

REVIEW ARTICLE

## Sex in the Cold War

Kateřina Liřková

Department of Sociology, Masaryk University, Jořtova 218/10, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic  
[katerina@fss.muni.cz](mailto:katerina@fss.muni.cz)

Alana Harris (ed.), *The Schism of '68: Catholicism, Contraception and 'Humanae Vitae' in Europe, 1945–1975* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 398 pp. (pb), £79.00, ISBN 978-3030-09995-4.

Dagmar Herzog, *Cold War Freud: Psychoanalysis in an Age of Catastrophes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 249 pp. (pb), £19.00, ISBN 978-1107-42087-8.

Agnieszka Kořciańska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence: The Construction of Expert Knowledge of Sexuality in Poland* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2021), 320 pp. (pb), £28.00, ISBN 978-0253-05309-1.

Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 240 pp. (pb), £12.00, ISBN 978-0691-19722-7.

Lukasz Szulc, *Transnational Homosexuals in Communist Poland: Cross-Border Flows in Gay and Lesbian Magazines* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 274 pp. (pb), £24.99, ISBN 978-3319-86505-8.

Surprisingly, sexuality has not been at the centre of scholarship on post-war Central and Eastern Europe. While neighbouring topics, such as gender or everyday life, have been thoroughly and wonderfully researched (the list here is too long, but let me mention at least some shining examples<sup>1</sup>), sexuality somehow escaped the spotlight. Path-breaking research done by Dagmar Herzog on East Germany<sup>2</sup> or Dan Healey on Soviet Russia<sup>3</sup> was for a long time not followed by similar examinations focusing on other countries from the region. The situation is beginning to change.

As the Foucauldian insight, well-known to historians and social scientists, teaches us: it is precisely through sexuality that we can understand power the best. So, it is high time that we received exciting new studies of how power during the Cold War operated through sex and sexual discourses, both in the East and West. What we learn from the five insightful books under review is the degree of authority experts wielded over sex in socialist countries, how entangled sexual and religious discourses were even in manifestly non-religious socialist countries and how sex served to paint the socialist East as backward in Cold War struggles and beyond. Reading these books, we learn how sexuality developed

<sup>1</sup> Malgorzata Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Lynne Haney, *Inventing the Needy: Gender and the Politics of Welfare in Hungary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer and His T.V.: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010); Paul Betts, *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Melissa Feinberg, *Elusive Equality: Gender, Citizenship, and the Limits of Democracy in Czechoslovakia, 1918–1950* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

in the absence of the bearer of change known from liberal societies – social movements. In the socialist East, it was expertise in the human sciences – namely sexology, psychology or demography – which sometimes fuelled progress and, at other times, informed backtracking.<sup>4</sup> We get a chance to ponder the role of religion and see both how Christianity was invoked as a backbone of traditional Western morality while also getting a chance to observe those instances in which Catholic prelates called for sexual liberalisation, especially when it came to marriage and relationships of spouses. Overall, we get a nuanced picture of sexuality in the East, which was by no means prudish during socialism and did not need to ‘catch up’ with the supposedly more developed and more liberated West after the Cold War had ended.

### Ideology, Subjectivation and Western-Style Modernity

On the cultural front of the Cold War, gender and sexuality were weaponised by the ideological opponents. The Western camp posited ‘the Soviets . . . as collapsing the public/private distinction, moving to a conceptual scheme of (unnatural) gender nondifferentiation’, as Joan W. Scott argues in her *Sex and Secularism*.<sup>5</sup> From the very beginning, the West couched their position in religion. In the 1946 speech, in which Churchill coined the term ‘iron curtain’, he ‘made an explicit connection between Christianity and democracy’,<sup>6</sup> and from then on, freedom and democracy were conflated with Christian civilisation and posited as a bulwark against communism. Symbolically, the phrase ‘under God’ was added to the pledge of allegiance, and ‘in God we trust’ appeared on US currency in 1953. As Scott would have it, the West waged ‘the crusade against communism’.<sup>7</sup> According to her, at stake was much more than which political or economic system was better. By invoking religious values, the morality of men and women’s everyday lives was put at the forefront, together with overarching ethical principles that guide entire societies.

