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Socialist Paradise, Sexual Paradise? Meditation on “Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism” (2018) by Kristen Ghodsee.

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Abstract: Women have better sex under socialism claims title of Kristen Ghodsee’s recent book (2018) that highlights female economic independence as a main factor leading to greater freedom and thus more sexual pleasure for women in “socialist paradise”. This critical approach opens up new perspectives and frameworks to reconsider socialist advantages that benefit women, and it also invites further discussion of the thought-provoking premise of “female comfort and pleasure” in various socio-cultural and socio-economic orders. Though the text serves primarily as a critique of current capitalism, it also explores available frameworks and generates reasoning for current campaigns concerning women’s sexuality as MeToo movement and/or US anti-abortion legal control and repressions associated with Make America Great Again campaign. It invites numerous questions and comparisons on the physical situation of women back at the era of state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe when human rights were suppressed and were built on totalitarian legacies of Nazism and Communism. This paper is a conversation with the text that inquires into ways nostalgia works with “the socialist paradise” notions for women in terms of their sexuality and female pleasure, yet it also highlights extraordinary scenarios having the impact on women’s lives, as well as limits and drawbacks or advantages of practical socialist policies that do significantly concern women.

Introduction

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 paperⁱ

writes Kristen Ghodsee in an article of the same title as her book *Why women have better sex under socialism*. It is not a call of *ostalgie*ⁱⁱ uncritically looking back at the late European socialism, but a complex and brilliant critique of capitalism and its impact on women's well-being highlighting socialist policies that reduce women's existential stress.

Ghodsee's bold argument is based on the following logic: capitalism may not be as beneficial for women as we tend to think, and women under socialism (living in states with some sort of socialist safety nets and equal opportunities, which concerns many countries in Europe, not only former Soviet bloc including its buffer zone) have better lives with economic independence, better labor conditions, free or very affordable health care, free or very affordable child care, free higher education, paid maternity and parental leaves with job positions on hold for up to three years, and much more. With such practical policies and support nets in place, women find themselves less stressed and thus their sex life is better. Ghodsee claims that unregulated capitalism harms women (though not all of course), and she supports this claim with disturbing statistics on poverty and discrimination of women as women fall into the categories of poverty at much greater rates than men, and women do much unpaid work caring for the young, the sick, the elderly, get paid less, and have other economic deprivations. Overall, Ghodsee makes a compelling and very complex argument.

Undeniably there are numerous problems to imagine women having sexual pleasure, feeling free and relaxed under communist or state socialist oppressive regimes as Ghodsee does not certainly deny. Instead, she draws powerful comparisons

and presents revealing statistics to support her provocative claim. She does not turn a blind eye on the human rights issues though, and she acknowledges and addresses the periods and situations under totalitarian socialism when things were a matter of life and death, and love and pleasure had hardly any place in women's lives. On the other hand, her dazzling critique invites more direct and indirect critical perspectives to explore various social scenarios via the prism of sexuality and (im)possibility of pleasure as such.

Nevertheless, the above-mentioned statistics from East and West Germany compare late state socialism and democratic capitalism and is blatantly suggesting that some aspects of advanced state socialism are good to reconsider, and she claims that after reunification East German women brought their reliance on socialist policies over and inspired West German women. Though the German case has its cultural specificities, such as subversive nudity and the late wave of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, it is exemplary. Ghodsee builds upon Michel Foucault's notion of sexuality (*The History of Sexuality*, 1990) as a discursive object of sexual expression and sexual freedom, both as factors that define the state of individual freedom. According to Foucault's "repressive hypothesis," (Foucault 15-51) sexuality was suppressed by capitalism and is closely connected to its moral systems. It is utilized by governments that tend to control sexuality and prescribe intimate practices, oversee subjugated procreation, regulate birth control as well as have some control of forms of free expression. By now, it is generally believed that capitalism has had a regressive power over sexuality, which is the affair of the private and intimate yet "in need" of public regulation. However, even controlling societies where the state interferes into the private can have free sexuality in subversive and alternative spaces. Though modern industrial societies, according to Foucault, have employed sexual repression via bans, controls, prohibitions and other mechanisms of controlling power, the pleasure finds its spaces to evolve. Foucault suggests that regardless of repressed sexuality, societies and communities generate and evolve their subversive ways to find pleasure - perhaps, that is the case of state socialism. Eventually, the concept of sexuality becomes manifold, less normative, and has subversive powers.

