Sex and Socialism

DAN HEALEY

Dagmar Herzog's *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History* is an astonishingly rich synthesis for a work just short of 225 pages. Its vigorous narrative and energetic arguments never flag, and the wider contours of the continent's twentieth-century history are always in view. This is a book that has the lucidity, and the sophistication, to instruct students and tutors alike.

Its key threads of argument are clear. The apparent march towards sexual liberty through the century must not be read as an unbroken road to freedoms won by radicals battling repression. In Herzog's account, 'conservatives' of various religious, political and ideological stripes contributed to the elaboration of new sexual ideals, and collaborated in erecting new sexual paradigms. Whether criticising 'the long-standing climate of discreet tolerance for prostitution' (p. 17) at the turn of the century, or seeking, as the Catholic Church increasingly did from the 1920s and 1930s, 'to present Christian marriage as . . . a companionate and joyfully sensual project' (p. 49), conservatives helped to shape the sexual freedoms and norms that seemed ubiquitous and institutionalised in the European Union (EU) at the threshold of the twenty-first century. As readers familiar with her ground-breaking scholarship would expect, Herzog doggedly pursues the paradoxes thrown up by the constructive sexualities invented by Nazis and Fascists in their heyday and by conservatives after their defeat, and she extends this methodology to challenge the presumption that right-wing moralists and religious critics before and after the violent events of mid-century sought mere repression. By speaking about sexuality, 'conservatives' inevitably laid out new contours of the permissible and informed audiences about sex in innovative ways.

Another compelling focus that animates Herzog's analysis of the century's sexual history is the emotional dimension that shaped Europe's understanding and experience of sex. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it had been 'typical . . . for many men to disdain the women with whom they had sex' (p. 18), that is, lower-class servants and prostitutes, and to think of sexual pleasure

The University of Reading, Whiteknights, PO Box 217, Reading, Berkshire, RG6 6AH; dan.healey@reading.ac.uk

Contemporary European History, **22**, 2 (2013), pp. 289–293 © Cambridge University Press 2013
doi:10.1017/S0960777313000118

as irreversibly alloyed to inequalities of power. The challenge for those who would transform sex, whether in the direction of greater liberty for women, or towards consecrated forms of heterosexuality, was to persuade men and not a few women that loving relations and sexual pleasure were compatible. Here Herzog finds one of her core themes across the century and many of its diverse actors: 'an ethics based on quality of relationship' (p. 114) increasingly motivated the promotion of sexually fulfilling marriage, by radicals at the start of the century, by Catholic theologians in the 1950s and 1960s, and by many other agents in the history of sexuality along the way. The 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s and 1970s saw an explosion of 'ambivalences and confusions' with starry-eyed hope that sexual pleasure and social justice could be fused in some form of political praxis (p. 135). Emotional fragility, anger, boredom and disappointments underlay a backlash against the West's sexual revolution, a reaction that was already building before HIV/AIDS appeared (p. 174).

At the heart of this account is an awareness of the violent 'state interventions' visited upon Europeans between 1914 and 1945, and the impact of violence on historical memory and the subsequent shaping of the EU's contemporary sexual values. In an audaciously compressed Chapter 2, covering these transformative three decades, Herzog highlights the 'violence and opportunity' of the First World War, the rising politicisation of gender and sex between 1918 and 1939, the transnational ambitions and reach of sex reformers, and Fascist and Nazi dreams of violent population management deploying the promotion of sexual pleasure for the *Volk* and selective exclusion for racial enemies, culminating in the Holocaust. Introducing a long section on Nazi 'human engineering and the promise of pleasure', Herzog reminds us that '[t]he crucial point to grasp about Nazi sexual politics is the way that it combined subjugation with disinhibition' (pp. 66–7). Not ignored are the politics of sexual regulation that Britain, Sweden, Switzerland and other democratic welfare states debated alongside the Nazi and Fascist regimes. When world war came once more it brought 'unimaginable brutality and terror' that eroticised cruelty and violence, while simultaneously affording 'enormous opportunities for exhilarating amorous experimentation' (p. 83).

