Introduction: Sexuality, respectability and communism

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As Russian revolutionaries of the early twentieth century designed the blueprints for a brand-new society, they pondered questions regarding gender, sexuality and new kinds of intimate relationships. Whereas European and American socialist theorists of the nineteenth century had been critical of 'capitalist' gender and sexuality norms, they offered little to no practical answers as to how these norms should evolve in a socialist society. In the Soviet context, Alexandra Kollontai was among the first who sought to provide such answers. She envisioned a society characterised by gender equality, personal autonomy and comradeship, wherein men and women were able to freely express their sexuality. Inspired by early utopian visions, Kollontai and like-minded socialists believed communism would trigger not only an economic and societal revolution, but also, simultaneously, a sexual revolution. By eliminating the rule of property and the obsession with oneself, a socialist society would provide the basis for mutually rewarding relationships and sexual satisfaction. Such a society would be free from limits to sexual expression, and relationships could be short- or long-term.

Kollontai stressed that a sexual revolution, or a 'revolution of the heart', could only be completed when childcare and housework were socialised and full gender equality had been achieved at work and in politics.[1] The first two family codes in Soviet Russia, instituted in 1918 and 1926 respectively, were promising in this regard. These two decrees provided new legal definitions of family structure, marital and parental relationships, sexual behaviour and women's public and private

positions; taken together, these constituted a fundamental departure from what had existed previously in most societies in the early twentieth century. The later decrees, issued under Stalin in 1936 and 1945, returned to a more traditional definition of the family. This reversal was part of the reactionary turn in Soviet policy.[2]

Scholars such as Frances Bernstein have shown that, rather than being a sudden change, the reintroduction of conservative sexual mores was gradual, and had already started before Stalin came into power. She argues that the Soviet 'sexual enlightenment' programme of the 1920s – a medical programme which intended to establish a model of sexual conduct for the men and women who would build socialism – paved the way for the Stalinist sexual repression of the 1930s. She points out that early communist leaders, including Lenin, held the opinion that devoting too much attention to sex distracted people, youth especially, from what was really important, namely political work. Following Lenin, the sexual enlighteners of the 1920s criticised the infamous 'glass of water' theory – which equated satisfying a sexual urge with reaching for a glass of water to quench one's thirst – as un-Marxist or bourgeois, and accused Kollontai, to whom the theory is mistakenly attributed, of driving young people mad with her 'free love' theories.[3]

And indeed, for a brief moment, those who were supposed to lead the world to communism *did* become enthralled with all things sex. But the sexual experimentation that followed the revolution, which also found expression in newspapers, fiction and non-fiction, was curbed by the sexual enlightenment programme created by a gravely concerned older generation of Bolsheviks, who emphasised that 'free love' would lead to a rise in sexually transmitted diseases and prostitution, and would ultimately deprive Soviet women of the independence that the revolution intended to bring them. Women, according to the party's old guard, would be victimised by men and burdened by unwanted pregnancies.[4] Lastly, they believed that bodily energy was finite, and wasting precious energy on sex meant there would be less for class struggle.[5] Thus, too much sex was selfish, anti-collective, and therefore bourgeois. In turn, proponents of a new, more liberated, sexual morality, often newer members, labelled the promotion of abstinence as bourgeois. They pointed out that it was only in a bourgeois society

that women were expected to preserve themselves for their husbands, their owners.

In Soviet Russia, the debate on appropriate sexual behaviour died down in the late 1920s, and Soviet citizens were increasingly portrayed as puritan and a-sexual in the decades following.[6] Still, it appears that sexual rebellion and political radicalism were not immediately – and in some cases never – uncoupled within national communist movements. In this context, Glyn Salton-Cox, whose book *Queer Communism and the Ministry of Love* is reviewed in this issue, refers to Foucault's observation that western communist parties were in a strange position during the Interbellum: 'Still committed to an outlaw ethos of the "revolutionary life as scandal of an unacceptable truth" and yet increasingly prescriptive of bourgeois standards of conduct, they sought to preserve a sense of radical élan in the everyday life of their members, and yet to rein in the excesses of cultural revolution in their social and sexual practices.'[7] The extent to which these 'excesses' were indeed reined in depended on communal and national peculiarities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in countries or communities that weren't deeply moulded by religion, and in those with a strong anarchist tradition, communists were more likely to remain committed to a tradition of progressive views on sexuality – a tradition that oftentimes predated the Bolshevik revolution.

In this special issue authors explore how sexuality and sexology were understood within national communist movements, and how individual communists and communist sympathisers interpreted questions of sex, sexuality, and respectability after the Bolshevik revolution. The contributions provide much needed insights into the trajectory of sexual politics and communism within the Soviet Union, Europe and the Americas.

The issue kicks off with Dan Healey's article, which examines diverging opinions on sexuality and sexology within the Soviet Union, and discusses how Soviet sexology was shaped by its approaches to race, ethnicity and nation. In the early twentieth century, sexological experts contemplated a range of more than one hundred diverse societies within the borders of the world's largest (and bi-continental – European and Asian) land empire, which after 1917 became the world's first socialist

state. However, 'sexology', notes Healey, was a secondary priority in Bolshevik science policy, and was almost totally suppressed under Stalin, only to re-emerge in a limited form after his death. Drawing on new post-1991 scholarship and Healey's own primary research, the article examines the agendas of sex experts over the lifetime of the Soviet Union to assess the role sexual sciences played in constructing nationalities and demographic policies.