Sexuality and Make America Great Again

Ghodsee's critique of controlled and commodified female sexuality under late capitalism is built on Foucault's discernment. This provocative thesis that women have better sex under socialism is not only a critique of capitalism, but it also resonates well with current movements as MeToo and conservative political backlash reinforcing abortion bans. The last US election slogan "Make America Great Again" gained a great support of conservative Christians who gradually promote more strict abortion laws, and eventually it became Donald Trump's flagship political agenda. Why does female sexuality and pleasure become such a high priority topic in current politics?

To help the readers to understand the connection of female sexuality and current political messages, Ghodsee brings into the play the so-called "sexual economics theory"ⁱⁱⁱ as a steppingstone to explicate the connections between capitalist power control and women's bodies and sexuality. This theory presumes that the discipline of economics is connected to the study of human sexuality, and consequently female sexuality is relevant for the capitalist economy, which is market-driven by the law of supply and demand. This theory works with a problematic assumption that sex is a female-controlled commodity because women's sex drives are weaker than men's. Thus, being less ruled by the sexual impulses, women can use it as a means of power over the men - and can commodify it - and barter it or get paid in return. In this regard, totalitarianism offers blatant examples of the barter system as well - but without the free market. The female-oppressive extremities of communism, such as women having "camp husbands" in gulags or concentration camps as a means of getting better food, more survivable work, and other goods and services that would improve their chance of survival, is a bit different (and we can hardly think of multitude of orgasms and uncomplicated women's pleasure as well). On the other hand, extreme scenarios also allowed women to be independent as they served at previously men-occupied positions as warriors, snipers, pilots, camp capos, manual laborers and were extremely liberated and independent in unseen ways - and for these independent women the barter

economics somehow mattered much less, as the usual loyalty and dependence on men was replaced by the love and loyalty to the country.

Nevertheless, in “sexual economics theory”, attraction and love are connected to power and money. Though the theory is gender-biased and problematic, however, Ghodsee uses it as a well-serving reflection of the current conservative political mindset. The psychology of the sexual economy suggests that intelligent and self-sufficient women may make some men feel less masculine (by replacing them, by taking on their roles as well). Ghodsee observes the logic through the sex price is thus determined by the demand -- and we are not talking about sex work in here, but about the logic of the free market reality, that determines the nature of relations. Sexual economics theory explains:

A broad range of valued goods can be exchanged for sex. In return for sex, women can obtain love, commitment, respect, attention, protection, material favors, opportunities, course grades or workplace promotions, as well as money... Men usually cannot trade sex for other benefits. (111)

This theory counts with stereotypes on women's sexuality, and with patriarchal and even misogynistic notions that women's sexual drives are weaker. It essentializes romance, sexuality, femininity and attraction to the market needs. In places where the market and materialistic culture determine much, it is rather relevant, unlike in places, where the market is rather non-existent or collapsed - like in state socialism.

This conservative theory also seems to impact post-communist countries that experience transition to market economy. Recently, there has been a campaign in the Czech Republic when a group of women produced apologetic videos to men: women said they were sorry they took away traditional men's roles and left men only with aggression and not much else. This self-bashing campaign undermines women's advancements and achievements, but it seems to resonate well with women who internalize the sexual economy market-driven model, and who interpret their womanhood and femininity with this limiting prism. As feminism is still to a great extent misunderstood in the post-communist Europe and is rather foreign to many women, it is not surprising that such campaigns emerge. A leading Czech feminist platform simply

labeled this massive campaign as “too subjective” not to estrange and antagonize the majority.

