
To what extent can sex be described as ‘a free space’ for women in the East German Democratic Republic?

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Abstract:

This article is inspired by the work of gender and sexuality historian, Dagmar Herzog. This article examines Herzog’s statement; that in East Germany sex could be a ‘free space’ for East German women in an otherwise restrictive society. As well as commenting on the political significance of East German women’s sexuality, the article considers three additionally important factors relating to sex as a free space for women in the GDR: the GDR’s sexual revolution or evolution, (using East German film to gain insight into contemporary sexual norms); the writing of GDR sexologists’ on the physical act of sex; and, lastly, prostitution. Using Biopower as a theoretical framework, this article argues, overall East German women’s sexuality can be understood as another aspect of life that the communist regime sought to regulate and control.

According to Dagmar Herzog, sex in the East German Democratic Republic, 1949-1990 (GDR) was ‘a crucial free space in [an] otherwise profoundly unfree society’; however, Herzog questions whether this was a ‘genuine democratic achievement’ or another means of state control.¹

Envisaging the GDR as a free space for sexuality presents a paradox as many associate the GDR with oppression; a land of grey high rise apartments with the Stasi lurking at every corner. Yet, in oral testimony gathered by historians such as Josie McLellan, the regime’s former inhabitants often remember the GDR fondly in regards to their sexual experiences. The purpose of this article is to examine Herzog’s statement in relation to the experience of East German women. Firstly, it is important to understand the context of the GDR’s legislation regarding women and the effect on women’s sexual freedoms. This article examines three additionally significant factors relating to sex as a free space for women in the GDR: the GDR’s sexual revolution or evolution, the physical act of sex, and prostitution. I maintain that despite aspects of these phenomena allowing sexual freedom for women, above all, women’s sexuality had a political purpose in the GDR.

Regarding the historiography on the history of sexuality, Herzog’s contribution is outstanding. Her 2005 publication, *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* has

¹ Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth Century Germany*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), p.188.

inspired this article.² Herzog argues the GDR's leaders hoped to show their citizens that only socialism provided the best conditions for long-lasting, true love. Signifying difference from Western sexual change in the 1970's, Herzog maintains that rather than a sexual *revolution*, the GDR experienced a gradual *evolution* of sexual freedoms in the 1970s. I will henceforth use the term evolution when referring to this event. Herzog's 2011 publication offers comparison between the GDR's sexual evolution and West Germany's sexual revolution as well as offering insight into sexual developments in the twentieth century such as prostitution, sexual violence and the HIV crisis.³ McLellan's 2011 publication utilises oral testimony alongside statistical analysis providing a detailed understanding of sexual practices in the GDR.⁴ Considering women's sexual experiences post-communism, Ingrid Sharp's 2004 work investigates the negative effects German reunification had on East German women's sexual freedoms.⁵ Similarly, Susan Gal and Gail Kligman's 2000 edited volume, particularly their chapter on abortion rights after the *Wende* (*Turning point*), offers comparison with women's reproductive freedoms in the GDR to restrictions East German women faced in the newly reunified Germany.⁶ Donna Harsch's contribution to the study of women in the GDR is also extremely insightful and her 2007 publication holds particularly valuable insight to the social conditions of women in the GDR.⁷ Harsch's recent review in the *German History Journal* also explores reproduction.⁸ However, Harsch nega to explore women's experiences in the most private sphere: the bedroom. This piece engages with existing literature on women's social position in the GDR while investigating the relationship between their social position and their sexual freedoms. In this respect, Katharina von Ankum's work is significant as it was written in 1993 providing the reader with a near contemporary understanding of women's role as 'political bodies' in the GDR.⁹ Regarding writing on sexuality written inside the GDR, East German sexologist, Siegfried Schnabl's *Mann und Frau Intim* allows access to contemporary thoughts on sex inside the GDR.¹⁰

² Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth Century Germany*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), p.188.

³ Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History*, (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2011).

⁴ Josie McLellan, *Love in the time of Communism: Intimacy and Sexuality in the GDR*, (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2011).

⁵ Ingrid Sharp, 'The Sexual Unification of Germany', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 13:3, (2004).

⁶ Susan Gal and Gail Kligman eds., *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics, and Everyday Life after Socialism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁷ Donna Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic: Women, the Family and Communism in the German Democratic Republic*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁸ Harsch, 'Die Wunschkind Pille: Weibliche Erfahrung und Staatliche Geburtenpolitik in der DDR', *German History*, 34:2, (2016).

⁹ Katharina Von Ankum, 'Political Bodies: Women and Re/Production in the GDR', *Women in German Yearbook*, (1993).

¹⁰ Schnabl, *Mann und Frau Intim*, 5th edition, (VEB Verlag Volk und Gesundheit: Berlin, 1972).