Scott is primarily interested in a longer-term history of Western modernity that illustrates how cherished notions of individual rights, of discrete public and private spheres and separated churches and states were all founded on an underlying gender hierarchy. The Cold War is a moment when this particular Western self-image – based on normative ideas of gender, sexuality and morality – came into especially sharp focus. Scott shows that the ideas of how a good life should be lived were heavily gendered and helped propel the Western liberal project (and one can add they served the same purpose in the communist East, albeit with different gender norms).

While advocates of the Western model of secularism might claim that gender equality naturally emerged as a result of church–state separation, Scott contends that gender *inequality* was part and parcel of said separation, and thus modernity as such. Secularism emerged infused with distinctions between public and private, political and religious, masculine and feminine, which were anything but gender equal. Not only was ‘gender equality absent from the founding documents of Western democracies’;<sup>8</sup> the Code Napoléon, the most influential among modern civil codes, ‘made the family, and the father’s supremacy within it, the cornerstone of secularizing nation-states’.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, Scott invites us to examine the origin stories of Western liberalism by the likes of Locke or Rousseau. Doing so, we discover that ‘the alternative to absolutism rested on the consent of those who were subjected to patriarchal rule, sons to fathers, wives to husbands’.<sup>10</sup> Scott persuasively shows that long before the Iron Curtain fell, the West built its polity on age and gender hierarchies. She uses

<sup>4</sup> As I show in Kateřina Lišková, *Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style: Communist Czechoslovakia and the Science of Desire, 1945–1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), /core/books/sexual-liberation-socialist-style/ECEFAB809A019B2F7D63267B9D95CEAD.

<sup>5</sup> Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 123.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

Freud's *Totem and Taboo* to elucidate the founding myth of a hierarchical gender order, within which brothers who together overthrew the father-king commenced a qualitatively new arrangement (read: modernity). To prevent future clashes that might threaten the new order, each brother was afforded a sort of kingdom of his own: his family. A close reading of Freud thus reveals that 'in the realm of the psyche, shared political power depends on the disciplining of sexuality by marriage'.<sup>11</sup> As Scott quips: 'we might characterize this with the formula: one man, one woman; one man, one vote'.<sup>12</sup>

The sleight of hand performed in the Cold War West was to present the patriarchal family as the guarantor of individualism. The family was not only an incubator for the (male) individual who had his own rights and responsibility for his own economic thriving (largely because he could rely on a gendered division of labour): it became 'an item for export, a way of undermining communist notions of collective, socialised responsibility and thus a way of depoliticising issues of economic causality'.<sup>13</sup> In other words, where the West could somewhat spuriously put the individual on the pedestal and shed any responsibility for his economic wellbeing, the East weakened an individual's standing while making people's economic security the state's obligation. Unfortunately, Scott does not discuss how gender and sexuality were deployed in the communist East. She only takes note of how post-communist societies realigned their public discourse on sex with their Western counterparts and how, after the Iron Curtain fell, the 'ideas about sexuality in Eastern Europe were either an explicit endorsement of the Western theme or a variant on it'.<sup>14</sup>

After the Cold War had ended two processes coincided. First, the language of individual rights became the lingua franca of the newly united post-communist world, in which large parts of society celebrated 'the return of true femininity'<sup>15</sup> as 'a response to the desexualization of life under communism'.<sup>16</sup> Scott argues that this sexualised individualism in post-communist Eastern Europe became emblematic of embracing 'the West'. Sexual autonomy was conflated with democracy, which also served an additional purpose. Secularism was deployed against another 'Eastern' enemy: Islam. 'In the clash of civilization discourse, Islam was now portrayed as an excessive form of spirituality . . . Islam became a form of totalitarian politics in which shari'a law substituted for Marxist dialectics'.<sup>17</sup>

It would be illuminating to read more about how Scott sees the deployment of gender in the communist East. She is the most persuasive when presenting the genealogy of Western modernity as profoundly gendered, showing how these values were marshalled to legitimise the Western order during the Cold War and how the same values are weaponised now, both in the 'old' West and East, to ward off the new 'threat from the East'.

