiatrists in identifying the roots of male aggression. Yet many of these experts accepted and even promoted the argument common at that time across political regimes and countries that the victim provoked the rape based on her provocative appearance or lack of clear and strenuous opposition to the assault.

Feminist discourse critical of victim blaming developed in Poland after 1989, inclusive of sexology. *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence* discusses the emergence of that voice and the pushback it has continued to encounter in the three decades since the end of communist rule. This is where a more robust discussion about the role of censorship in the production and dissemination of knowledge would have been useful. The author brings up censorship in both books, but does not dwell on the larger picture of how specific items, such as the sex education book mentioned above as having been pulled from the shelves at the insistence of Catholic activists, fit into the overall framework of government control over the media. Of course, censorship is sometimes also self-censorship, and freedom of expression does not necessarily bring about the widening of perspectives toward more tolerant and emancipatory practices. Kościańska's discussion of pornography certainly reminds us of that. That in contemporary Poland sexologists are comfortable making misogynist jokes; that scholars continue to be confronted either as lacking sufficient objectivity or as marginal figures because they are feminist; that queer-friendly sexologists are still relegated to positions of marginality in medical training, are signs that sexology in Poland has not always been progressive and emancipatory when it comes to women and nonheteronormative sex.

Public discourses about sexuality in modern Hungary share many common points with those of the other post-Habsburg states described above. Anita Kurimay's book is more limited in thematic and geographic scope—dealing with queer life in Budapest—but more expansive in its time span, taking us from the heyday of Habsburg urban splendor to the criminalization of homosexuality under communist rule in 1961. The author's approach is also capacious in examining related contexts, providing a wealth of comparisons that render the book a good companion for the others discussed above.

The narrative arc of this book is less closely connected with the question of the emancipatory promises of communism and more with the development of modern policing techniques and the role of doctors in public surveillance around heteronormativity. The author's interest in exploring queer communities and the lives of the sexually marginalized in the Hungarian capital led them toward an examination of all the historical evidence that had anything to say about the theme. This is not an examination of sexologists, or of the medical profession's interest in the psychological aspects of sexuality. It is a careful reading of both explicit and veiled references in government

documents (court documents, police files, medical records), of the media, especially widely read newspapers, and even of some literary works that engage with homosexuality. The author's meticulous work of archaeological uncovering and of arranging these various shards has produced an exemplary historical analysis, where meaning is explored as potentiality and the reader is invited to consider different perceptions of the same phenomenon by different participants and audiences. Most importantly, Kurimay manages to bring to life the complexities of queer love in Budapest over this period of time, and to persuasively argue for the relevance of sexuality in better understanding social developments, public policy, and ideological conflicts in the history of modern Hungary. Given the paucity of historical evidence for some of the issues raised in the book,⁴ the analysis provides a broad framework for understanding the social and political status of queer persons and a few lively case studies that take us more directly into the lived reality of queer communities and their place in the larger Hungarian community.

Immediately after the 1867 dualist regime came into being, the Budapest authorities took a keen interest in developing a model metropolitan police. The goal of modernization was to be achieved through careful and complete statistics on criminals and crimes—files that included biometric information and socioeconomic data. This effort included the establishment of a "Homosexual registry." Budapest was the second metropolitan authority to institute this sort of surveillance. This registry was used, however, for a variety of purposes, including protection for some in the homosexual community, especially men considered "respectable" victims of blackmail by others less "respectable" with whom they had engaged in consensual sex. The class-based perspective adopted by the police reflected the wider views of many among the medical profession, politics, and the media, that middle-class and aristocratic men could engage in nonheteronormative practices without fear of losing their social status, becoming outcasts, or getting a criminal record.

By contrast, the author shows that women whose sexuality did not conform to the maternalist, passive norms described by the emerging sexological community and embraced by the Hungarian upper classes and metropolitan media were more frequently stigmatized and treated like a public threat. Female sex workers, in particular, were considered a serious problem in terms of public health and morality, and the police pursued them more actively than they did homosexuals.

The interwar period saw both continuities and changes in public representations of queer sexuality and their consequences for the queer community. Béla Kun's short-lived communist regime (1919) created an Experimental Criminology Department that took a keen interest in matters of sexuality and sought to understand same-sex desire rather than pathologize it, when the people pursuing such relationships were consenting adults. The regime also wanted to establish a curriculum for sex education in schools, long before any other regime in the world was giving any consideration to that topic. Yet the framework through which Kun's regime understood homosexuality was still eugenicist, focusing on the reproduction of healthy individuals and efficient investment in the reproductive capacity of the working class. The second communist regime established in Hungary after World War II was not as lenient to nonheteronormative sexualities.