When investigating sex as a free space for East German women, it is necessary to consider legislation regarding women. Soon after the GDR's conception the Law for the Protection of Mother and Child and Rights of Women was introduced in 1950.¹¹ Significantly, the law viewed women's rights in relation to the maternal role and secured women's right to work, equal pay and established maternal authority in families. Protective legislation was also introduced for pregnant working women and generous financial incentives for large families were provided.¹² Although aspects of this law appeared progressive, in reality the policies addressed:

‘the stagnating population growth due to war losses and emigration to the West...women were as crucial for the continued existence of the GDR state in their function as child bearers as they were as workers.’¹³

Thus, reproduction was portrayed by the regime's leaders as symbolic of women's commitment to socialism; it was their duty to produce the future of the developing republic. Hence, as part of the 1950 law, and owing to the regime's pro-natalism programme, abortion was made illegal.¹⁴ Restricting women's power over their pregnancies can be understood within the framework of Michel Foucault's theory of Biopower.¹⁵ Foucault maintained the individual's body was a site of control and a means to affect state control. He believed both socialist and capitalist states had embraced Biopower. In reference to the Soviet Union, he suggested their belief in the biological right of the state to take or allow life was evident in the killing of political opponents and criminals.¹⁶ The theory of Biopower is evident in the GDR's control of the female body to aid economic and demographic concerns. Thus, until the legalisation of abortion in 1972, women were at the centre of the state's interests as they held the power to create or indeed, abort, the socialist state's future. This put extraordinary pressure on women who were already struggling to manage the double burden of work and family. The state attempted to prevent illegal abortions by introducing family counselling services to register pregnancies.¹⁷ Furthermore, in the GDR's early years, contraception, though not illegal, was not easily accessible or guaranteed to be effective. In this sense, for women in the GDR, the only guaranteed assurance to prevent pregnancy was to completely avoid sexual intercourse. Thus, I suggest that legislation regarding

¹¹ Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic*, p.134.

¹² *Ibid*, see pp.134-136 for further details on protective legislation and monetary incentives to encourage large families.

¹³ Von Ankum, 'Political Bodies', p.4.

¹⁴ Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic*, p.143.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France*, (New York: Picador, 2003).

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.261.

¹⁷ Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic*, p.141.

women and abortion in this era was premised on providing a strong Socialist future generation, but in actuality, it curbed women's sexual desire owing to the fear of pregnancy.

There were exceptions to the illegalisation of abortion, for example, medical risk to the mother and child or eugenic risk; which although rarely enforced could legalise abortion in the case of incest.¹⁸ In reality, both categories remained ambiguous, moreover, petitions appealing for legal abortions were unanimously rejected, according to Harsch.¹⁹ During the 1960s there was increasing liberalization regarding the abortion law; and economic constraints in particular, pushed the regime to consider new legalisation.²⁰ In 1965, a commission found women were often working shorter hours to account for child care and household duties.²¹ In 1972 abortion was formally legalised in the GDR; a significant turning point for the socialist state and for East German women. However, Ankum believes it was not the consideration of women's self-determination that reversed the regime's decision on abortion; instead, legalisation of abortion 'was ultimately decided in favour of production, which happened to coincide with women's right to self-determination.'²² The country's economy, similar to others in the Soviet bloc, was struggling to provide for the needs of modern life. Therefore, concerned for the GDR's economic needs, the regime legalised abortion to ensure women could fulfil their role as workers. Ankum also believes the legalisation of abortion was a political power play from the GDR; seeing the 'visible struggle' of West German women in their campaign for legal abortion, the GDR tried to assert its moral superiority to West Germany through abortion's legalisation.²³ However, despite the legalisation of abortion, maternal pressures such as the burdens of being and becoming a mother, existed for East German women until the state's collapse in 1989.

It is necessary to examine the impact of sexual evolution in judging whether sex was a free space for East German women. To gain contemporary insight I will be using East German film as a case study for measuring women's sexual freedom. During the Erich Honecker era, beginning in 1971, there was a gradual sexual evolution in the GDR following policy change such as the decriminalisation of homosexuality and abortion.²⁴ Women, ever more economically independent, became 'increasingly confident subjects with strong negotiating power vis-à-vis

¹⁸ Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic*, pp.151-153.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp.148-149.

²⁰ Von Ankum, 'Political Bodies', p.9.

²¹ *Ibid*, p.12.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ *Ibid*, p.9.