One sees, then, in Scott how a certain kind of conservative ideology of the family could come dressed in the garb of sexual autonomy and individual rights. Another type of fodder for sexual conservatism, especially in the freshly post-war United States (and contrary to the end of the nineteenth century in Central Europe), was psychoanalysis laced with Christianity. The reworkings of psychoanalysis in the second half of the twentieth century is the subject of Dagmar Herzog's *Cold War Freud: Psychoanalysis in an Age of Catastrophes*, which documents the shifts from manifestly apolitical science (which, however, remained coloured by the politics of the times) to the overtly political movement inspired by the desire for social change. At the first post-Second World War meeting of psychoanalysts, the president of the International Psychoanalytical Association, Ernest Jones, admonished efforts to link psychoanalysis to anything political. His was a vision of the discipline that looked strictly at 'the primitive forces of the mind'.<sup>18</sup> Yet, Herzog argues that 'the Jewish science', as psychoanalysis

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 142–3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Herzog, *Cold War Freud*, 3.

was nicknamed at the time, was getting profoundly Christianised – and thus tacitly politicised. Particularly in the United States, where rapprochement occurred between Christian churches and psychoanalysis, analysts often traded in misogyny and homophobia.

Contrary to a Jonesian call for separation of politics from science, including psychoanalysis, Herzog persuasively argues for ‘the utter inextricability of social context and psychic interiority’,<sup>19</sup> providing a conceptual blueprint for historians to study human sciences such as psychology, medicine and sexology in their socio-historical embeddedness. In other words, if we want to understand societies on their macro level, we should not focus on ideology formulated in the political sphere but rather on modes of subjectivation. Among the first to notice, Herzog points to Wilhelm Reich, ‘the iconoclast Marxist’, who already in the year of Hitler’s ascent to power pointed not to some intellectual appeal but to ‘the corporeal impact of ideology, especially an ideology that enforced sexual fear and self-restriction’.<sup>20</sup> In her previous work, Herzog showed how limitations were selectively applied to undesired populations, while the heterosexual members of the ‘master race’ were incited to sexual pleasure.<sup>21</sup> After the war Reich was adamant that fascism was ‘not, as is commonly believed, a purely reactionary movement – it represents an amalgam between rebellious emotions and reactionary social ideas’;<sup>22</sup> and Herzog documented how coming to terms with the Third Reich’s heritage fuelled the youth rebellion in the late 1960s West Germany.<sup>23</sup>

In the following decade and a neighbouring country, psychoanalysis found a radically political expression in *Anti-Oedipus*, a work authored in 1972 by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, reflecting the sexual revolution, gay rights movement and anti-colonial struggles. In an explicit repudiation of the non-political variety of psychoanalysis, *Anti-Oedipus* insisted on social and collective dimensions of psychogenesis. Turning away from a simplistic notion of ideology, the ways of *becoming a subject* became central to psychoanalysts reformulating Freud in the late Cold War era. Guattari proclaimed that ‘rather than speak of ideology, I always prefer to speak of subjectivation, or the production of subjectivity’.<sup>24</sup> Or, in the words of his fellow traveller Gilles Deleuze: ‘ideology has no importance whatsoever: what matters is not ideology . . . but the organisation of power’.<sup>25</sup> Deleuze and Guattari were psychoanalytically inspired theorists making sense of fascism. However, their thinking could be productively applied to state socialism. There, also, attempting to analyse social relations through ideology runs into impasses and generally does not bring compelling insights.

Choosing psychoanalysis as an object of study, Herzog gives a brilliant reading of travelling texts and their interpretations, their shifting and morphing into new forms that were always indicative of their time and place. Far better than psychoanalysis’ purported universal explanation of the human condition, Herzog sheds light on the social context, which in the double move shaped psychoanalysis and revealed itself through rewritings, receptions and repurposings of the psychoanalytical text.

### The Role of Religion in Sexual Liberation

As Scott shows, secularism is neither a synonym for progress, equality or emancipation, nor does it guarantee gender equality. Conversely, religion is not merely a retrograde force, time and again setting back the clock of sexual progress. Indeed, Scott cites Herzog on the change in tone of Christian churches, which by the mid-twentieth century began to stress the importance of ‘mutually satisfying marital sex’, not only reproduction. After the Second World War a debate stirred within the Catholic Church with progressive voices among many high-ranking representatives calling for relaxing the

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>21</sup> Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Herzog, *Cold War Freud*, 161.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, 170

<sup>25</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, 163.

age-old dogma surrounding sex in marriage. A resolution came in 1968 in the form of encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, influential Catholic teaching on marital sex and contraception, which confirmed the traditional approach to marriage and banned the faithful's use of 'artificial' contraception.