As far as the implications for the cultural politics in the US, Ghodsee’s meditation on the theory helps to understand why women's sexuality caught in the top political agenda (unlike foreign trade or space exploration). According to Ghodsee, the main arguments (based on suggestions made by the Austin Institute for the Study of Family and Culture) apparently follow this logic: “the loose women” make the price of sex too low and are to be blamed for the problematic demography and decreasing population (less and less white population) as well as the downfall of American economy - in this view especially the available birth control is to be blamed. If birth control and abortion were banned, women’s sex is valued more, and women will be more committed to marriage and childbearing and “can’t do with their bodies as they like” (111). In this view, the current falling marriage rate and “low price of sex” harms men, who do not have incentives to do anything with their lives, but “goof in parents’ basements” as it is too easy to get sex and no need to earn and make it in the real world to impress women and eventually take care of them (Ghodsee 112). If there is no birth control for women, and no abortion, the price of sex is higher, and sexuality is confined to marriages - and bread winners must try harder to be more successful. Eventually, women would not focus on their careers, and educational and professional development, as they would not need to. Men would be the breadwinners and back in control, and they get paid more anyway.

Interestingly, this ironic logic contrasts with the logic of the late state socialism in which women were overworked. Women had full time jobs plus took full care of their families while respecting strict gender role divisions (as mentioned in the Czech Republic apology campaign), yet women earned money and were self-sufficient (with the help of social safety nets). While they were overburdened, they struggled with low standards of femininity (the economy of shortages did not help), and women could not press on men to earn more and provide for them as all were on the “same boat”. In general men could not make impressive careers in terms of power and money. In the state socialism, the glass ceiling was low for both sexes (if not representing the power structures). Would women still necessarily have more sexual pleasure? Perhaps, but

they certainly did not have to barter and exchange their sexuality as in the market-driven economy, as they tended to be self-sufficient - sexuality was a rather recreational or procreational concept (more below).

The sexual economics theory is clearly a very patriarchal and traditional model and, in its extreme, women are shut out of political and economic life (which was the opposite of socialist work market which included women and invited them to all positions, though no leadership and executive powers were offered as leadership was left for the party leaders). Ghodsee illustrates this conservative view with a global sex survey that obviously shows more economic opportunities in places with freer sex, where women are more equal in terms of sexuality, their beyond-marriage-sexuality is tolerated, and women are not as easily labeled as sluts and spinsters. In this regard, the logic of “Make America Great Again” is regressive. It provides calls to curtail and even ban birth control and abortion, so women would have few economic opportunities and sexuality is their asset (in marriage) and they save men “from a life of sloth” (114).

Nevertheless, what about places with no free market that drive sexuality in different terms? In socialism, the work ethic was problematic, and there was low economic and sexual drive for men. It was not “an egalitarian paradise” of course, though certain labor complacency and complicity among sexes was in place (men would cover up for women with kids or needing to do errands during work hours and so on). This model did not encourage the market competition. However, not to give state socialism too much credit, it is clear that the economy of shortage and totalitarianism in its extremities was hardly a sexual paradise for confident and self-sufficient women.

The totalitarian extremes (that would not happen in state socialism) offer very disturbing stories of manipulated and exploited sexuality, that are highly problematic: Nazism and Communism simply manipulated sexuality for various purposes. Women were sexually enslaved or had to barter their sex for survival, women’s sexuality was exploited and used as a way to manipulate men: for example, women were humiliated with body checks, women were sexually exploited by male prisoners in order to increase their productivity, or even to cure homosexuality. Nazis used sex slavery, they ran brothels to uplift the morale of the men in the camps, they used women as Aryan breeders (Lebensborn scheme breeding of the master race), or abducted women to

brothels to increase the libido of soldiers. All this preceded later state socialism with more pleasure. Nevertheless, in less extreme conditions and in full blown state socialism (without gulags and death camps and sexually deprived prisoners and soldiers) where women have their own jobs they can't lose, and other social securities and laws to protect them, we can ask: how do women perceive sexuality when the free market or survival necessity frame do not apply? Can they feel more pleasure?

