

# Reviews

Glyn Salton-Cox, *Queer Communism and the Ministry of Love: Sexual Revolution in British Writing of the 1930s*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018, ISBN: 978 1 4744 2331 1

*Queer Communism and the Ministry of Love* begins with a suggestive sentence: ‘Communists are queer creatures’ (p1). This opening establishes a metaphorical refrain threaded throughout this literary history: that elements of communist practice, such as the concept of the cell or the vanguard party, echoed and often complemented queer experiences. Writers prominent in the analysis include Christopher Isherwood, Sylvia Townsend Warner, George Orwell and Katharine Burdekin. The resulting work is an interesting and often provocative look at interwar British writing through a queer Marxist lens, one that will prove relevant not only to historians of radical literary politics but also historians of international communism more broadly.

*Queer Communism* begins with a broad-ranging introduction. Salton-Cox devotes a significant portion of the book to defining the theoretical framework that he uses to explore the tensions and transitions in interwar queer-communist literature. The continuous outlining of new concepts and frameworks – such as Warner’s ‘counterpublics’, Berlant’s ‘cruel optimism’ and the sociological category *Gemeinschaft* – can prove difficult to parse. Threading this theoretical work *throughout* the text may have resulted in a more lucid narrative. Instead, the book reintroduces these formulas as they reappear in later chapters. Nonetheless, the introduction remains thought provoking. Establishing anti-heteronormativity as a ‘major commitment’ of the book, Salton-Cox argues that the revolutionary concepts foregrounded in the communism of the 1920s and early 1930s, such as the notion of a party cell and vanguardism, were more conducive to queer antinormativity than the revolutionary models of the Popular Front era (pp23, 26).

The opening chapter uses the Berlin writing of Christopher Isherwood to explore an engagement between Isherwood and the concept of 'factography' developed by the Soviet intellectual Sergei Tretiakov. Salton-Cox's diligent research into the social and political milieu of Isherwood is revealing. The author describes how Isherwood lived next door to Magnus Hirschfeld's famous Institute for Sex Research in a residence shared with Willi Munzenberg, thereby directly residing 'at an intersection between queer and Marxist fields of activism and engagement' (p43). Yet the archival evidence for a direct engagement between Isherwood and Tretiakov's factography seems sparse, which undermines Salton-Cox's argument that Isherwood's writing reveals the 'queer potential' of the First Five Year Plan.

The second chapter, focusing on the importance of vanguardism in the writing of Sylvia Townsend Warner, presents a more convincing case of a queer British writer's literary engagement with a Marxist-Leninist formulation. Salton-Cox notes that literary historians have relied too heavily on Townsend Warner's edited published correspondence and diaries rather than the author's archive itself, leading to a downplaying of her communist commitment (p77). The chapter explores Townsend Warner's archive in addition to her novel *Summer Will Show* to offer a reading of how the novel is 'at least as much concerned with radical possibility as it is with hopelessness and loss' (p79).

The following chapter examines the shadow cast over the Popular Front by the USSR's 'homophobic turn', providing a useful corrective to an understanding of the Popular Front era as *de facto* broader and more progressive than the years of intense Third Period agitation. The chapter returns to the concept of 'transformative normalcy', defined in the book's introduction as signifying the Popular Front's appeals to defending people from the perceived antinormative aspects of fascism, in particular the link constructed between fascism, homosexuality and sadomasochism by Popular Front polemicists (p31). Exploring the dystopian fiction of Katharine Burdekin through this concept, Salton-Cox reveals how antifascist anti-homosexual rhetoric contributed to a 'strategic heteronormalisation with lasting consequences for the sexual politics of the left' (p116). This chapter provides particularly important examinations of the homophobic tropes found in certain antifascist polemics.

The fourth chapter focuses on an initially surprising inclusion: George Orwell, a figure more commonly cited in histories of Communism for his opposition to the ideology. Yet Salton-Cox argues convincingly that Orwell was ‘not merely a participant in but a paradigmatic figure of Popular Front cultural politics’ (p153). The chapter uses Orwell to launch a discussion of how Popular Front internationalism was marked by an elevation of supposedly unique national cultures in order to refute fascists who claimed to be the voice of the nation. Salton-Cox neatly brands this seeming paradox of an internationalist network embracing national idylls as ‘transnational provincialism’ (pp154-5). Orwell acts as a fitting cypher for the heteronormative reproductive politics at the heart of this concept.