In subsequent chapters Herzog demonstrates how the shadow of state violence informed and justified new sexual freedoms. The European Declaration of Human Rights, a response to the horror of genocidal war adopted in 1949, would eventually yield a codification of sexual citizenship (p. 195). Classic liberals like Britain's Wolfenden invoked the values of 'consent and privacy' to justify the extension of sexual self-determination (p. 125), and West Germany's left-liberals lambasted conservative legislators for opposing homosexual decriminalisation with appeals to 'the moral sensibility of the people', a phrase redolent of Nazi propaganda (pp. 128–9). Re-regulation of sexuality during and after the West's sexual revolution (the East's revolution in behaviour was only vocalised in the 1990s) would turn upon revulsion for Fascist and Nazi interventions of the past, a revulsion that was increasingly instrumentalised by theorists of sexual revolution. Having so violently infringed on the family, private life and intimate relations, the state would increasingly be banished from the bedrooms of Europe's nations. From the 1980s, the European

Court of Human Rights began issuing judgments that constructed a permissive right to sexual self-determination, institutionalising the values of 'consent and privacy' as keystones to EU sexual citizenship.

I mention these key themes at some length to illustrate how richly textured and carefully analysed Herzog's account of modern European sexuality is. Particularly noteworthy is the spine of argument about the pervasive and enduring, indeed, yet-to-be-exhausted consequences of Fascist and Nazi state intervention in the sexual sphere. In its organisation and preoccupations, this book treats Nazi and Fascist ideology as a singularly significant corpus of ideas about sex. These short-lived regimes, their extreme violence and their sexual norms cast a long shadow over the history of the twentieth century.

This is a compelling and persuasive thesis; and yet, I expected to find it balanced against a more systematic exposition of socialist and communist sexual ideals and policies, especially, the evolution of socialist thinking in the first half of the century, before and after 1917. That year surely marked a signal moment for European sexual history, when the Soviet regime inaugurated sweeping reform based on a century's legacy of socialist dreaming and scholarship about sex. In Herzog's account, the Russian Revolution's sex reforms are dispatched in a single paragraph (which, unfortunately, dates Soviet decriminalisation of male homosexuality to 1920 – it was 1922); and she offers them chiefly as a foil for Western European church leaders' hostility to their own congregations' ungovernable desires (p. 49). Occasionally, early twentieth-century sex reformers' political affiliations and the ideological inspiration for their activism are subsumed under the general rubric of sex-radicalism, or are listed but not explored; Magnus Hirschfeld's commitment to socialism is never mentioned or analysed, for example. Klara Zetkin is absent from this account; and Vladimir Lenin is only mentioned as straw man in a satirical Yugoslav film of 1971 (p. 147).

A concise discussion of the broad church of Europe's socialist sex ideals before 1917 and its wholesale and problematic adaptation to a war-exhausted Soviet Russia thereafter would have yielded a clearer motive for Joseph Stalin's turn towards apparently conservative values.[1] At more than one juncture in Chapter 2 Stalin is poised alongside the leaders of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, Vichy France and even liberal democratic regimes as backing sexual conservatism, it would seem in response to shared anxieties, but without further explanation of Soviet contexts and contradictions (pp. 60, 74, 75). Some exploration of Stalinism's sexual politics would have supported a more satisfying explanation for the regulation of sexuality in post-1945 Eastern European 'people's democracies' under Soviet tutelage, which is described in some detail (pp. 100–1). Herzog indeed hints at the local origins of communist sexual conservatism when she notes the differentiated responses of French and Italian communists after 1945 to crises of gender and sexuality (pp. 102–3), and there is a fuller, and excellent, discussion of the eruption of nationalist responses to

[1] For an argument that Stalinist sexual values were born as much from Soviet expert theories about gender difference as from Stalinist 'conservatism', see Dan Healey, *Bolshevik Sexual Forensics: Diagnosing Disorder in Clinic and Courtroom, 1917–1939* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009).

sexual politics in the wake of communism's collapse after 1989 (pp. 183–95). Without a sustained critical eye focused on communist sex politics as they evolved through the century, Herzog offers no synthesis corresponding to her incisive analysis of Fascist and Nazi politics.

