

Lišková, Kateřina: Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style. Communist Czechoslovakia and the Science of Desire, 1945-1989.

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Kateřina Lišková's book is intriguing from the first glance. With its topic of sexual revolution in the Eastern Bloc and the role experts played in it, its prestigious publisher, its attractive cover advertising it as the first work of scholarship on the topic, its readable idiomatic English, and its straightforward theses that refute heretofore easily accepted beliefs, it is – to be blunt – sexy. The publication traces the path of sexology in Communist Czechoslovakia – focusing not so much on its development within the field as its prescriptions for society and its contribution to creating specific gender roles. Divided into four chapters, two characterize the impact sexology had on two distinct eras (the 1950s and the years of Normalization), while the other two focus on the development of a scientific view towards the female orgasm and towards sexual deviance and homosexuality.

The first decade after the Communist coup in 1948 brought radical changes to society in terms of sex and gender. That which feminists had sought for years was now enshrined in Socialist legislation. The 1949 Family Law Act, arising from a proposal by Milada Horáková (who was already imprisoned and soon to be executed), ensured that men were no longer the exclusive decision-makers in many family affairs. Women and men were now supposed to combine forces, and Kateřina Lišková shows how sexology began to participate in the Socialist experiment. Communicating with the public through prescriptive treatises, scientists explained the biological function of sexual organs, while at the same time promoting romantic marriages based not on class obligations but actual love. Simply put, love was supposed to provide the basis for an equal partnership – both in intimate relations and work towards the common good.

Earlier scholarship has already addressed the reexamination of the egalitarian utopia in the sixties, especially in terms of stressing the crushing workload for women and the neglect of children in collective childcare facilities;¹ however, we have yet to see a detailed analysis of the reform movement's systematic attack on women's equality and employment. Lišková documents the influence of this theory of child deprivation and its connections with mothers' employment during the first half of the sixties; in her examination of sexological expertise, however, she focuses on the fundamental shift in the perception of marriage and relations between men and women during the period of Normalization, which she summarizes with the bon mot: "Forget love, marriage only works when men are above women." (p. 180) She deduces these changes primarily from the numerous popular marital guides that sexologists were now producing. Love figures into the guides as an inconvenient hurdle; the family has become the central concern. While equality in sex is still nec-

¹ See *Wagnerová, Alena: Die Frau im Sozialismus: Beispiel ČSSR.* Hamburg 1974; and studies from *Havelková, Hana/Oates-Indruchová, Libora* (eds.): *The Politics of Gender Culture Under State Socialism: An Expropriated Voice.* London, New York 2014. In Czech: *Vyvláštěný hlas: Proměny genderové kultury české společnosti 1948-1989.* Praha 2015.

essary, every possible difference between men and women is now stressed. These guides advised people on ways to improve their sex lives while simultaneously emphasizing the maternal role of women. According to Lišková the same sexologists who had been promoting equality and partnership now became promoters of traditional gender roles and family values.

As a non-historian, what fascinates the author is distinguishing the two phases of state Socialism and correcting the monolithic image of “prudish Communism” that was juxtaposed with the liberal West. The problem is that in place of the dichotomies and monoliths she rejects, Lišková merely supplies different dichotomies and homogeneous images: the sexually liberating fifties now stand opposed to the conservative period of Normalization; the sixties saw sexual liberation in the West, the opposite happened in the East; while the sexual revolution was a social movement in the West, experts brought it about in the East; and so on and so forth. In this regard, the entire introductory chapter on the Eastern Bloc as a whole is problematic – and not just because the general historical characteristics, as well as all the other parts, are drawn exclusively from Jan Křen’s book *Dvě století střední Evropy* (Two Centuries of Central Europe).² After quickly running through the history of sexuality, Lišková uses the chapter to divide East-Central Europe into two zones: 1) Poland and Czechoslovakia, with their egalitarian approach to sexuality in the first phase of Communism and their regression to a hierarchical approach in the later stages of Communism; 2) Hungary and East Germany which kept silent on the subject of sex during the fifties, before witnessing large-scale emancipation in the sixties. But it was never that simple for any of these countries – even when dealing with Czechoslovakia there is no reflection upon the differences between what Czechs and Slovaks faced. Additionally, the Soviet Union cannot be held up as the vanguard of abortion rights: before the war it had a complicated history of legalizing and banning abortion.