The book’s coda, which makes a historical leap to the period 1964-1976, aptly demonstrates one of *Queer Communism’s* most important contributions: a commitment to upending conventional chronologies. Throughout the book, Salton-Cox effectively maps a broad arc from an experimental 1920s to a restrictive 1930s using Dan Healey’s pioneering work on homosexuality in the early Soviet Union as a reference point. British queer experience is traced with reference to Soviet queer experience, thereby eschewing a normative chronology which suggests that a sectarian ‘Third Period’ of international communism gave way to an open Popular Front. While focused on 1930s British writing, the work pays attention to the revolutionary echoes of this writing in the later careers of the authors examined.

Given the emerging focus on the subjective side of communist experience in recent histories of international communism, the absence of an engagement with the works of scholars such as Lisa Kirschenbaum and Brigitte Studer seems like a missed opportunity.<sup>1</sup> Yet it is also the case that such scholarship sometimes ignores the insights of literary criticism, despite the intensely textual lives led by interwar communists. *Queer Communism* suggests the potential for a conversation between the two fields.

The book is handsomely produced by Edinburgh University Press. Particular credit must go to Genevieve Stawski and Foad Torshizi, whose cover design for the book re-imagines a drawing from Townsend Warner’s diary. The original diary image, also reproduced in the text,

depicts a heart enclosed by a hammer and sickle with the initials of Townsend Warner and her partner Valentine Ackland (p91). For anyone interested in how these symbolised concepts related to one another – namely sexual and communist revolution – *Queer Communism* makes for an engaging and rewarding read.

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## Notes

- 1 Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, *International Communism and the Spanish Civil War: Solidarity and Suspicion*, Cambridge 2015; and Brigitte Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians*, Basingstoke, 2015.
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**Kristen R. Ghodsee, *Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism: And Other Arguments for Economic Independence*, Penguin Random House, 2019, ISBN: 9781847925596, 240pp**

The failed experiments of state socialism in Eastern Europe during the twentieth century have provided a strong argument for the enthusiasts of the free market economy, while they have inflicted a sense of culpability on those who want to challenge neoliberalism. Three decades after the fall of communism, this notion that those who support socialism are somehow responsible for the atrocities committed under communism remains popular. It has been masterfully and systematically cultivated by high school curricula and the media, especially in countries where anti-communism remains a structural element of the official state ideology, such as in the United States. In order to challenge anti-communist narratives of twentieth-century history, Kristen R. Ghodsee, professor of Russian and East European Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, has spent many years in countries that were behind the Iron Curtain. She has studied the transition of Eastern European societies from state socialism to capitalism and, through this book, aims to

challenge some of the hegemonic neoliberal arguments that perpetuate women's double burden. She prompts her readers to re-examine what they learned in school about twentieth-century communism, to learn from past mistakes, and to draw useful conclusions from the experiment of state socialism in Eastern Europe.

With the catchy title *Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism*, Kristen Ghodsee offers an accessible book on why 'unregulated capitalism is bad for women' and why socialism can lead 'to economic independence, better labour conditions, better work/family balance, and, yes, even better sex'. Ghodsee compares the sexual life of women in Eastern European countries with those of women in powerful capitalist countries such as the United States and West Germany. Based on findings in previous research, the author argues that the massive mobilisation of women into the labour force, and the creation of solid networks protecting motherhood and childcare, to a great extent, freed women living under state socialism. To gain material security, women did not need to have sexual relations, or to find a husband. In making her argument, Ghodsee does not embellish conditions in the Soviet Union and the Eastern European people's republics, or ignore the setbacks that distorted the vision of female revolutionaries such as Alexandra Kollontai or Nadezhda Krupskaya; instead, her point is, at its most basic, that gender equality in emotional and sexual relations cannot be achieved without the economic independence of women. To support this argument, the author uses expressive examples familiar to most of her readers, which she draws from her personal circle of friends and acquaintances. Ghodsee also writes about how the transition to a free-market economy worsened the position of women in Eastern European countries. A typical example was the founding of so-called 'gold digger' academies in post-communist Russia, where young Russian women learn the precise tactics of being a successful 'gold digger', which has become a coveted career for Russia's most beautiful women.

The book is mainly addressed to a younger generation of Americans who experienced the resurgence of ultraconservative and misogynistic views during the Trump administration. This explains also why Ghodsee often moves beyond the historical experience of state socialism to the subordinate and precarious position of women in the United States.

There, Ghodsee explains, as in most capitalist countries, various vicious circles prevent women from claiming leadership positions in economics and politics. Most of them are forced to submit their sexuality to the dispositions of partners or husbands in exchange for material benefits that would be provided for by the welfare state in other countries.