Alana Harris's edited collection *The Schism of '68: Catholicism, Contraception and 'Humanae Vitae' in Europe, 1945–1975* analyses the responses to the encyclical that emerged on both sides of the divided continent, showing the heated debates that preceded and fractious acceptance that followed. *Humanae Vitae* was adopted on 25 July 1968 and Harris labels it a "Catholic equivalent" to the better known secular revolts of 1968.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, religion is mostly absent in the histories of sexual revolutions of the 1960s in the West, and thus 'sexual liberation automatically equates to secularization',<sup>27</sup> a claim which Harris refutes together with the idea that religion disappeared with modernity as a mighty force shaping the sexual landscape. Instead, Harris references Dagmar Herzog's idea of syncopated sex,<sup>28</sup> which brings out the unevenness of sexual developments, the leaps forward and backlashes, both of which are brought about by various social forces, including organised religion.

Within Christian churches, opinions stirred from at least the mid-twentieth century celebrating the pleasurable aspects of marital union. In Belgium, progressive Catholics began pushing for reforms in sexual mores that had been tightly set in 1909 by Catholic conservatives who pronounced any contraception within marriage a 'conjugal onanism'. Wannes Dupont, in his chapter 'Of Human Love: Catholics Campaigning for Sexual Aggiornamento in Postwar Belgium', cites from theological writings published in the 1940s, which depicted 'people who practiced any form of contraception, including periodic abstinence, as morally bankrupt hedonists who "listen to the deafening noise of jazz on the radio to muffle the voices of their own conscience"'.<sup>29</sup> In opposition, a new generation of clergy arose: personalists philosophised starting from love, emphasising personal growth and relational fulfilment. Love in marriage was of utmost importance and with it "virtuous fertility": a positive embrace of the marital act, periodic abstinence and family planning in good Christian spirit'.<sup>30</sup> A champion of these teachings, Louis Janssens, welcomed progesterone pills, and from 1959 organised annual International Sexological Colloquia in the Belgian city of Leuven. From this progressive environment stemmed an interdisciplinary group of reformers who had the pope's ear and got to shape the Vatican Council to the extent that the council was informally dubbed 'Concilium Vaticanum II, Lovaniense I'<sup>31</sup> and its creators 'referred to as "la Squadra belga"'.<sup>32</sup> Yet, their 'high hopes and heavy lobbying'<sup>33</sup> came to naught as a traditionalist wing gained influence over the new pope and halted any changes of sexual mores within the Catholic Church. *Humanae Vitae* came to reflect this traditionalist reversal.

Parts of the Church voiced their reservations – Belgians among them – calling the encyclical 'not an infallible declaration of doctrine'.<sup>34</sup> However, as Dupont argues, the doctrine was set and 'the breach of confidence between the Catholic population on the one hand, and the nation's clerical hierarchy on the other, fundamentally damaged the moral authority of the Church'.<sup>35</sup> Over the following decades the gap between the official teachings on married life and most Catholics' lived practice grew ever wider, leading the laity to practise a form of cultural Catholicism that was sometimes at odds with official doctrine. While *Humanae Vitae* ultimately did not manage to rein in the faithful in terms of accepting sexual traditionalism, 'it still serves to foster the commonly held view that religious

<sup>26</sup> Harris, *The Schism of '68*, 14.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>28</sup> Dagmar Herzog, 'Syncopated Sex: Transforming European Sexual Cultures', *The American Historical Review*, 114, pp. 1287–1308 (2009).

<sup>29</sup> Harris, *The Schism of '68*, 52.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

conviction and sexual pleasure are mutually exclusive by necessity'.<sup>36</sup> In an interesting contradistinction to Scott, who shows how Christian sexual and gender conservatism never ceased tainting the supposedly separate modern state, Dupont presents the Catholic Church as gradually failing to shape the lived family practices of its flock who were also citizens of a Western liberal country.