Socialist femininity

Another blatant disparity between market economy and state socialism concerns women's looks and complexities of femininity. Is femininity connected to sexuality as closely as we may think? Femininity and sexuality both concerns learned behaviors and attributes that somehow refer to the formation of the particular feminine character and certain looks. Also, the systemic construct of femininity is associated with feminine traits, such as gentleness, empathy, humility, sensitivity that closely connect to sexual rites and cultural practices. With social and economic changes, femininity expectations and performance change as well. The following example provides a case in point: alarmingly different portrayals of femininity were captured on photographs of the Dior promotion team's visit to Moscow in 1959^{iv}. Women of two different worlds contrasted greatly: well-dressed elegant urban models differed strikingly from women who wore plain cotton dresses, had no accessories as nylons, fancy shoes, gloves, hats, handbags. Postures, expressions and self-confidence differed strikingly too. Local women were in stark contrast to the elegant well-dressed French models. The post-war economy of shortage took its toll on the population of women as their femininity was compromised, and traditional well-dressed urban, upper class and professional Moscow women seemed to be missing at all, probably being relocated or even blending in out of necessity.

The problematic feminine looks are closely connected to the economies of shortage and the crippled consumer market. This discrepancy is well described by Croatian author Slavenka Drakulic in her *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed About It*. Drakulic shares how women felt back then:

Look at us - we don't even look like women. There are no deodorants, perfumes, sometimes even no soap or toothpaste. There is no fine underwear, no pantyhose, no nice lingerie. Worst of all there are no sanitary napkins. What can one say except that is humiliating?'

Drakulic describes how the frustrated local women portrayed in the Moscow photographs might have felt facing the Dior modeling team, though in her time things were not as bad. However, it helps to comprehend that Moscow women must have felt amazed, very likely humiliated, and insecure about their femininity, desirability and eventually insecure about their sexuality. Even so, women would not give up, and in many societies the control of ideology over feminine looks was temporary, and women would fight back - they would sew, knit, improvise or have the goods smuggled in - they would not let their femininity disappear despite shortages, dress codes, propaganda and forceful media images (and men would encourage women's attempts as well).

Next to the blatant example of Moscow in 1959, femininity and sexuality were under the ideological control in China during its cultural revolution and its Great Leap policies: women's looks and sexuality, as well as dating, choice of a partner, marriage and procreation, were subjected to approval by the powers-to-be. Wearing patterned dresses was considered "bourgeois", and women were expected to wear simple unisex "Mao suits", though, on the other hand, these new policies helped to push out the traditional foot-binding.

These selected examples of compromised femininity under ideological pressures certainly comply well with Western stereotypes of Eastern bloc women who were supposed to "look tired, fat and ugly, wearing dreadful cloth" (Ghodsee 102). On the other hand, propaganda played with women images on both sides of the Iron curtain. Socialist propaganda portrayed these supposedly unattractive socialist working women as pretty, smiling and sexy factory workers in overalls, it generated images of beautiful and healthy-looking women in labs, farms, classrooms, smiling and laughing together with children and working men. The propaganda was not a true depiction of women's reality, but it was meant to attract women to these professions. Thus, the Moscow Dior

pictures become a fascinating document on the state of women in postwar Russia after some forty years of systemic Communism - and an enigma on subversive femininity and its connection to sexuality.

Other factors that determine sexuality concerned living conditions. In the postwar era and under state socialism, there were lacks of privacy (shortage of housing), erotica (all pornography was banned), birth control or party permission for birth control and abortion, and, for example, in many places like Romania and China sexuality was strictly controlled by the state ideology. One can't even think of female pleasure and women's well-being: in Romania, infamous monthly fertility checks were imposed on women of fertile age (even if virgins) to prevent abortions (pro-natalist script), in China the officials gave couples permissions when to marry, when to have a child, not to mention the infamous one child policy and feticide on females. All this must have had impact on attitudes towards sex and sexuality.

Nevertheless, instead of building upon the legacies of totalitarian sexuality, Ghodsee explores the theme of sexuality and pleasure further by examining "narratives of love" (127-154). This framework is helpful to understand different modes of sexuality that are created in various social conditions as individuals are acculturated and scripted in their understanding and practice of sex by the socio-cultural and socio-economic factors they are exposed to.