Ghodsee's book has already been translated into several languages and certainly fulfils its pedagogical goal. It is an introduction to the women's issue, enriched with eloquent quotes from intellectuals and political figures who have linked women's emancipation to socialism, such as Friedrich Engels and Clara Zetkin. Nevertheless, sexual pleasure is a complex question not merely related to economic and social issues, but also connected to cultural and individual aspects. In this book, the author largely overlooks the cultural realities – such as the role of religion and local traditions – that significantly influence both the sexual behaviour of people and society's prevailing views on female sexuality.

Like many other anti-neoliberal intellectuals, Ghodsee is unable to present a concrete political and social model that would replace neoliberal capitalism. Although she convincingly describes the factors that limit women to a subordinate position in modern capitalist societies, the democratic socialism she invokes is rather vague. The author's definition of democratic socialism is so loose that it includes everything from Clement Attlee's Labour Party that ruled Britain during the first years of the Cold War, to the capitalist model of development with a strong welfare state in the Nordic countries, the Syriza party that ruled Greece between 2015 and 2019 and *Podemos*, which since November 2019 has, in coalition with the Spanish Socialist Party, participated in the government of Spain. Of course, for Ghodsee the forefront of democratic socialism includes Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, but it could also include Hillary Clinton when the logic of the lesser evil is applied. In the last pages of her book, Ghodsee explains that certain economic and social reforms within the existing economic system are much preferable to an overthrow of capitalism, which 'would have massive global repercussions and cause widespread human suffering to many of the same people who would ultimately benefit from its demise'. In this sense, the title of Ghodsee's book could also be *Why Women Have Better Sex Under a Better Capitalism*. Considering the author's vague ideas about

democratic socialism, it remains unclear what kind of reforms would put an end to the unemployment, insecurity and inequality that are inherent elements of capitalist development itself. Are the tools of liberal democracies, such as quotas, as the author argues, capable of paving the way for the emancipation of all women – including, for example, immigrants, who, in many capitalist countries, constitute a large part of the most savagely exploited working class?

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**Maria Lafont, *The Strange Comrade Balabanoff. The Life of a Communist Rebel*, Jefferson NC: McFarland & Co, 2016, 244 pp, ISBN 978-0-78649878-9**

Curiosity about Angelica Balabanoff's adventurous life and her relationships with prominent men such as Vladimir Lenin and Benito Mussolini drove Maria Lafont to research and write this biography of her. Lafont is not an academic historian and she does not pursue a political biography of Balabanoff, nor does she place her life in historiographical context. Nevertheless, her lively writing style creates a picture of people and places that make her book an engaging read.

Although she left published memoirs, Balabanoff has not been the subject of a scholarly biography. Starting with these, which have large chronological gaps, Lafont traces Balabanoff's life journey. She compares her memories to sources from more than thirty archives and libraries in eleven countries, as well as drawing on interviews. Lafont visited some of these places, but did not personally conduct research in all the archives from which she has acquired materials.

Balabanoff spoke thirteen languages. Most of Lafont's sources are in Italian, French, English, German and Russian. Sources include Balabanoff's unpublished memoirs of childhood, her correspondence, police reports, newspaper articles and government documents. Some parts of Balabanoff's life, such as her childhood and youth, are docu-

mented weakly, while there are many sources about her from the time when she lived in the United States. She achieved both fame and notoriety and often received prominent press coverage. Police forces across Europe and the US tracked her carefully.

Balabanoff was not a political theorist but her fellow revolutionaries highly regarded and valued her as an agitational speaker, organiser, fundraiser, treasurer and interpreter for the revolutionary movement. People were attracted to her kindness, compassion, honesty and selflessness. Therefore, she acquired a large network of friends and comrades who came to her aid at crucial moments in her life.

Born in Chernigov, Ukraine into a wealthy merchant family, she explained her commitment to improving the lives of the poor as having arisen from sympathy for her family's servants, who she thought her mother mistreated. Balabanoff's family was of Jewish ancestry, but her parents or grandparents might have converted to Russian Orthodoxy. Religion doesn't appear to have played a strong role in her upbringing. Balabanoff claimed to have been about nineteen when she left Russia to study in university courses in Belgium, Germany and Italy, but Lafont found that she was twenty-eight years old and was probably trying to hide an unsuccessful marriage by claiming to be younger. Having rejected her upbringing in luxury, she adopted an ascetic way of life, accepting only a small monthly subsidy from her brothers.

