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A Reply to Judit Takács

In reaction to our paper "Bumbling Idiots or Evil Masterminds?" Judit Takács expressed concerns that we were "trying to distort [her] scientific credibility" by not having "really paid attention to the content of the whole article." In this brief response, we wish to clarify our position regarding our use of her work. Upon carefully reviewing the article that we cited, and the sources cited by Takács in that article, we feel that our initial intervention was legitimate.

First and foremost, let us stress that we have great respect for the authors whom we quoted in our original paper. Their texts were often chosen because we considered them as among the most exemplary researchers working in their fields. We deem them influential and their research engaging. In fact, it would make little sense to substantiate our claims with work of less well-renowned scholars. As we made clear in the beginning of our article, we had "no intention of mounting ad hominem attacks on our colleagues and friends." We quoted them because we are familiar with their work, cite it ourselves in our research, and assign it to our students.

Indeed, Judit Takács's work brings important and interesting evidence of non-normative sexual lives and permissive attitudes to various forms of non-reproductive sexual behavior in late socialist Hungary. In her paper "Disciplining gender and (homo)sexuality in state-socialist Hungary in the 1970s," from which we quote, Takács highlights experimental forms of sex education which "debuted in several volunteering primary schools all over the country in the school year 1974/5". (p.165) While these classes surely were not perfect, according to Takács's evidence they were not prudish since topics such as masturbation were discussed and „the point that it was too early to discuss the topic of masturbation in the sixth grade (at around the age of 12) was turned down in the following way: '[While] there shouldn't be too much talk on masturbation, it cannot be silenced either, because it exists as an innate part of psychosexual development. In our view, it is not too early to discuss this [topic] in the 6th grade because children won't start masturbating in the 6th grade after [participating in this] class – this [masturbation] has started already much earlier.'" (contemporaneous experts quoted by Takács on p. 166). Women could find

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important information in the magazine Nök Lapja (Women's Magazine): "one of the primary functions of the Nök Lapja was to provide information and guidance for women (and men) on important female-specific social and health issues such as modern means of contraception, cures for impotence and sexually transmitted diseases, as well as some questions with gender equality relevance, such as how to cope with the problem of the shortage of places in kindergartens" (p. 167).

Most interestingly, Takács delves into "a unique research project, the first and still largely unexampled empirical sexual-sociological survey, which was conducted by researchers from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest in the early 1970s. The research focused on the sexuality-related value orientation and attitudes of 250 young Hungarian workers and university students, aged 18–24" (p. 167). Respondents had to rank 11 stories about people in various sexual situations including a couple having sex before marriage, unwed mother abandoned by her partner, a woman selling sex, and a homosexual man. Takács reports that "the most-liked characters included the 'free-love' cultivating couple and the single mother (the latter being the absolute favourite of young female workers)" (p. 168) and while the prostitute and the homosexual ranked among the lowest, "there were also a few tolerant views expressed, pointing to the fact that sex work cannot be maintained without clients' demand" or that homosexuality "'is an illness that cannot be squarely condemned'" or "'he has the right [to do it], if he doesn't violate others, and does it with similar ones.'" (p. 168-169). In the last section of her paper, Takács showcases creative ways in which gay men and lesbians sought sexual and relationship fulfillment in times of silence (but, crucially, no criminalization) surrounding homosexuality.

All in all, her paper reads like a description of a society, which despite various shortcomings offers space for non-reproductive, joyful sex, be it the same-sex kind, masturbation or pre-marital sexual experimentation. The authorities either condoned such activities (as in the case of teaching schoolchildren about masturbation) or turned the blind eye (in case of practicing same-sex acts as Takács describes in the last section of her paper). In any case, the presented evidence suggests that young Hungarians of late-socialist era viewed sexuality rather permissively, even that of traditional sexual 'others' (unwed mothers, prostitutes, homosexuals).

So what did we write in our paper that Judit Takács found offensive? We stated:

> "Another stereotype pervading contemporary scholarship on state socialist countries in Eastern Europe claims that communists were asexual prudes that suppressed the natural flourishing and variation of human sexuality. Once again, we find a plethora of statements asserted with no citation to relevant studies. For example:

> […]
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> 2. [S]tate-socialist morals celebrated a specifically asexual state-socialist reproduction i.e., the party-statebuilding capacities of labour-force reproduction and not pleasure… As state-socialist morals celebrated a specifically asexual socialist reproduction, sexuality was delegated to specifically asexual socialist reproduction, sexuality was delegated to social invisibility and surrounded by hypocrisy (Takács 2015: 165, 174)."

As indicated by ellipses, this was not the full quote. The latter part of the quote comes from the conclusion to Takács's paper and as such is, understandably, without references. The former part reads in its entirety:

> "By the early 1970s, the 'totalitarian androgyny'[32] of the 1950s, when the private life of citizens became an object of regular supervision and surveillance was replaced by a milder form of authoritarian control in many Soviet-bloc countries – including Hungary – that left some, at least not directly controlled, space for private life. Nonetheless, state-socialist morals celebrated a specifically asexual state-socialist reproduction i.e., the party-statebuilding capacities of labour-force reproduction and not pleasure: 'Sexuality was surrounded by hypocritical silence not only in everyday life but also in the academic circles, reflecting a general impassivity in relation to this field.'[33]" (Takács 2015: 165)

There are two references in this paragraph. The first one, number 32, cites Zdravomyslova and Temkina, "Gendered Citizenship," 98. Yet, Zdravomyslova and Temkina refer exclusively to the Soviet reality. In the cited section, they cite Igor Kan (1997), Gail Lapidus (1977) and Anna Rotkirch (2000) offering the following periodization of "Soviet gendered citizenship": 1918 to the beginning of the 1930s: "political mobilization of women"; early 1930s to mid-1950s: "totalitarian androgyny"; mid-1950s to the end of 1980s: "a new 'soft' approach to the 'woman question'" (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2005: 98). However, it is not uncontroversial to argue that a reality in one country (the USSR) at one point in time (before the mid-1950s) provides evidence for a reality in another country (Hungary) at another time (the 1970s). We perceived this reference to Zdravomyslova and Temkina as a "statement asserted with no citation to *relevant* studies," which is what we suggested in our original paper. Although we did not go into this level of detail in our initial article due to word limits, we don't believe we have misread Takács's article or taken her quotes out of context.

Takács's second reference, number 33, is a self-citation of "Queering Budapest," 195. This refers to a paragraph in her own work which contains almost exactly the same wording as the one we quote in her later article. Moreover, some of the evidence that follows her discussion of homosexual lives in state-socialist Hungary is the same as in the text we quoted. Providing a citation to a piece of one's own previous scholarship, where a

statement has been asserted as common knowledge, just moves the question back to the original article, which we might have quoted rather than Takács's latter piece.

What is important here is not that there is anything amiss with Takács's scientific credibility. She has not done anything that other scholars (including ourselves) do not also do on a regular basis: asserting claims that we believe constitute "common knowledge." The point of our article is that while editors and peer-reviewers almost always demand substantiation for any claim that makes seemingly positive statements about the state socialist past, those same editors and peer-reviewers allow negative statements and stereotypes to be published either with no citation, with citations to only vaguely relevant studies, or with citations to unsubstantiated assertions in previous published works. Our hope is to expose what we think of as a systematic bias in English-language publishing on the state socialist past, and not to antagonize our colleagues working in this field. In this context, we still believe that the quotes we drew from Takács's article were not taken out of context. Takács's work is an example of surprisingly unconstrained sexual life that people today might not attribute to a socialist country, given the Cold War stereotypes about the supposed Eastern prudishness many of us continue to share.