In Switzerland, similarly, people's contraceptive practices were peeling off from the doctrine. Oral interviews by Caroline Rusterholz 'reveal that there was a substantive gap, as early as 1955, between the teachings of the Catholic Church and the behaviour of believers who used methods of birth control condemned by the Catholic Church'.<sup>37</sup> In her chapter 'Religion and Contraception in Comparative Perspective – Switzerland, 1950–1970', Rusterholz goes on to document the differences between a Catholic canton of Fribourg and a Protestant canton of Lausanne. In Lausanne, contraceptive counselling had been available since 1959, and the official family planning centre was established in 1967. In contrast, Fribourg opened such a centre a full decade later. The encyclical accentuated differences between the cantons even further, and the Synod in the Swiss dioceses was summoned (1972–5) to implement *Humanae Vitae*. Yet, the laity voiced their concerns about sexual restrictions and, despite strong conservative authority, 'the Synod recognized the ability of Catholic couples to decide for themselves the contraceptive method they were to use'.<sup>38</sup>

In mid-century Spain, sexual mores were coloured by Franco's dictatorship, which propagated pro-natalism to the extent of banning the sale of contraceptives in 1941. The Church–state alliance began to crumble in the 1960s, with relaxing press censorship and 'red priests' spreading liberation theology. As Agata Ignaciuk argues in her chapter 'Love in the Time of el Generalísimo', 'debates on responsible parenthood and contraception in Spain in the 1960s and 1970s is emblematic of the fracturing of the Spanish Catholic community at a time of a progressive disconnection and decoupling of the Church from the Francoist regime'.<sup>39</sup> During Franco's dictatorship, an estimated 4.5 million women underwent illegal abortions with several hundred thousand more women seeking pregnancy terminations abroad. Unsurprisingly, a restrictive approach to reproductive choices went hand in hand with the sexual double standard, which aligned with traditional Catholic ideas.

Curiously, the pill was available on the Spanish market, yet it was sold as an anti-ovulation drug manifestly aimed at treating gynaecological diseases and even sterility. Analysing debates in the press in 1968, when the preparation of *Humanae Vitae* culminated, Ignaciuk shows how large the pill loomed for religious leaders in the country. Many progressive Catholics held that parents have the right to decide about how many children they have and some went even further, arguing that the pill needed to be accepted as a 'natural' birth control method that is better than the rhythm method, which is 'mutilating and contributing to the objectification of women'.<sup>40</sup> When the working papers from the encyclical's preparation leaked to the press, the conclusion was that 'the majority of clergy and medical experts endorsed the use of the pill within the aims of responsible parenthood'.<sup>41</sup> After the actual text of *Humanae Vitae* brought an end to the hopes of the Church endorsing modern contraception, conservative circles rejoiced, 'praising it as the "encyclical of love and women's dignity" which, rather than being summarized as "no to the pill", should instead be considered a "yes to human love, women's dignity, the transmission of life, God's creative intention, marital fidelity and the triumph of true freedom"'.<sup>42</sup> While defending the pill remained a minority position within the Spanish Church, the debate in the wake of the encyclical was never quashed. Among medical doctors, some adhered to the teachings and 'accused the pill of objectifying women while bringing huge benefits to the pharmaceutical industry', while for those 'who were supportive of family planning and became involved in early, semi-clandestine outpatient birth control clinics, *HV* was largely

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 239.

irrelevant'.<sup>43</sup> Also, popular opinion and lived practice continued to shift towards greater acceptance of contraception. In 1977 the pill was among the most popular methods preventing unwanted pregnancies, second only to coitus interruptus. The following year, the ban on 'contraceptive propaganda' was lifted, placing Spain on the road of gradual liberalisation of sexual mores.

One of the most compelling accounts of Catholic debates on sex comes from Poland, written by Agnieszka Kościańska, who shows how Polish Catholics, especially those in the capital, espoused progressive views about married sexuality and contraception and how those views were eclipsed over time. In fascinating detail, Kościańska documents an outsized influence one female doctor had on the future pope John Paul II. In Warsaw, forward-looking Catholic intellectuals 'opined [that] most morally justified methods of birth control were not those most "natural", that is, periodic abstinence, but rather those that made sex "less routine, free from fears [of unwanted pregnancy] and accessible to all"'.<sup>44</sup> Yet, much more conservative circles existed in Krakow and Lublin where the future pope John Paul II, at the time still known as Karol Wojtyła, preached. For his friend and confidante, the psychiatrist Wanda Póltawska, sex that was not open to procreation undermined dignity, which led to abuses, especially abuses of women by men. Póltawska, who survived Ravensbrück, was among those from Wojtyła's circles who first called contraception and abortion 'the civilization of death' and compared them to the Nazi death camps. She influenced his writing on *Love and Responsibility*, which was published already in 1960. Moreover, Kościańska argues that 'Póltawska's influence on his views perhaps extended so far as her (ghost) co-authoring his contributions to the encyclical'.<sup>45</sup>

