
Book Review

A post-queer study of postsocialism

Francesca Stella (2015) Lesbian Lives in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Post/Socialism and Gendered Sexualities. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Until recently, social scientists and historians have paid little attention to non-heterosexual “modes of existence” (Bech, 1997) during state socialism in the Eastern Bloc. Important exceptions include the work of Dan Healey (2001) and Josie McLellan (2011) – and from now on the present volume of Glasgow based sociologist, Francesca Stella (whose first degree is in Russian language and literature, enabling her to conduct real participant observation and empirical data collection in Russia/n). Stella’s work is especially important if we consider that in 19th-20th century Europe women with non-heteronormative desires and sexual practices were not persecuted in the same way as men, thus there are less obvious ways to explore their historical traces, and consequently their narratives still remain a rather under-researched topic.¹

The empirical base of this book is ethnographic research focussing on the experiences, practices and identities of non-heterosexual women in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Stella decided to refer to them as lesbian, bisexual or non-heterosexual women, while avoiding the example of Laurie Essig who used the ‘queer’ adjective to translate *goluboi* (literally ‘light blue’ in Russian) as ‘queer man’ and *rozovaia* (‘pink’) as ‘queer woman’ in her book on Queer in Russia.²

The fieldwork that involved interviewing 61 women (aged between 18 and 56) was conducted during 2004-2005 in Moscow (the capital city of the Russian Federation with more than 12 million residents) and Ul’ianovsk (a regional centre in the Central Volga region with a population of 650,000). Transgender issues were not explored in this study because gender identity related issues remained marginal in the empirical data collection. Nevertheless, trans women were present in the examined lesbian social networks of Moscow and Ul’ianovsk, and were encouraged to take part in the study: “two interviewees openly talked about the discrepancy they felt about their bodies and their gender identity. Nonetheless, an element of self-selection operated: two male-identified women declined the invitation to take part in the study, as they felt that their experiences would not be captured by the notion of ‘lesbian’ or same-sex desire” (161).

¹ A recent example of presenting a country-specific 20th century lesbian herstory is provided by Borgos (2015).

² However, Essig also adds that “[i]n order to convey the fuzziness and inclusiveness of such terms, I try to use “queer” rather than “sexual minorities” I wish I had a better term. [...] I just want a word that will describe nonnormative sexual practices in Russia without making the mistake of assuming those practices are “homosexual” (1999: x).

In the introductory chapter on *Locating Russian Sexualities* the author promises to contribute to “theoretical and methodological debates on ethnocentrism and the construction of normative subjects and of Oriental ‘others’” (p1) and to provide a “multisited analysis of women’s negotiations of different ‘everyday’ spaces in metropolitan Moscow and provincial Ul’ianovsk”(p10). Her goal is avoiding methodological nationalism because social life cannot be explored as something contained within the boundaries of national societies; critical regionalism is proposed to be used instead as a “way to avoid reifying ‘Russian lesbians’ as exceptional vis-à-vis the ‘west’, and to foreground complexity” (p7). Additionally, different geographical scales are examined ranging from the nation (whatever that might mean in the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts) through urban localities to the individual body, and it is also considered how sexuality and generation intersect in women’s experiences capturing variations across space and time.

The author interprets intersectional and queer perspectives as sensitising concepts that can increase the visibility of the multi-layered complexities of lived experiences. However, she also notes that since “both intersectionality and queer are somehow ill defined, ‘buzzwords’, it is not terribly helpful, in my view, to talk about intersectional or queer methodologies” (p11) mainly because social scientific debates on intersectionality have been largely theoretical rather than methodological, and queer approaches are often seen as “too abstract and text-based, and therefore inherently unable to come to terms with the empirical world”(p11).

The theoretical framework of the book heavily relies on what Goffman had to say on performances in the context of impression management but also applies some of Judith Butler’s insights, especially those connected to the *heterosexual matrix* – i.e. the ways “how the discursive production of gendered subjects is informed by heterosexuality” (p14). Additionally, Stella also refreshingly reminds us of an understanding of performativity (another *buzzword!*) in the context of naturalising specific constructs of sexuality and gender “through stylised repetition” (p14), instead of referring to a performance enacted by *agentive* subjects. Among the central concepts applied in the analyses we can find Goffman’s stigma as well as Ken Plummer’s sexual stigma, negotiations of sexual selves across time and space, and generational sexualities from micro-level perspectives concerned with the life course of individuals and intergenerational perspectives as well as from macro-level perspectives “aimed at historicising narratives of queer globalisation” (p16).