According to Ghodsee, in the Soviet Union at the time of the Dior visit the earlier free socialist friendship sex (without marriage) was on the way out, soon to be replaced by pro-natalist script needed to compensate for the famine and war losses. The earlier socialist friendship sex proved wrong; there were many orphans left as women who had children out of wedlock had no protection and support from men whom they did not marry, and abortion was banned under Stalin (it was allowed after 1955 - though it was conditioned and ideologues were to approve each case). The free sex ceased of necessity. Ghodsee explains that this new extreme affected the so called "silent generation" (129), women born between 1920-1945 (as many women in Moscow Dior pictures). Women had so many uncertainties and existential issues, that sex was endured to have babies, and it had nothing to do with love and pleasure, though there were exceptions, of course. "For this generation, Soviet Sex sucked."^{vi}

This social scenario could apply to other women who experienced war extremities, such as German “rubble women”. This pro-natalist script was common in totalitarian states and concerned femininity and sexuality alike. Under the Nazis, no make-up was allowed, tough physical exercise, sports and fresh air made women look pretty, and were meant to prepare women to become healthy breeders. Some women have rosy memories of these active times (while other women were dehumanized, experimented on, sterilized and murdered.)^{vii} These examples only illustrate the manipulative powers over female sexuality that have a long and complex history.

Nevertheless, later love relations and sexuality moved away from the pro-natalist script, as the public narratives on sexuality shifted, and sex became to be seen as an attribute of love, romance and passion. Sexuality was defined by the so called romantic script, though in socialism the so called friendship script re-appeared again. So, what is the journey to more orgasms and more female pleasure after all?

Friendship Love Script

This sex is so called friendship with benefits, uncommitted, recreational, meaningful relationship between two people of a shared social circle, sex is a way to show affection and respect. (119)

The socialist friendship love script may be represented by an iconic and well-known female TV protagonist of the socialist Czechoslovakia. Jirina Svorcova starred as a shopkeeper in a very popular TV series *Zena za pultem* (*The Woman Behind the Counter*) that was broadcast in 1977. This woman protagonist became extremely popular. She was not particularly feminine, had a faint moustache, and would not care much about being dressed up, yet she was placed behind the delicacies counter reserved for the prettiest girls, (according to the grocery store manager). She was divorced, self-sufficient, and was not vain: we never see her in front of a mirror or buying clothes, discussing fashion with her friends. (Though she lends some money to her colleague to buy a sweater - but she does that to teach her colleague a lesson on her vanity). She means well for all (including her ex-husband and unsympathetic

mother-in-law) and she interferes in everyone's business to help them (as private is public). She is all about being the best comrade to all. Eventually, she befriends a male customer and they engage in a sexual friendship. This sexual narrative is not bursting with seduction rituals and love talks, passion or romance, but is truly more about friendship and bonding which is confirmed by having sex. The female shopkeeper is in charge of the relationship - the sexual economics theory does not apply.

This TV female protagonist became extremely popular during Czech normalization as many women could relate to her working mother routines, to the situations and happenings in her work place and with her family, to her boyfriend in the series: he is an uncomplicated bachelor who fell for her when she suggested to him what to buy for a small party and for his weekend meal - she made the decisions for him. He is not masculine, but rather an emasculated and indecisive good man, who apparently became a cool sex symbol in the late 1970s and 1980s. This friendship sex became a typical official propaganda on relations in the late socialism, where women were in charge: they can choose their partner, as they work and they are economically independent, so they choose with whom they wish to have "a friendship with benefits" (certainly no gold-diggers or sex-barter scenarios). This sexuality does not seem to sexualize women but allows them to choose more freely whom they want to have sex with. In this socialism, women would not really compete in terms of femininity as much, and neither do men - their masculinity is not put on display, as competition is low, and men are required to be good men and good compatriots who accept women in charge. This scenario compromised masculinity and created a stereotype of lazy men catered for by overworked women.

Perhaps, this friendship script could be also described as socialist sexual utopia or socialist sexual propaganda as the reality was a bit more complicated: under socialism, which presented no incentives in terms of personal or economic development, women and men were gradually losing respect for themselves and for each other (though not all of course). The general fear imposed on society, and unwritten social contracts imposed by the state ideology would not allow for healthy human relations, including sexual relations. In the dissent culture, which fought back, men became more masculine and were known as womanizers to (sub)consciously

counterattack the ideological pressures of the social contracts and create notions of freedom, via sexual freedom. Overall, the state socialist culture became cynical about sex and sexual relations, and women and men were to a great extent alienated as they became lost in the unclear gender roles. The ideological muddle prescribed uncomplicated and simplified constructs of classless femininity and masculinity. This would be however, a topic for another discussion.