Upon having completed her courses of study, Balabanoff was offered a career as a professor, but she turned down this opportunity in favour of devoting her life to helping the poor. Having become a Marxist in 1901, she fell in love with Italy around the same time. Her mission focused on helping Italian immigrants carrying out manual work in Switzerland. She turned to journalism in 1904, when she founded and edited a weekly newspaper for Italian women workers, using material furnished by the workers themselves. A catalyst in her rise to fame and notoriety was her attack on a group of nuns who were stealing the wages of factory girls who lived in their convent. Her exposure of their abuse brought the church and its supporters to attack her in words and sometimes physically. By 1906 the Swiss police regarded her as a dangerous socialist and she was forced to relocate to Genoa in December 1906.

Although Balabanoff did not return to Russia for the 1905 revolution,



she was in close contact with Russian revolutionaries in emigration. She leaned toward the Mensheviks among the Russian Social Democrats. Rumours about the Bolsheviks' unsavoury methods, such as the 1907 Tiflis bank robbery, made her leery of them.

Lafont devotes many pages to speculation about Balabanoff's rumoured sexual liaisons with Lenin, Trotsky, Mussolini and a host of others, but the evidence for these seems very weak. Scholars of political and social history may become frustrated by Lafont's creative writing in these sections. She notes that Balabanoff denied any attraction to Lenin upon their first encounter but does not want to accept her subject's words. Balabanoff's contacts made her valuable to ambitious politicians like Lenin and Mussolini. She helped to advance Mussolini's career prior to World War I while he was still a socialist.

Lafont allows that friendships with women were important to Balabanoff both emotionally and politically, but she does not relate her research to much of the secondary work on women revolutionaries or about gender in the revolutionary movement. She paints Balabanoff as an advocate of free love like Kollontai, despite Beatrice Farnsworth's assessment of Balabanoff in her Kollontai biography as 'a puritan who rejected Kollontai's free sexuality'.<sup>1</sup>

When World War I began, Balabanoff took an internationalist position against the war and had to leave Italy to avoid arrest. She returned to Switzerland. The war made the financial subsidies she received from her brothers less regular and the family wealth declined due to inflation. Therefore, she had to take on translation jobs to support herself. Nevertheless, her work on behalf of the socialist movement continued. She helped organise both the anti-war women's conference in March 1915 in Berne and the Zimmerwald conference of socialists opposed to the war. Strictly a pacifist, she did not favour Lenin's position on turning imperialist war into civil war.

After the February 1917 revolution in Russia, Balabanoff was on the second train of socialists after Lenin's to leave Switzerland for Russia, arriving in May 1917. She was reunited with her brother in Petrograd. She still had no party affiliation, but the press had already labelled her a prominent Bolshevik. Forced to leave Russia in August 1917 due to accusations of spying for the Germans, she acquiesced to representing

the Bolsheviks in Sweden. The only alternative for her would have been return to Switzerland, where she would have been completely sidelined from the revolution in Russia. This is how she became a member of the Bolshevik party.

Balabanoff represented the Bolsheviks' diplomatic interests in Scandinavia after they came to power. She also provided financial aid to Russian refugees and displaced persons there. Permitted to return to Russia in late 1918, she was only there long enough to inform Lenin about the prospects for international revolution, which she thought poor. Unconvinced, Lenin ordered her to go to Switzerland in October 1918 to assist with a general strike due to take place there in November. Not long after her arrival, she was ordered to leave the country. During her escort to the train station, she was beaten, bloodied and knocked out. Having finally arrived safely in Germany, she returned to Russia through Poland.

From 1918 to 1922 she lived in the Hotel National in Moscow in the tiniest room she was permitted. The Russian Communist Party leaders denied her wish to live among workers. Having been absent during much of the year after the October revolution, she was now forced to confront the reality of red terror. This took some time. Although one of her brothers had been brutally killed by peasants, she refused to regard his fate as a consequence of Bolshevik policies.

Lenin acquiesced to Balabanoff's desire to help the arrested by giving her a position overseeing prisons, but she found there was little she could do. Her command of more than a dozen languages made her valuable in international work, but she complained to Lenin about untrustworthy foreigners being given money to spread propaganda in favour of Soviet Russia abroad. Lenin sent her briefly to Ukraine as commissar of foreign affairs in February 1919 and then brought her back to Moscow to help translate at the first congress of the Third International. She represented the Socialist Party of Italy there. Lenin appointed her to be secretary of the Third International, but she despised its leader, Grigory Zinoviev, for placing himself above his comrades, unethical behaviour and material self-indulgence. Soon she found that Zinoviev was excluding her from important meetings and having her signature forged on important documents, but she still trusted Lenin.