The presented biographical narratives can be examined not only as accounts of individual non-heterosexuals’ lives but also as narratives that are shaped in fundamental ways by the ideas and values of the historical period in which they are embedded. Stella refers to the notion of generational cohorts (i.e., age cohorts can be identified through shared critical life events, which shape a generation’s formative years, and generate shared collective memories) and emphasises that research on generational same-sex sexualities can raise quite a few conceptual issues. For example, the 1960s might emerge as a very relevant reference point in the narratives of many gays and lesbians in the West: in fact, the discursive shift from homosexuality as a form of deviance to homosexuality as a positive social identity during the late 1960s in

the US can be identified in qualitative research findings where gay liberation appears as the defining moment in the interviewees' 'identity career' towards a positive identification as gay or lesbian (Rosenfeld, 2002; 2009). However, this reference point does not really work in non-Western environments with differently constructed normative masculinities and femininities, where gendered sexualities were regulated in different ways and the local functioning of the heterosexual matrix has been mediated through culture-specific social institutions such as heteronormative marriage and family. Empirical findings presented in this book confirm that same-sex desire can be effectively regulated not only through criminalisation and medicalisation, but also through symbolic erasure (i.e., the enforced silence and invisibility surrounding and stigmatising same-sex sexualities); it can also be seen that social invisibility played a more determining part in the women's lives belonging to the 'last Soviet generation' (born in the early 1950s and the 1970s) than in the socialization of women belonging to the 'transition generation' (born after the 1970s) who had access to representations of same-sex sexualities from various sources including radio and television programmes and other media products.

Stella is critical about the essentialising East-West polarisations and urges us to interpret the complexities of lived experiences within specific socio-historical contexts. For example, a practical focus on reconciliation techniques of sexual desires and personal aspirations with normative pressures can lead us to the careful reconsideration of socio-historically specific concepts such as bisexuality (often presupposing a sexual identity formation process that takes place in early life, and leading to a stable exclusively heterosexual or homosexual identity during adulthood) or leading a "double life" (being a relatively widespread experience not only among the elderly of the pre-gay liberation generations in the West but also among many people with same-sex relations in the Eastern bloc countries during state-socialism and afterwards). Stella also joins the critiques of the binary notions of sexuality as either gay or straight that ignore the fluidity of sexual desires and identifications leading to research practices that "bracket queers' experiences of heterosexual relations, married life and parenthood and interpret them as attempts to conform the heteronorm or as a case of 'double life' or as a stage on the path leading to an authentic stable gay or lesbian identity" (p18).

Chapter 2 on *Same-Sex Sexualities and the Soviet/Post-Soviet Gender Orders* provides a socio-historical background to the following presentation of the empirical findings. In this chapter we can learn about the Soviet government's recriminalisation of male homosexuality in 1934 that "broadly coincided with the campaign to strengthen the heterosexual nuclear family, and can be seen as part of a broader effort to harness sexuality to reproduction and emphasise the value of the nuclear family's role as the founding unit of Soviet society" (p30). (However, it does not turn out since when male homosexuality was criminalised in Tsarist Russia, and when it became -

temporarily - decriminalized.³) This anti-sodomy law remained in operation until 1993. Both male and female homosexualities were interpreted as perverted attractions in medical discourse, but female homosexuality has never been criminalised because it was seen as a “deviance that could be corrected by pressures to conform to ‘compulsory motherhood’” (p30). It is a telling detail that the discipline of sexology was known as “sexopathology” (p34) in the Soviet context, implying that “normal” sex does not need to be examined at all.