Nevertheless, the egalitarian and classless notion of thriving sexuality in East Germany can be examined via the close connections to the unique German nudity that naturalizes bodies and sexuality alike. There was a common anecdote in Germany: Divided by the wall, united by nudity!

Divided by the wall, united by nudity!

As we learnt from the introductory quote, the situation of female pleasure was apparently disproportionate in the divided Germany, yet nudity became an unifying cultural phenomenon, though wide acceptance and embrace of nudity would not mean the same sexual pleasure for women in both Germanies as the quote suggests. Nudity, which has an interesting cultural history in both Germanies, has undeniable cultural powers: it can establish a sense of camaraderie, even kindred spirit and equality between the sexes and seem to go well with the so called “friendship sex”. Besides, when people are naked, there is no competition in dressing, they are also a bit closer to nature, express their freedom (which may be a form of escape from the uniforms, parades and conformity of the communist state). East Germans were free to practice nudism and were known to do it wherever possible: at lakes, sea beaches and camping grounds, during sports events; they even held fashion shows on nudist beaches. (Apparently, even German Chancellor Angela Merkel was said to have practiced nudism during her youth in the GDR as it was rather common.) Nudity appeared in GDR movies, nudity was put on display even in the May Day parades pleasing the sterile stare of high Communist Officials, who eventually granted work permits to striptease artists to perform at official party and work celebrations. Still, pornography as such was apparently banned and socialist bloc claimed to have no porno magazines,

films or sex industry. Thus, it fits the friendship realm well. State socialism was very tolerant of nudity, it cultivated and embraced it. The western concept of the commodified nudity -- the porno industry -- was seen in a different light and was viewed as a market economy product. Nudity might be another interesting concept that helps to explain the disparity of pleasure: when individuals become open and free with their bodies, maybe pleasure becomes more natural and present to a higher extent as well. Perhaps, uncommodified and free nudity is another interesting incentive to reconsider the social policies that benefit all, though primarily women.

Coda: Generations of Loners

The Atlantic magazine published in December 2018 this lengthy article: "Why are young people having so little sex? Despite the easing of taboos, and the rise of hookup apps, Americans are in the midst of a sex recession". This article claims, that there are fewer healthy relationships, but more porn, sex for money and "ugly sex" (abuses, rapes, nonconsensual sex). This fact supports the wide relevance of sexual economics theory, but adds that though people are more responsible and safer, they are also increasingly unable to form healthy partnerships and are inclined to perform sexual practices for loners, develop hate and blame for the other sex (*incels*), prone to using violence. So, the abortion control will not help in this regard and is even more harmful to healthy sexuality. Perhaps the crisis of sexuality that exists in western free market economies reveals alarming cultural implications for the future. Perhaps, capitalism is bad for sexuality and pleasure and even procreation after all, perhaps it is advisable to examine the German disparity case and re-examine some policies concerning women. Perhaps, it is essential to look into ways that socialist sexuality brought more pleasure and more sexuality to women, perhaps healthy sexuality might bring needed social remedies.

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ⁱ See *The New York Times, Sunday Review, Opinion*, Aug 12, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/12/opinion/why-women-had-better-sex-under-socialism.html>

ⁱⁱ The German term for nostalgia, specific to German memorial culture

ⁱⁱⁱ Theory by Roy Baumeister and Kathleen Vohs, in Ghodsee 101-105.

^{iv} Images can be seen at <https://www.rferl.org/a/christian-dior-models-in-soviet-union-in-1959/29991086.html>

^v Drakulic, Slavenka. *How We Survived Communism & Even Laughed*. United Kingdom, HarperCollins, 1993.

^{vi} Stern, Mikhail and August Stern. *Sex in the Soviet Union*. New York Times Books, 1980. Quoted in Ghodsee 129.

^{vii} For more on the topic of sexuality and Nazism see Lower, Wendy. *Hitler's furies: German women in the Nazi killing fields*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013; Herzog, Dagmar. *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth Century Germany*. Course Book ed. Princeton University Press, 2007.