Given her inability to work with Zinoviev, Balabanoff was transferred to the Third International's Southern Bureau in Ukraine, where she was to carry out propaganda to recruit individuals to go abroad to promote Soviet Russia and to undermine morale among French military forces in Odessa. She also helped oversee conscription into the red army. In Odessa in summer 1919, she was confronted by her impoverished and prematurely aged sister and other relatives, but her relations with them were problematic because the reds viewed them as counterrevolutionaries. She had to flee Odessa and then Kiev to avoid white armies. Her family departed for Constantinople and a nephew eventually reached Paris.

While in Ukraine, Balabanoff had witnessed atrocities toward civilian refugees, which she wanted the government in Moscow to address. She found, however, that both Dzerzhinsky and Lenin approved of these and so she became demoralised. Dismissed as Comintern secretary in 1920, she nevertheless served as an interpreter at the Second Congress of the Third International in July 1920. Not permitted to leave Russia with the Italian delegation, she finally was allowed exit in 1921 for medical treatment after prominent Swedish socialists intervened with the Soviet government on her behalf. In April 1924, several months after Lenin died, she lost her Soviet citizenship and was purged from the Communist Party. Lafont has scanty information about Balabanoff's movements from 1920 to 1924. Creatively filling the gap, she constructs an elaborate hypothesis that Balabanoff went to Constantinople to reunite with her sister Anna, but there is no evidence for this.

Balabanoff subsequently obtained Austrian citizenship and worked a variety of odd jobs as a writer and translator. She returned to her aid work among poor Italian immigrants. In 1925, she moved to Paris and took up the antifascist cause. Infiltrating her networks of close friends, Mussolini's spies kept constant track of her. She also remained under the close observation of police agencies. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, she was very poor, malnourished and often sick. She came close to committing suicide in 1931. In her vulnerable state, at age 65, she fell in love with a man in his thirties who turned out to be a spy sent from Mussolini to monitor her. The shock of his betrayal, Lafont writes, made Balabanoff suspicious of new acquaintances for the rest of her life.

By 1935, Balabanoff had finally saved enough money to leave Europe for the United States, where she lived until after World War II ended. There she gave assistance to war refugees and continued her campaign against fascism and Stalin's communism. She earned money from her books and lectures, but never enough to be comfortable. After the war ended, she lost her refugee status and could no longer stay in the United States. Her friends paid for her return to Italy.

Not long after Balabanoff arrived in Rome, she delivered an 'openly anti-communist speech' at a socialist congress that 'sparked a mutiny' (p197). Given threats to her life for disrupting the socialist movement and for her past links to Mussolini, her friends were able to obtain for her an open-entry visa to return to the United States if ever emergency threatened her. Nevertheless, she remained in Rome for the rest of her life, although she moved residences thirteen times over twenty years. The Italian Socialist Party paid her rent, and she was kept up from a financial fund set up on her behalf in the US. Despite giving away much of what she received, she did not suffer extreme poverty in her later years. Her great fear was that Soviet agents would seize her and repatriate her to the Soviet Union (p205).

Actively involved in Italian socialist politics throughout her later years, Balabanoff controversially called for 'social revolution', (p207), but Lafont insists that she did not mean a violent revolution that would have provoked bloodshed. She retained much support among Italian socialists. Giuseppe Saragat, whose successful campaign for the presidency she supported in 1964, paid for her nursing home stay until her death in November 1965.

The chief consistency running through Balabanoff's life was her devotion to humanitarian socialism in principle and practice. Everywhere she lived, she devoted her time and energy to helping the poor, immigrants, refugees and prisoners. Her genuine kindness and compassion won her a large network of devoted friends. Despite Lafont's unscholarly attempts to spice up Balabanoff's biography with shaky hypotheses about scandalous sexual affairs and other escapades for which there is little to no evidence, she deserves credit for giving prominence to Balabanoff's social mission in a lively narrative. Perhaps a historian with more time and resources to track down documents in Russia and Ukraine could

shed more light upon the parts of Balabanoff's life that remain obscure in Lafont's account, but no academic historian has produced a complete biography of Balabanoff. This book is intended to appeal to a popular readership, but it may be of use to scholars who seek the most comprehensive narrative of Balabanoff's life available.

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## Notes

- 1 Beatrice Farnsworth, *Aleksandra Kollontai. Socialism, Feminism and the Bolshevik Revolution*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto 1980, p57.