After crushing Kun's revolutionary regime, the conservative government led by Miklos Horthy sought to return to prewar values and Christian morality, with a distinct antisemitic and antiliberal flavor. Yet the Homosexual registry continued to be used selectively against those whom the regime wanted exposed or eliminated, while protecting others. Nowhere is this duplicity better illustrated than in the infamous case of the love affair between the celebrated conservative Christian moralist Cecile Tormay and Eduardina Pallavicini, a prominent member of the aristocracy. Although evidence about their affair was gathered and presented before the courts, through Horthy's personal influence the accusations against the two women remained just allegations, and they continued their private and public lives unabated, having suffered very little beyond some public insinuations in the popular press about their racy relationship.

Kurimay's book takes us into World War II and the early period of communist rule—two periods that, despite their obvious ideological differences, shared more in terms of their treatment of nonheteronormative sexuality. During Hungary's alliance with Nazi Germany, eugenics, already a mainstream approach to public health, was deployed aggressively to persecute homosexuals along with other sexual "deviants," such as Roma and Jewish men. All these categories of men were to be castrated, along with the sterilization of sexually "deviant" women. The war ended before this brutal measure was put into practice.

Although the communists saved the queer community from catastrophic violence, they continued to depict homosexual men as deviants who needed to be disciplined. Same-sex desire was recast as a bourgeois attitude that needed to be extirpated. The fortunes of gay men who had been protected by aristocratic allies were overturned and the Homosexual registry became a source for blackmail on the part of the communist authorities. The police squeezed men fearful of exposure for compromising information about others and engaged them in spying and framing various other men whom the regime wanted to target. Priests, for instance, became the object of such blackmail and eventually imprisonment. The criminalization of homosexuality in 1961 was part of an attempt to return to gender norms that framed sexuality in terms of patriarchal maternalism, not unlike the Czechoslovak normalization regime and the efforts of the Polish Catholic Church.

While the sexological community does not play a major part in Kurimay's narrative, the medical profession does, especially in terms of providing the scientific discourses that framed laws and public policy with regard to sexuality. Despite influences from similar sources—the Austrian and German schools of psychology, bioanthropology, and eugenics—Hungarian doctors did not seem to take such an active interest in understanding sexuality. It may be that, given the great level of interest Kun's regime took in such matters, the Horthy regime's reaction was to cut off government interest in and funding for sexological research and training. What can be stated with certainty, however, is the absence of a community of interest during the communist period among a variety of specialists—gynecologists, psychologists, sociologists—in the area of sexuality. Without a group like the ones that developed among medical circles in Prague and Warsaw, public policy connected to sexual behavior, from the availability of reproductive control to marriage counseling and the prosecution of sexual

assault, was shaped more directly by political goals of labor mobilization and social pacification.

These splendid examples of writing about sexuality in Eastern Europe provide for scholars of gender and historians of modern Europe many exciting discoveries and beckon us to rethink how we make sense of gender norms in the world of politics and social practice. The comparisons that all authors draw upon—either with other countries in the region, with Western Europe, or with the United States—convincingly question any assumptions that readers might still have about the “backwardness” of the region vis-à-vis the West or any broad generalizations about the conservative nature of the communist regimes. In fact, together they suggest that the experience people had under neighboring communist regimes was quite different, with not only communist ideology, but religious ideology and sexological research all playing varied roles.

There are many questions that these books leave open for future research. We are collectively in their debt for their findings, which establish an excellent framework for other case studies, other comparisons, and further generalization. It may be that in another ten years, we will be able to answer the question of whether women really did have better sex under socialism more definitively. We might even be able to answer the question about the quality of sexual experience beyond binary assumptions about gender and in a more intersectional way. These scholars have given us the tools and incentives to continue the work.

◆ About the Author

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◆ Notes

1. Maria Bucur, “An Archipelago of Stories: Gender History in Eastern Europe,” *The American Historical Review* 113, no. 5 (2008), 1375–1389.

2. For the authors whose preferred pronouns I know, I have used “she/her/hers.” For the rest, I have used the more capacious “they/them/theirs.” This is in no way meant to signal a specific gender designation on the part of the author. It is simply an abundance of care aimed at not assuming essentialist gender identity on the basis of naming practices.

3. For the most recent analysis of this phenomenon by two Polish experts, see Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (London: Routledge, 2022).

4. The author shows convincingly that many documents were likely disappeared over the twentieth century, making it nearly impossible to reconstruct some of the actions and especially intentions of official actors and experts.