My comment is not motivated by Russophilia or nostalgia for lost socialisms. It is a response to Herzog's compelling thesis that Fascist and Nazi sexual discourses had a transformative and enduring influence in Europe's sexual history. For if they were indeed constructive of sexual meaning in the century, then we also need a broader account that acknowledges the longer duration of socialist regimes and the profound geopolitical sweep they commanded across Europe between 1917 and 1991. Ideally, such an account would also scrupulously interrogate the distinctions between, as well as the similarities of, communist and Fascist aspirations, policies and experience in biopolitics and sexuality. The lack of comparative work devoting sustained attention to European socialism as it was imagined and then lived is evident in recent attempts to synthesise histories of sexuality, however they organise the question. Some historians simply leave the Soviet Union out, ignoring the 'bear in the room', and say little or nothing about the Eastern European people's democracies of the post-war decades.[2] Others treat socialist pioneers like Aleksandra Kollontai as isolated political fanatics, interesting principally for having scandalised the West, rather than framing them as representatives of a century-long tradition of *European* socialist thinking and experimentation about sexuality.[3] Historians of sexuality sometimes emphasise the singularity of Stalinist totalitarianism, and sometimes minimise it; but they do isolate it and other historically existing socialist regimes from any consideration of the longer sweep of Europe's socialist heritage and its impact on sex.[4]

Behind these authorial choices lies a disregard for this longer heritage, and perhaps its unexamined colonialisms as well. For what is the story of socialist thought but a tale of its incubation in Western Europe and its realisation in Eastern Europe?[5] One of the remarkable features of Europe's sexual history is the opportunities afforded for experimentation in radical sex policy as a result of the capture of a succession of unstable states in Eastern Europe. Yes, Kollontai frightened Europe's clerics, but she

[2] See for instance Stephen Garton, *Histories of Sexuality: Antiquity to Sexual Revolution* (London: Equinox, 2004).

[3] 'Kollontai represented the West's worst nightmares about "Godless" communism undermining the foundations of Christian morality and the nuclear family', George Robb, 'Marriage and Reproduction', in H. G. Cocks and Matt Houlbrook, eds, *Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 101.

[4] For an attempt to contrast Stalin's, Hitler's and social-democratic Swedish approaches to 'sex and the state in the 1930s', see Anna Clark, *Desire: A History of European Sexuality* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 181–97. Robb, 'Marriage', 102, treats Stalinist natalism as identical to Fascist and Nazi variants; remarkably, his is the only essay in this collection on the 'modern history of sexuality' to mention any socialist regimes *at all*; the only other references to 'socialism' briefly refer to early nineteenth-century utopians of the Anglo-American world, see H. G. Cocks, 'Religion and Spirituality'.

[5] Socialism's story of course shifts eastward from Russia and on to the global South over the course of the twentieth century; see David Priestland, *The Red Flag: Communism and the Making of the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2010), xxv–xxvii.

was a creation of the common European socialist tradition, engaged in attempts, many but not all of them failures, to put that tradition's sexual ideals into practice in a peasant empire on the fringes of Europe. As it was, the policies that she and Lenin could agree on (easy divorce and abortion on demand, to cite just two) appalled Catholic Europe; but they were the programme-minimum of *Western* Europe's socialist vanguard, adopted by Lenin, modified by Stalin, reinstated in full by his successors and exported to Eastern Europe's socialist regimes.

The problem of incorporating the socialist regimes into our accounts of Europe's history of sexuality is compounded by the relative dearth of scholarship touching upon the sexual policies and experience of the continent's eastern regions and nations: the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires before 1914 and, after 1918, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. In fairness to Herzog, she mentions this challenge in her introduction (p. 4). There is some new work emerging in English, but anyone attempting a comprehensive survey of this region would need to command the languages of local scholarship, a daunting demand. Also daunting is the task of seeking out this new work, often by younger scholars with barely a foothold in academic life.[6] Yet the question is not so much about new facts, but about the potential for reinterpretation. Herzog's compelling arguments, skilfully and knowledgeably laid down in this short work, are a stimulus to rethinking the topic and challenge us to consider the limitations of our current conceptions.

[6] See e.g. the articles by Susan Zimmerman, Karla Huebner and Erin K. Bibuyck, under the general title 'Gender, the Body, and Sexuality', in *Aspasia: The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History*, **4** (2010). Work by Drs Martin Putna, Jan Seidl and others on the cultural and historical dimensions of Czech homosexuality was showcased under the general title 'Jiná laska: homosexualita jako kulturní fenomén (The other love: Homosexuality as a cultural phenomenon)' in the national historical magazine of the Czech Republic, *Dějeni a současnost*, 12 (2007), and Putna and Seidl are editing a three-volume Czech-language series on same-sex love in Czech history and culture.