By the 1990s the Soviet *etacritic* (i.e. state-determined) gender order, exclusively based on the ‘working mother’ contract (channelling “women’s sexuality into reproduction through the notion of motherhood as an essential duty to the state”⁴ - p43), was replaced by the pluralisation of legitimate gender contracts, including the ‘career-oriented woman’, the ‘housewife’ and the ‘sponsored contract’ (i.e. a transactional relationship where the woman is sponsored by a wealthy lover - p36) as well as an increasing pluralisation of discourses on sexuality. However, decriminalization (1993) and demedicalisation (1999)⁵ of male homosexuality came from ‘above’ and was pushed through because of external constraints such as decriminalisation being a precondition for Russia joining the Council of Europe.

The 1990s was characterised by a new visibility of same-sex sexualities rooted in not only LGBT media production and queer subcultural spaces but also in mainstream media and popular culture production leading to the success of such bands as the Zemfira or the t.A.T.u.,⁶ addressing quite explicitly the (until then) taboo theme of lesbianism. In this context sexual citizenship can be seen as confined to sexual expression and consumption, but not extending to the political sphere of civil rights and liberties.

This period of limited liberalisation was followed by a backlash culminating in the 2013 law against the ‘propaganda’ of ‘non-traditional sexuality’: “since the 1990s homosexuality has commonly been referred to in the Russian media as a ‘non-traditional sexual orientation’ (*netraditsiionnaia orientatsiia*), a term which is meant to be neutral but conveys the idea of a phenomenon alien to Russian traditions” (p40). In fact, the propaganda law can be seen as part of a broader legislative initiative aiming at defending traditional Russian values and protecting minors from harmful influences - and it can also be identified as a symptom of the ongoing crackdown on civil liberties in Russia over the last few years.

³ For example, Laura Engelstein’s study on the Soviet policy toward male homosexuality (1995) or Dan Healey’s book on Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent (2001) can be consulted for more details.

⁴ According to Zdravomyslova and Tenkina (2005) the construction of parenthood as primarily a function of the mother and the state, closely connected to the tradition of alienating fatherhood, can be dated from here; they also refer to women’s position between the 1930s and the 1950s, during the Soviet period of “totalitarian androgyny” as being “somewhere between generators and milk cows” (2005:104).

⁵ The Ministry of Health did not include homosexuality into its new classification of mental illnesses in 1999 (p39).

⁶ In 2003 the t.A.T.u. represented Russia at the Eurovision Song Contest, where they finished third (Heller, 2007).

Chapter 3 on *Lesbian Relationships in Late Soviet Russia* shifts the focus from the stigmatising (medical and legal) ‘expert gaze’ to the micro-level of the interviewees’ lived experiences, while acknowledging the fact that the only legitimate discourse about same-sex relations among women produced by medical experts during the Soviet era was of a pathologising nature. Stella’s interviewees did not report on personal experiences of forced psychiatric treatment, though a few of them encountered “sexopathologists” who either provided advice towards heterosexual re-education such as “show an interest in men” (p48) or just registered the fact that there is no cure that can change one’s sexual orientation (or *ain’t no cure for love*). This chapter also presents stories about how the policing of sexual morals was conducted not only by experts, but also by co-workers and close family members.

Besides policed, being married seemed to be a common experience of the majority of the older interviewed women who saw marriage as an inevitable fact of (Soviet) life and lesbian affairs as being accommodated only on the margins of family life. Stella points to the heteronormative ideals about couple relations and parenthood as well as the lack of long-term prospects of starting a ‘proper’ family with a same-sex partner as contributing to the widespread perception of same-sex relations as not viable. Tamara, one of Stella’s interviewees summarises this point in the following way: “During the Soviet period the majority of women I dated eventually got married and lived a heterosexual life, I mean, same-sex relations had no prospects. For two women, well, you could of course live, sort of, together, but at the time there were huge problems with housing... There was no way around it, lesbian couples simply had nowhere to live” (p56). – These findings are consistent with other similar post-socialist studies: perhaps not surprisingly, the inescapability of marriage and housing shortage were also central topics in many of the Hungarian interviews conducted with men and women having same-sex relations before the political system change in the course of the ongoing research on the social history of 20th century homosexuality in Hungary (Takács, 2015). Additionally, the long term socialisation effects of these constraining features could also be detected in Hungary: for example, a study focusing on value orientation of Hungarian gay men in the 1990s found that legal and practical difficulties in establishing one’s own family and living together with a same-sex partner, exacerbated with a heteronormative family definition limited to the classic heterosexual nuclear family, could prevent gay respondents from considering *family security* as a value to be achieved (Takács, 2007).