The starting point of Lišková’s entire argument is the belief that the knowledge of experts directly and extensively influences societal and individual behavior. Rejecting conventional wisdom, the author literally says that sexuality has little to do with nature – to a great extent it “is a product of sexological discourse” (p. 10). Cultural shifts in the perception of sexuality make for a rich topic, but what we have here is an uncritical application of Foucault’s theory of expert knowledge as an instrument of governmentality and discipline. Lišková refers explicitly to Nikolas Rose, who in analyzing British institutions, has accused psychotherapy of creating the mechanisms that after World War II have gradually linked disparate areas of life, forcing individuals into certain manners of thought and modes of behavior.³ But applying his conclusions elsewhere proves problematic (even in the case of Germany – to say nothing of Eastern Europe). Lišková skips by historical differences to claim that the development of sexology confirms the therapeuticization of post-war Czechoslovak society. Sexologists viewed sex as something that could be improved, leading to satisfaction. Then, especially during Normalization, they collaborated

² Křen, Jan: *Dvě století střední Evropy* [Two Centuries of Central Europe]. Praha 2005.

³ Rose, Nikolas: *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*. London 1990.

with the authoritarian regime to divert people's focus from the public arena "by cushioning the walls of [their] private family unit," helping to create "atomized, content and governable citizens." (p. 259)

Yet Lišková is interested in neither the scientists' actual expert opinion and what they wrote in their manuals nor their strategic relationship with the regime. It is problematic to write about the work of scientific disciplines in a dictatorship without addressing these issues. Which brings us to the gravest problem of the whole book – its use of primary sources, secondary literature, and earlier research. The claim that sexological expertise was reflected in people's behavior, is not verified in any methodical way. Letters addressed to various institutions and court files from Bratislava are cited, but it is hard not to suspect that the author of merely confirming what she already knew. The book repeatedly states that the author of the first ever to investigate such material, but sometimes this is patently false. Ivan Vodochodský and Petra Klvačová have published several studies on gender analysis in marital guides. A large part of book's material on Poland comes from the work of Agnieszka Kościańska, yet Lišková never cites her, nor does she think critically about her one-sided interpretation of the Polish sexologists' work. It also seems entirely impossible that Lišková would not be familiar with Věra Sokolová's (unpublished but publically available) habilitation thesis detailing the history of Czechoslovak sexology and the opinion of experts vacillating between loyalty to state ideology and progressive approaches to sexuality. The author instead pits herself against weaker opponents, especially older foreign publications, ignoring the important research carried out by local authors in recent years.⁴ Particular details from the relevant texts of these authors are sometime cited, yet their research often contains many of the conclusions that Lišková announces, with great fanfare, as her own discovery.⁵

Kateřina Lišková has offered foreign audiences an attractive product, in which she asserts "the centrality of sexuality to the Socialist project" (p. 31) and speaks of a new social contract that the Communist parties offered the citizenry of post-war Eastern Europe. Such contract was far from experience of anyone who lived under the system, and so was the idea that sex, family life, and intimacy were practiced along what was written in marital guides. I am not saying that the relationship between the expert realm and power did not exist in dictatorships – only that it was far more complex than this book suggests.

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⁴ See especially *Havelková/Oates-Indruchová* (eds.): *The Politics of Gender Culture under State Socialism* (cf. fn. 1).

⁵ Viz "Katerina Lišková's Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style: Notice of Unethical Scholarly Conduct," an open letter endorsed by a number of scholars that accuses the book of plagiarism. Available at www.academia.edu/37309978/Notice_Liskova_Cover_and_Details. (last accessed 02.05.2019).