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Challenging social and scientific stereotypes about sexuality

[Francesca Stella, *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia. Post/Socialism and Gendered Sexualities*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2015]

The overall task of this very interesting book by Francesca Stella, a sociologist of the University of Glasgow, is to challenge the ethnocentricity of gay and lesbian/queer studies through the analysis of 61 in-depth interviews with non-heterosexual women living in Russia. Stella starts from the realization that these kinds of studies are dominated by a Western/Anglo-American perspective and she has chosen to study the Russian scenario (with Russia straddling Western and non-Western worlds) in an attempt to “de-centre” the dominant narratives of research about homosexuality. This is also why, though acknowledging the value of queer theory, Stella decided to use the term “lesbian” instead of “queer”, as the former is widely used by Russian women to define themselves, while the latter only recently entered Russian language and has a still uncertain meaning. The interviews were done in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and Ul’ianovsk, a regional administrative centre in the Volga region, 850km southeast of the capital, so that they also illustrate non-heterosexual experiences in a provincial context and not only in the relatively privileged surroundings of a big city. The interviewees included older women who had experienced the Soviet regime and younger women who had lived entirely in the post-Soviet society, allowing for enlightening comparisons between the two periods and generations.

This comparison enables Stella to uncover important dynamics of both Soviet and post-Soviet societies. For example, the third chapter, dedicated to older women, demonstrates the im-





portance of surveillance by family members, neighbours, and co-workers in sanctioning and containing homosexual practices in post-Stalinist society: previous studies, mainly focused on the violent repression of male homosexuality, had underlined the role of punitive institutions like psychiatric hospitals and prison camps, but understated the importance of this “much more mundane and subtle disciplining mechanism operating in the private and the semi-private spheres”. This book confirms the uncertain and context-dependent Soviet distinction between public and private, and the strength of peer-surveillance in enforcing “Soviet morality”. This has also been shown in spatially focused histories of socialism and recent studies on Khrushchev’s revival of hooliganism persecution and on Comrades’ Courts¹.

The part about the persistence of the “working mother paradigm” is likewise illuminating: the Soviet utopia forced all women to work but did not liberate them from the burden of house cleaning and childcare, creating a double exploitation of the female workforce. In post-Soviet society the working mother paradigm has been embraced but in a sexist context, which ascribes the less prestigious jobs to women and locates one of the main characteristics of femininity in bearing children. Consequently “lesbian” women in both Soviet and post-Soviet times are often perceived (even by themselves) as incomplete women and many decide to marry in order to generate: these women often resist the practice of defining themselves as lesbians or more generally according to their sexual practices (homosexual or bisexual). This resistance is interpreted by Stella as a consequence of the “widespread isolation and lack of contact with others involved in same-sex relationships, and the very informal and hidden character of queer subcultures in

1 See Nick Baron, *New Spatial Histories of Twentieth Century Russia and the Soviet Union: Surveying the Landscape*, in “Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas”, Bd 55, H. 3 (2007), pp. 374-400, and Brian LaPierre, *Hooligans in Khrushchev’s Russia. Defining, Policing, and Producing Deviance during the Thaw*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2012.





Soviet Russia, [which] resulted in the lack of shared social experience and narratives of identity. Thus, sexual subjectivities were more fluid than in 'the west' because 'homonorm' failed to crystallise in Soviet Russia".

The public/private dichotomy is at the centre of the analysis of the chapter dedicated to the home: perceived at the same time as a comfortable space and as the place of relatives' everyday homophobia, the homes of lesbian women were the seat of a never-ending negotiation over the expression of sexuality and the meaning of adulthood. Stella rightly decides to analyse the home, rather than the family, as the two clearly do not coincide and have different relationships with the public and private spheres. Despite this decision, Stella does not analyse alternative homes to the familial home, like communal flats or dormitories (*obshchezhitie*), and perhaps fails to fully exploit this intuition.

Another scientific narrative questioned by this research is the "in the closet/coming out paradigm": in Western scholarship and associationism, the act of coming out is usually perceived positively as it rests on the assumption that visibility empowers queer individuals against the heterosexual norm. However, Stella demonstrates how lesbian women in Russia, though not claiming to be heterosexual, manage the division between queer and non-queer spheres of their existence and exploit the grey areas surrounding their sexuality in order to preserve their position of power in a heteronormative society. She also suggests that, according to recent findings on everyday practices in the United Kingdom, British non-heterosexuals also exploit this self-management of public and private spheres in spite of the mainstream 'coming out' narrative.

The sixth chapter is dedicated to describing the gay and lesbian *tusovka*: this Russian term is used to mean the practice of Russian non-heterosexuals occupying public spaces where they can get acquainted and meet. Unlike gay prides, which consist in occupying public space while visibly displaying non-





heterosexual identities and practices, “*tusovka*’s occupation of public space was based on the understanding of invisibility as enabling: carving out queer space in the city landscape involved discreetly and unobtrusively inhabiting certain public locations, while at the same time actively sheltering this space from public view”. Though the notion of invisibility as empowering is counter-intuitive and marginalising, *tusovka* unquestionably emerges as a form of resistance to the heteronormativity of a repressive society, though understandable only to the initiates.

In conclusion, with her book on lesbian women in Russia, Stella has not only written an interesting research for the scholars of Soviet and post-Soviet societies, but also contributed to the “provincialisation” of the Western-centred perspective in queer studies.