The second part of the book shifts the level of analysis from time to space: it problematizes the “ahistorical, aspatial notions of the closet, and the notion of ‘coming out’ as individual choice, detached from any consideration about the specific rules governing interactions in a particular socio-spatial context” (p22); and explores “strategies collectively deployed to carve out ‘lesbian/queer’ space” (p21) as well as practices of disclosure and perceptions of safety/danger in different settings: home, workplace, and the street. In this part of the book the author calls for reassessing and reconceptualising the ‘closet/coming out’ paradigm. One of the main issues here (in the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts) is about the validity of the equation of visibility with empowerment: is social visibility always empowering; isn’t it a privilege just for

some, instead of being a universal norm to be followed? While acknowledging that the closet metaphor might be useful in analysing how the construction of the private/public space divide is used to maintain heteronormativity, Stella points to the integration of the “Goffmanian notions of non-heterosexuals as performers who are called to manage self-impressions and ‘fronts’ during social interaction” (p22) into debates about the closet, self-management and disclosure for non-heterosexuals as a way to highlight the role individual agency might play in coming (or not coming) out processes.

Chapter 4 on *Family Matters: Negotiating ‘Home’* explores identity negotiations within the parental home and manifestations of everyday homophobia in the family home, rooted in normative expectations about femininity and a ‘healthy’ transition into adulthood. (Note that the focus is on the complex emotional connotations of the ‘home’ and not the family.) Chapter 5 on *The Global Closet? Negotiating Public Space* focusses on lesbian/bisexual (in)visibility practices at the workplace and the street, by also highlighting the difference between metropolitan Moscow and provincial Ul’ianovsk. Chapter 6 on *Carving Out Queer Space: In/visibility, Belonging and Resistance* provides queer mapping of two Russian cities: Moscow, the biggest and most affluent city with a well-developed (and often gender-segregated) commercial and community infrastructure for gays and lesbian – and the not so big and not so affluent Ul’ianovsk with less stable infrastructure and more informally queered urban spaces. In Stella’s interpretation carving out queer space – which is about “claiming a legitimate presence in the public space” (p121) – can be achieved in various ways and with different levels of ease depending on the perception of safety and danger. For example, in a small provincial town it can happen around an unmarked bench, where members of a lesbian group regularly meet – and for safety reasons neither the bench nor the group being visibly marked as queer.

In the concluding chapter Stella positions her work in the context of critical *postsocialism* (as opposed to mainstream ‘transitology’, following the logic of “flat Cold War binaries” – p133), where postsocialism is seen as “emerging from empirical micro-level and often ethnographic studies exploring how the deep socio-political and economic transformations which followed the demise of state socialism were experienced by ordinary citizens in former communist states” (p133). In the present study Stella convincingly demonstrates that the intersection of different geographical scales, ranging from the individual body to the postsocialist region, she has focussed on, could lead to a more nuanced and less reifying analysis of Russian sexualities, while at the same time it can also potentially contribute to “provincialise western-centric perspectives within sexuality studies”(p141).

Stella sees the rehabilitation or (as she puts it) the recuperation of postsocialism (as a critical standpoint and a supraregional framework of analysis) as one of her key contributions to the field of studies in sexualities with this monograph: she argues that while postcolonialism has developed into a vastly popular approach in research and theoretical work in and on non-Western societies, “postsocialism is yet to become an established part of the theoretical toolkit of global gender and sexualities studies” (p21). However, this well-researched and well-presented work has many more merits.

In my view, it deserves special praise because Stella was able to integrate queer theory into social scientific research practice by bringing to (social) life the *undersocialized* »queer« subject (Green, 2002:522) that is said to be quite weakly connected to the empirical world. In fact, this work can be seen as one of the first representatives of a *post-queer study of sexuality*, incorporating “the criticism of queer theory while maintaining the grounded footing of empirical sociology” (Green 2002: 537) – and a very invigorating one, indeed. We can only hope that it will be followed by additional volumes by Stella and other post-queer social scientists.

Judit Takács (takacs.judit@tk.mta.hu)

Institute for Sociology, Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Hungary

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