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*Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism: And Other Arguments for Economic Independence.* Kristen R. Ghodsee. Nation Books, 2018. 220 pp.

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It is hard to deny that Orwell's original quote "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" (2008, p. 126) still holds true even to this day. Consider the following version: all women are equal, but some women have better sex under socialism. Yes, you read that right, but unfortunately it is not an excerpt from some kind of socialist feminist parody of *Animal Farm* (although that sounds like a great read). Whether we are talking about wealth, power, or sex, the relatively equal distribution of wealth and resources that Marx and Engels envisioned over 175 years ago still smacks of nothing but the utopian fantasy which communism failed to realise. However, how is this failure defined? More often than not, it is defined as the general ineptitude and collapse of former socialist states. This can be associated with statistics on famine, poverty, and democide, but what may be overlooked are the potentially positive social outcomes and lived experiences of those whose voices have traditionally been silenced or ignored. The experiences of women under socialism, and in particular, the nature of their intimate relations with their partners, are no exception. This and much more is covered in ethnographer Kristen R. Ghodsee's *Why women have better sex under socialism: and other arguments for economic independence* (2018).

One might wonder why a book published in 2018 is resurfacing now. One might also recall that 20 years ago, Baumeister and Vohs published their controversial article "Sexual Economics: Sex as Female Resource for Social Exchange in Heterosexual Interactions" (2004) in which they introduced "sexual exchange theory". For anyone unfamiliar with it, it simply likens (and simplifies) courtship between men and women to a market where women sell sex and men buy it with nonsexual resources (such as money, a home, security, etc.). However, and as Ghodsee notes, when women have more opportunities to earn money (for example, in societies with higher levels of gender equality), they are less reliant on "selling sex" and thus more likely to have sex for pleasure (p. 161). So how or why is this reductionist theory relevant now? Please recall the economic hardships many women faced worldwide as a result of the pandemic and other factors. With the economic reverberations of the pandemic still lingering, global inflation and job insecurity are hitting women hard. Although it is partly related to the expansion of user-friendly content creating platforms in recent years, it is no coincidence that OnlyFans creator accounts have skyrocketed since the pandemic. In late-stage capitalism where exploitation and transactional relations reign supreme, "putting out" for a third party (or more) to "pay up" has arguably been normalised. How did it come to this? Was it always like this? Or is it the case that women just

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exercise more sexual agency, embrace sex positivity, and enjoy sex more now than ever? These are the kind of questions that come to mind when reading Ghodsee's work. Surely women had it different under socialism. Surely women had more economic independence under socialism. Surely relationships and intimate relations were different, if not better under socialism.

Without falling into the trap of glorifying or romanticising socialism, Ghodsee acknowledges the pitfalls of both "state socialism" and neoliberal governments, and while she refers to theory and literature pertaining to the subject and maintains a critical stance, it is written in a non-academic tone for a mostly non-academic readership. Comprised of six chapters, Ghodsee discusses motherhood, leadership, sex, and citizenship through personal anecdotes, and based on her extensive research on post-socialist societies in the Eastern Bloc since 1989. Because the book avoids getting excessively bogged down in theory and is written in a personal and uncondescending tone, scholars, students, and general interest non-fiction readers can all take something away from it. One of the caveats, perhaps, is that Ghodsee does not draw upon all the rich anecdotal evidence that comes from doing ethnographic research but relies on secondary sources. For readers detached from anything remotely to do with socialism or everyday life in a former socialist state, it might be hard to conjure up an image of what it was like for women to live under such circumstances. Take for instance the claim that state socialism ignored women's desires and the shortage of basic hygiene products was embarrassing. While it is not entirely necessary to go into great detail, some of the evidence to substantiate these claims is often taken from secondary sources. For example, the following citation was a common complaint observed by Croatian journalist Slavena Drakulić during her research in Eastern Europe:

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 it is humiliating? (Drakulić, 1993, p. 31)

More privileged readers can be detached from accounts and experiences such as the above and they are arguably worth expanding on. Considering that Ghodsee spent over 150 hours interviewing Elena Lagadinova (the president of Bulgaria's national women's organisation) alone, more of the insight and personal narratives she gained from that experience and others, if relevant, would have helped contextualise life in the Eastern Bloc much more than the statistics and data regarding employment quotas, maternity leave policies and so on.

In any case, what readers eventually come away with is a clear and sound understanding of the following suggestions. The first is that "women's economic independence [under socialism]

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contributed to a culture in which sex was something to be shared rather than sold” (p.120). The other suggestion, and as ideal as it sounds, is that unregulated capitalism is “bad” for women, and if we adopt some ideas from socialism, women will have better lives. If done properly, socialism leads to economic independence, better labour conditions, better work/family balance, and, yes, even better sex” (p.18). In Japan, a country often criticised by Western media outlets for having a culture of “sexless marriages,” the worst gender pay gap among all G7 nations, and a low participation of women in executive positions or politics, this book might shed some light on how to address some of these issues. It also might just be the case that one of the outcomes of improving equality in the boardroom is greater satisfaction in the bedroom.

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### References

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