My own article is a case study of how European rank-and-file communists continued to exhibit notions of sexual liberation and understanding even after the Soviet Union and their national parties had turned toward more traditional and conservative ideas of sexuality and family life following the Second World War. Based on a series of interviews with twenty-five Dutch 'cradle' communists, the article looks at communist activities within the Dutch sexual reform movement in the cold-war era, and explores some of the lived experiences and nuances of individual relationships between communist politics and sexual practices beyond the Soviet Union.

Tensions between sexuality and respectability are evident throughout this special issue. Raphael Samuel was one of the first to detail communists' desire for respectability and their tendency to recruit among clean, serious-minded young workers, rather than among the lumpen-proletariat. He refers to the ancient division between the 'rough' and the 'respectable', with communism fighting for the first, but recruiting within the latter. 'Communists', according to Samuel, 'were noted for their strictness – or what was sometimes referred to as "clean living". They eschewed "foul" language – the "effing" and "blinding" of the "politically illiterate"'.[8] Members who ran up debts and those who got into trouble with the police, for reasons other than political, were expelled. Those whose appearance didn't meet communist standards – polished shoes, short hair, and preferably a suit and tie in the case of males – were reprimanded. The party was serious business, writes Samuel. At recruiting meetings, potential members were told that it was a party of a new kind that they were joining, 'not a party that was interested in having socials and dances, and tea parties'.[9]

Sexuality wasn't explicitly discussed by Samuel, though it was a topic that was debated within the context of respectability. There appears to

be less of a consensus among communists about what was considered respectable in matters related to sexuality, and opinions both varied geographically and changed over time. Overall, by the late 1960s, communist parties in Western Europe and Great Britain had become less rigid, as young people who had come of age in the social movements of the 1960s began to join the parties. Paul Mishler shows that this wasn't the case in the United States, where a longing for more respectability was expressed as a response to the unruliness of the 1960s. Mishler's article assesses the notion of respectability among communists and other radicals in the United States, as well as where it came from, and how it was applied to sexuality.

Perhaps related to this longing for more respectability rather than less, communist views on homosexuality remained very conservative in the United States. While communist parties in western Europe and Britain began to declare their solidarity with gay and lesbian people's struggles in the 1970s and 1980s, the CPUSA kept its silence. It finally came round in 2001, when, at its twenty-seventh convention, the party passed its first resolution announcing it was part of the movement for LGBT rights. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, there was a widespread fear among members of the US communist movement that any support for homosexuals, and their fight for acceptance and equal rights, would alienate the CP's working-class base. Additionally, in a society where authorities actively persecuted homosexuals and threatened them with outing, there was a fear that the government would pressure arrested homosexuals into becoming federal informants.

The notion that gay people were more susceptible to being manipulated, and posed a threat, pre-dated Joseph McCarthy's witch-hunt against homosexuals known as the Lavender Scare, though anti-communism and homophobia became increasingly intertwined during the Cold War. A number of negative characteristics were attributed to communists and homosexuals alike, including moral corruption, psychological immaturity and an ability to 'pass' undetected among ordinary Americans. Furthermore, they were seen as slaves – homosexuals to their passions for other men, and communists to their Soviet masters.[10] Despite the fact that no compelling evidence of any federal employee being blackmailed into revealing state secrets on account of

their homosexuality was ever uncovered in the United States, thousands of men and women were fired from federal employment and forced out of the closet.

In the past decade, the Lavender Scare and the FBI's 'sex deviates' programme have received increased scholarly attention.[11] The focus, however, has been mostly on the persecution of gay and lesbian federal employees, not so much on the instances where the FBI blackmailed gay and lesbian individuals into infiltrating 'subversive' organisations. While there are some famous incidences, for example the case of Whittaker Chambers, it is not clear how many homosexuals were pressured into joining the FBI's domestic espionage efforts.

In her article about lesbian FBI informant Angela Calomiris, Veronica Wilson suggests that, in a time when homosexuals were considered 'morally bankrupt' and 'politically suspect', actual threats to expose homosexuality were unnecessary. She argues that Calomiris and other gay and lesbian Americans may have felt pressured into FBI service, as if it were a public duty, precisely because of their sexuality. In other words, the perceived threat of outing may have spurred their anti-communist zeal and desire to be accepted and considered patriotic. In Calomiris's case, for example, there is no concrete evidence that the FBI threatened to expose her homosexuality if she refused their request for her to infiltrate the Communist Party – though it seems likely her sexuality informed the bureau's decision to recruit her.