Polish clergy embraced *Humanae Vitae*. Not only did Polish bishops not contest the encyclical but they endorsed it fully and, as such, took it up as an emblem of their fight against the communist state. However much they were in the minority, there were still Catholic intellectuals, such as Wielowieyski from the Warsaw circle, who criticised the encyclical. Wielowieyski published a marriage manual, *Marriage Upon Us (Przed Nami Małżeństwo)*, in 1972, in which he extolled marital sex, in very personalist terms, as a bond between spouses and a route to self-understanding. Referring to secular sexologists, he presented practical advice as to, for example, the length of the sexual act and lambasted domestic violence, alcohol or abuse of power as far more problematic issues in marital life than the use of contraception. In fact, he held that 'the rigorous rules of [rhythmic] abstinence kill spontaneous feelings, cause neurosis and result in distressing experiences for many married couples'.<sup>46</sup> However, he buckled under pressure exerted by conservatives such as Póltawska and, in the second edition of his marriage manual, rewrote passages on contraception, scolding those who did not follow the encyclical's teachings, and added a part condemning abortion. The alteration, Kościańska writes, was 'very meaningful: it contributed to the process of erasing an expert alternative adjudication from the collective Catholic memory in Poland. In today's heated and highly fraught debates over birth control, this former dissension and differentiation of Catholic views on the issues are neither mentioned nor indeed remembered'.<sup>47</sup> Poland thus becomes an example of an Eastern European country where state repressions against religion only strengthened the Church, which by the 1980s became an emblem of the fight against the communist regime. After socialism was toppled, Poland emerged as a country that embraced both Catholicism and liberal democracy.

The whole volume stands to remind us of many rich histories of the Catholic Church, which has, for centuries, been a standard-bearer of morality in Europe and beyond, including sexual morality. These histories persuasively demonstrate that debates within the Church never cease, and even the topic of sex has seen a relatively progressive treatment from some clerics and many laypeople. Despite the will of those who would like to position the Catholic Church as a safeguard against progressive change, the cases analysed here attest to the multiplicity of voices within one of the oldest

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>44</sup> Kościańska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence*, 191.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 198.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 199.

institutions on the continent. Religion is not a necessary ally of backwardness, in the same way that secularism does not guarantee headway. While Harris's volume amply attests to the former, Scott eloquently argues the latter.

### The International Outlook of the Bearers of Sexual Discourse

While the Catholic Church is clearly an international player, other institutions transcended national borders and exerted influence over sexual matters. On the Eastern side of the Iron Curtain, these were experts and, especially during the last decade of the regime, emerging social movements that placed sexual politics in the foreground. Focusing on Poland, two excellent books analyse socialist sexualities. The powerful influence of experts over the matters of the heart and groin is attested to by Agnieszka Kościańska, while Lukasz Szulc pioneered an analysis of transnational ties between gay (and to some extent lesbian) activists during the last years of communism.

Szulc's book is launching a new Palgrave series, 'The Global Queer Politics', that, in the words of its editors, aims to dispel the idea of a 'homogeneous and essentialist attitude to homosexuality in the Eastern Bloc'.<sup>48</sup> As such, this book is a fine start, mostly for its transnational outlook. While the author chose the case study of his native Poland, he paid close attention to transnational flows of knowledge and activism, as these were created and shared between local homosexuals and their, mostly Western, counterparts in 1980s Poland.

