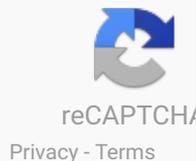


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SundayReview

Why Women Had Better Sex Under Socialism

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When Americans think of Communism in Eastern Europe, they imagine travel restrictions, bleak landscapes of gray concrete, miserable men and women languishing in long lines to shop in empty markets and security services snooping on the private lives of citizens. While much of this was true, our collective

stereotype of Communist life does not tell the whole story.

Some might remember that Eastern bloc women enjoyed many rights and privileges unknown in liberal democracies at the time, including major state investments in their education and training, their full incorporation into the labor force, generous maternity leave allowances and guaranteed free child care. But there's one advantage that has received little attention: Women under Communism enjoyed more sexual pleasure.

A comparative sociological study of East and West Germans conducted after reunification in 1990 found that Eastern women had twice as many orgasms as Western women. Researchers marveled at this disparity in reported sexual satisfaction, especially since East German women suffered from the notorious double burden of formal employment and housework. In contrast, postwar West German women had stayed home and enjoyed all the labor-saving devices produced by the roaring capitalist economy. But they had less sex, and less satisfying sex, than women who had to line up for toilet paper.

How to account for this facet of life behind the Iron Curtain?

Consider Ana Durcheva from Bulgaria, who was 65 when I first met her in 2011. Having lived her first 43 years under Communism, she often complained that the new free market hindered Bulgarians' ability to develop healthy amorous relationships.

"Sure, some things were bad during that time, but my life was full of romance," she said. "After my divorce, I had my job and my salary, and I didn't need a man to support me. I could do as I pleased."

Ms. Durcheva was a single mother for many years, but she insisted that her life before 1989 was more gratifying than the stressful existence of her daughter, who was born in the late 1970s.

"All she does is work and work," Ms. Durcheva told me in 2013, "and when she comes home at night she is too tired to be with her husband. But it doesn't matter, because he is tired, too. They sit together in front of the television like zombies. When I was her age, we had much more fun."

Last year in Jena, a university town in the former East Germany, I spoke with a recently married 30-something named Daniela Gruber. Her own mother — born and raised under the Communist system — was putting pressure on Ms. Gruber to have a baby.

“She doesn’t understand how much harder it is now — it was so easy for women before the Wall fell,” she told me, referring to the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in 1989. “They had kindergartens and crèches, and they could take maternity leave and have their jobs held for them. I work contract to contract, and don’t have time to get pregnant.”

This generational divide between daughters and mothers who reached adulthood on either side of 1989 supports the idea that women had more fulfilling lives during the Communist era. And they owed this quality of life, in part, to the fact that these regimes saw women’s emancipation as central to advanced “scientific socialist” societies, as they saw themselves.

Although East European Communist states needed women’s labor to realize their programs for rapid industrialization after World War II, the ideological foundation for women’s equality with men was laid by August Bebel and Friedrich Engels in the 19th century. After the Bolshevik takeover, Vladimir Lenin and Aleksandra Kollontai enabled a sexual revolution in the early years of the Soviet Union, with Kollontai arguing that love should be freed from economic considerations.

Russia extended full suffrage to women in 1917, three years before the United States did. The Bolsheviks also liberalized divorce laws, guaranteed reproductive rights and attempted to socialize domestic labor by investing in public laundries and people’s canteens. Women were mobilized into the labor force and became financially untethered from men.

In Central Asia in the 1920s, Russian women crusaded for the liberation of Muslim women. This top-down campaign met a violent backlash from local patriarchs not keen to see their sisters, wives and daughters freed from the shackles of tradition.

In the 1930s, Joseph Stalin reversed much of the Soviet Union’s early progress

in women's rights — outlawing abortion and promoting the nuclear family. However, the acute male labor shortages that followed World War II spurred other Communist governments to push forward with various programs for women's emancipation, including state-sponsored research on the mysteries of female sexuality. Most Eastern European women could not travel to the West or read a free press, but scientific socialism did come with some benefits.

“As early as 1952, Czechoslovak sexologists started doing research on the female orgasm, and in 1961 they held a conference solely devoted to the topic,” Katerina Liskova, a professor at Masaryk University in the Czech Republic, told me. “They focused on the importance of the equality between men and women as a core component of female pleasure. Some even argued that men need to share housework and child rearing, otherwise there would be no good sex.”

Agnieszka Koscianska, an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Warsaw, told me that pre-1989 Polish sexologists “didn't limit sex to bodily experiences and stressed the importance of social and cultural contexts for sexual pleasure.” It was state socialism's answer to work-life balance: “Even the best stimulation, they argued, will not help to achieve pleasure if a woman is stressed or overworked, worried about her future and financial stability.”

In all the Warsaw Pact countries, the imposition of one-party rule precipitated a sweeping overhaul of laws regarding the family. Communists invested major resources in the education and training of women and in guaranteeing their employment. State-run women's committees sought to re-educate boys to accept girls as full comrades, and they attempted to convince their compatriots that male chauvinism was a remnant of the pre-socialist past.

Although gender wage disparities and labor segregation persisted, and although the Communists never fully reformed domestic patriarchy, Communist women enjoyed a degree of self-sufficiency that few Western women could have imagined. Eastern bloc women did not need to marry, or have sex, for money. The socialist state met their basic needs and countries such as Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and East Germany committed extra resources to support single mothers, divorcées and widows. With the noted exceptions of Romania, Albania and Stalin's Soviet Union, most Eastern European countries guaranteed

access to sex education and abortion. This reduced the social costs of accidental pregnancy and lowered the opportunity costs of becoming a mother.

Some liberal feminists in the West grudgingly acknowledged those accomplishments but were critical of the achievements of state socialism because they did not emerge from independent women's movements, but represented a type of emancipation from above. Many academic feminists today celebrate choice but also embrace a cultural relativism dictated by the imperatives of intersectionality. Any top-down political program that seeks to impose a universalist set of values like equal rights for women is seriously out of fashion.

The result, unfortunately, has been that many of the advances of women's liberation in the former Warsaw Pact countries have been lost or reversed. Ms. Durcheva's adult daughter and the younger Ms. Gruber now struggle to resolve the work-life problems that Communist governments had once solved for their mothers.

"The Republic gave me my freedom," Ms. Durcheva once told me, referring to the People's Republic of Bulgaria. "Democracy took some of that freedom away."

As for Ms. Gruber, she has no illusions about the brutalities of East German Communism; she just wishes "things weren't so much harder now."

Because they championed sexual equality — at work, at home and in the bedroom — and were willing to enforce it, Communist women who occupied positions in the state apparatus could be called cultural imperialists. But the liberation they imposed radically transformed millions of lives across the globe, including those of many women who still walk among us as the mothers and grandmothers of adults in the now democratic member states of the European Union. Those comrades' insistence on government intervention may seem heavy-handed to our postmodern sensibilities, but sometimes necessary social change — which soon comes to be seen as the natural order of things — needs an emancipation proclamation from above.

Correction: August 14, 2017

An earlier version of this essay misattributed responsibility for enacting women's suffrage in Russia in 1917. It was achieved under the Provisional Government in July,

not by the Bolsheviks, who did not seize power until November.

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This is an essay in the series Red Century, about the history and legacy of Communism 100 years after the Russian Revolution.

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