Still, Calomiris's motivations to become a so-called G-Girl were much more complex than sexuality alone, argues Wilson. She explores how gender, class and ethnicity, in addition to her sexual orientation and identity, shaped Calomiris's choices in this regard. Calomiris's espionage had a detrimental effect on American communism. As she rose through CPUSA ranks in New York City, her efforts as a paid informant resulted in the Attorney General's office declaring the avant-garde Film and Photo League to be a subversive communist organisation, in 1947. Two years later, Calomiris served as a witness in the Smith Act trial of CPUSA leaders for conspiracy to advocate the overthrow of the government. Her testimony helped convict CPUSA executive board leaders and state-level communists.

Evelien Eshuis, a communist member of the Dutch parliament in the

early 1980s who was interviewed for this special issue, identified similar fears of blackmail and compromise within Dutch government. She told me that, whereas other political parties went to great lengths to 'protect' gay MPs who weren't out in public, she had an altogether different approach. She prevented extortion and other sordid crimes by being out, a decision whole-heartedly supported by her party. She recalled how the Dutch Communist Party placed the fight for gay rights firmly within its longstanding fight against fascism. In the Dutch House of Commons she proudly wore a pink triangle, which had recently become a symbol of gay activism. By being 'out and outspoken', she contributed to the normalisation of homosexuality in the Netherlands.

Compared to other European countries, people in the Netherlands were less intolerant towards homosexuality. Already by the 1950s, as the number of secularised citizens had begun to rise, more relaxed attitudes regarding sex and sexuality, including homosexuality, were being adopted by large sections of the population. The Communist Party, which had previously been characterised by a culture of denial and even condemnation of homosexuality, followed suit, and declared full support for gay rights in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Nerina Visacovsky's reflective article – based on extensive research into the *Idisher Cultur Farband* (ICUF), the Argentinian section of the *Yidisher Kultur Farband*, an international network of secular Jewish leftists linked to the Communist Party – also suggests that communists' views on sexuality and gender were predominantly shaped by national peculiarities. Visacovsky notes that, while the ICUF stood out as a progressive force which promoted gender equality and radical secular ideas, sexual education was neglected and surrounded by taboo until the mid-1970s, while the topic of homosexuality remained practically unmentionable until recently. She then explains that, while many of the social and cultural changes that took place in the United States and Northern Europe from the 1960s also occurred in urban Argentina, the sexual revolution and the passing of associated laws happened much later. For example, the pill was officially legalised in 1985, while elective abortion wasn't legalised until early 2021. The ICUF and the Communist Party of Argentina, though slow compared to similar organisations in North America and Europe, were still very much ahead

of the rest of Argentina when they began to promote a more liberal outlook on sexuality in the 1970s and 1980s.

Contributors make it abundantly clear that there was no singular communist view of sexuality. Instead, they show how sex and the politics of sexuality were uprooted, contested and constantly redefined in the decades following the Bolshevik revolution. They also raise important questions as to how scholars should interpret the intersection of left politics and sexuality in the twentieth century. Hopefully, this issue will provoke further discussion – for example on the theme of sex and communism in Asia and Africa – as well as deeper analysis.

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Notes

1 Greg Carleton, 'Writing Reading the Sexual Revolution in the Early Soviet Union', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol 8, No 2, 1997, pp229-55, p233; Christine Sypnowich, 'Alexandra Kollontai and the Fate of Bolshevik Feminism', *Labour/Le Travail*, Vol 32, Fall 1993, pp287-288.

2 Becky L. Glass and Margaret K. Stolee, 'Family Law in Soviet Russia, 1917-1945', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol 49, No 4, November 1987, pp893-902.

3 Frances Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex – Lifestyle Advice for the Soviet Masses*, Northern Illinois University Press, Dekalb 2007, p37.

4 Greg Carleton, *Sexual Revolution in Bolshevik Russia*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh 2005, pp1-18; Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex*, pp3-13.

5 The notion that bodily energy was finite was especially widespread among Victorians, and informed biologists' advice that women shouldn't waste energy on education and sports as it would detract from their true purpose of having babies. See: Vanessa Heggie, 'Bodies, Sport and Science in the Nineteenth Century', *Past & Present*, Vol 231, No 1, pp169-200.

6 A slightly disappointed Eric Hobsbawm wrote in a 1969 *New Society* essay: 'There is, I am bound to note with a little regret, a persistent affinity between revolution and puritanism. I can think of no well-

established organized revolutionary movement or regime which has not developed marked puritanical tendencies.' See: Eric Hobsbawm, 'Revolution is puritan', *New Society*, 22 May 1969, p807, as cited in Greg Carleton, *Sexual Revolution in Bolshevik Russia*, p1.

7 Glyn Salton-Cox, *Queer Communism and the Ministry of Love – Sexual Revolution in British Writing of the 1930s*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2018, p3.

8 Raphael Samuel, *The Lost Word of British Communism*, Verso, London 2006, pp188.

9 Ibid, pp188-9.

10 Andrea Friedman, 'The Smearing of Joe McCarthy: The Lavender Scare, Gossip, and Cold War Politics', *American Quarterly*, Vol 57, No 4, 2005, p1106.

11 For example, Douglas M. Charles, *Hoover's War on Gays. Exposing the FBI's 'sex Deviate' Programme*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence 2015.