Szulc situates his research in the current discourses of 'queer wars', referencing authors who invoke the 'clash of civilization discourse', such as Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, who posited civilisations as clashing over gender equality and sex liberalisation. Similarly to Joan W. Scott, Szulc refuses such scholarly approaches as misguided and unmoored from empirical realities. Moreover, coming from Eastern experiences, Szulc is critical of the 'catch-up discourse', according to which the 'East' is backward, especially in sexual mores, and needs to catch up with the liberal and sexually liberated West. Proponents of the 'catch-up discourse' paint 'CEE as historically and essentially homophobic'.<sup>49</sup> This idea is further undergirded by interconnected myths of homogeneity, essence and the transition narrative of the region after 1989. The author holds that these ideas of 'queer wars are a hoax',<sup>50</sup> resting on stereotypes of Central and Eastern Europe as thoroughly isolated from the West. In contrast, he proposes historicising homosexuality in the Cold War East as the first and necessary step toward doing away with these preconceived notions. The author explores topics such as the globalisation of LGBT identities and politics, homosexuality in the Eastern Bloc or homosexual activism in communist Poland. He analyses in detail gay and lesbian magazines printed mostly in the last decade of state socialism. Focusing on the magazines allows the author to track the cross-border exchange of ideas and activist support, which attests to the fact that 1989 did not constitute a rupture but instead marked a milestone on the global route of Polish sexual activism and identity construction. That said, Szulc argues against the idea of Polish gay men as copycats of Western modes of being gay 'but rather selectively adopted as well as strategically and creatively adapted'<sup>51</sup> from the flows to come up with their politics. As a result, they presented 'homosexuality as natural, promoted self-acceptance and coming out among homosexuals as well as affirmed particular notions of romantic, sexual and collective selves'.<sup>52</sup>

Kościańska's book, first published in Polish in 2014, is now coming out in English under the title *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence: The Construction of Expert Knowledge of Sexuality in Poland*. The author documents how impactful the Polish school of sexology was on the intimate lives of people. Polish sexologists were medical doctors who were inspired by the approaches in social sciences and the humanities, so they viewed sex holistically, as enmeshed in social and cultural settings and

<sup>48</sup> Szulc, *Transnational Homosexuals in Communist Poland*, v.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

interpersonal relations. They drew heavily on their clinical practice and feedback from their patients and readers of their books and magazine columns. Kościańska, analysing varied sources, including expert writings and patients' letters, excels in documenting how pervasive sexual advice was in creating the sexual selves of Poles during socialism. She highlights the specificity of 'her' experts – their broad and erudite attitude – while pointing to their scholarly exchanges, especially with colleagues within the Eastern Bloc. Sexologists advised on married sex, focusing on female pleasure and perceiving masturbation as good for women, including stimulating the clitoris during intercourse. Significantly, sexological views influenced women who gradually stopped seeing themselves as perverted when they could only climax clitorally and even demanded clitoral stimulation during sex with their husbands. Yet, sexologists' often forward-looking stances on sex did not necessarily go hand in hand with gender progressiveness. More often than not, Polish sexologists underscored good sex by gender hierarchical relationships within marriage and posited intercourse as the proper aim and culmination of the sexual act. Most tragically, gender stereotypes about sexually provocative women and men who could not control their hormonally driven impulses were mobilised by experts when assessing rape cases.

Kościańska argues that sexology in Poland 'cannot be unambiguously described as progressive or conservative. Its development was neither unilinear nor organised in "pockets" of gender equality and sexual liberation'.<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, the tenets of sexology in Poland, shaped by 'years outside the influence of the market – away from erotica, pornography, and the "pursuit of orgasm" so omnipresent today and instead with emphasis on relationships and sociocultural conditions',<sup>54</sup> are now being hailed by feminists in the 'West', namely in North America, as superior to the current onslaught of biomedicalisation of sexual medicine with its overreliance on pharmaceutical solutions to sexual ailments.

Recently, debates have flared up in academic circles and beyond as to whether women had better sex under communism. The contention was ignited by an op-ed in the *New York Times*, whose author, Kristen Ghodsee, argued that economic independence, provisions for single (or divorced) mothers and relative openness about sex grounded in local expertise made for much more equal and pleasurable lives for women in the intimate realm.<sup>55</sup> Those who disagreed with her assertion could be roughly grouped into two (sometimes overlapping) camps: those who cannot imagine that anything good (let alone pleasurable) could arise under a communist dictatorship and those who cannot imagine that anything progressive could happen for women unless it is fought for by social movements (let alone if it comes from above and specifically when male experts are the instigators). Kościańska with her book weighs into these debates, showing persuasively that while we cannot idealise sexology or socialism, there was much in socialist sexology we can learn from. And surely we would be doing ourselves a disservice if we did not study sex in the Cold War East.

<sup>53</sup> Kościańska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence*, 228.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>55</sup> Ghodsee's volume has now become a bestseller that has been translated into most European languages. Kristen Rogheh Ghodsee, *Why Women Have Better Sex under Socialism: And Other Arguments for Economic Independence* (New York: Nation Books, 2018).