²⁴ Officially, homosexuality was decriminalized in the GDR in 1968.

both their male partners and the state.²⁵ Women's confidence translated into a desire for sexual enjoyment without fearing repercussions such as pregnancy and judgement. The 1973 East German film, *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (DLPP) portrays the young single mother, Paula, who is frustrated with her lack of sex life: 'Sleep, work and again sleep and back in bed at nine.'²⁶ Instead of staying in bed, Paula goes to a night club to find a man; here, she meets her neighbour, Paul, who, due to his failing marriage, is also sexually frustrated. Soon after their meeting they have sex. Paula demonstrates female agency through prioritising her sexual needs by the way in which she is also pursued by Saft, a much older man offering a home and financial security. However, Paula goes against her sensibilities and pursues love and passion with Paul. When the pair make love, Paula is often overcome with emotion and in one scene she is transported to a 'dream world', symbolising the pleasure she experiences with Paul. Over three million East Germans viewed this film and it remains a cult classic, suggesting the resonance of the film with East German women, as well as men.²⁷ I believe the film revealed to East German women the sex lives women were already having, or could have. However, soon after the film's release it was banned, indicating measuring women's sexual freedom in the GDR is complicated; sexually liberal attitudes towards sex were not uniform and instead developed gradually. The film broke many East German taboos, moreover, the film's embrace of sexual themes was perhaps too explicit for the authorities; its music is laced with innuendos such as: 'Go to her and let your kite soar / Hold her tight and let your kite soar.'²⁸ Despite the authorities' disapproval of the film, it revealed East German women's freedom in pursuing sexual relationships, even if these were non-conventional for the time, indicating sex could be a free space for East German women.

McLellan writes, during the Honecker era, youthful sex was not viewed negatively, however this was only within 'the coupling of sex with love and sex with heterosexuality.'²⁹ Even among the young, a specific type of sexual relationship was encouraged; sex within loving, heterosexual relationships resulting in marriage and children. In DLPP, Paula exemplifies the sexual freedom women could experience in the GDR. However, the film also, perhaps indirectly, reveals the regime's expectation of what sex should result in; Paula wants to have a child with Paul to

²⁵ Herzog, *Sex After Fascism*, p.188.

²⁶ *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* [film], directed by Heiner Carow, (DEFA, 1973). Authors note: all translations in this text from German to English are my own.

²⁷ Sebastian Heiduschke, *East German Cinema: DEFA and Film History*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.103.

²⁸ *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* [film], directed by Heiner Carow, (DEFA, 1973).

²⁹ Josie McLellan, *Love in the time of Communism*, p.26.

solidify their love and devotion to each other. She is distraught to discover having another child would put her life in danger: ‘So I can’t have a child with the only man who means something to me.’³⁰ Ultimately, Paula’s decision to have a child with Paul results in her death during childbirth. Therefore, considering sex as a free space for women using DLPP, it is evident that lurking behind sexual evolution lay a political agenda:

‘Sex was a useful way of offering young people “a bit of freedom” allowing the regime to appear to be on the side of the young while still pursuing its own agenda of a peaceful population and a healthy birth rate.’³¹

Therefore, sex can be seen as another method of enforcing loyalty within the population; sex would result in a loving relationship and simultaneously tie the couple together to socialism. Herzog succinctly summarises this principle citing the SED’s 1963 youth memorandum, ‘true love belongs to youth the way youth belongs to socialism.’³² Again, Biopower is useful in understanding women’s sexual freedom. In the 1970’s, abortion was legalised resulting in greater female sexual enjoyment; evident in the character of Paula, a single mother who has a sexual relationship with a married man. Despite the moral confusion surrounding their relationship outside of marriage, relating to Biopower the relationship is acceptable as the pair hope to have children together during a time when demographic concerns were of central importance to the GDR. However, Paula’s death in childbirth could also be interpreted as a form of punishment for her sexual freedom. I believe the climate of sexual evolution did offer women sexual freedom, but the authorities expected sex to take place in loving relationships between loyal citizens resulting in marriage and children. Women might have had greater freedom over their sexual choices, but they were still to consider the state’s concerns; producing children for socialism’s future underpinned much of the GDR’s principles on sexuality.

Considering the concept of sex as a free space for East German women, leading East German sexologist, Siegfried Schnabl’s ideas on the physical act of sex are of significance as he stressed the importance of female pleasure. As previously explored, women experienced sexual freedom from the 1970s onward; for Ina Merkel and Diane Kent women had abandoned the ‘Cinderella myth’; instead they expected more from their men believing they could have greater equality in

³⁰ *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* [film], directed by Heiner Carow, (DEFA, 1973).

³¹ McLellan, *Love in the time of Communism*, p.30.

³² Herzog, *Sex After Fascism*, p.196.

the GDR.³³ One of the best-known publications on sex in East Germany was sexologist Siegfried Schnabl's *Mann und Frau Intim*, which had eight editions published during the regime demonstrating its value as a guide for normative sex under socialism. This essay refers to the 1972 edition and his complete works from 1992. Schnabl stressed the importance of female pleasure in sex; famously, he wrote about women's right to orgasm.³⁴ In both editions, Schnabl includes several diagrams of female genitalia and prompted men to pay attention to women's clitoris where women derive most pleasure.³⁵ Schnabl also encouraged men to be more aware of the emotional aspects of sex believing them to be at the centre of women's sexual pleasure during intercourse:

'Women's sexuality is more closely integrated in the relationship than the man, it is more dependent on the quality and emotional intensity (of the act) and on their mental state.'³⁶

It seems that Schnabl's writing reflected societal change; in 1980 42% of young women stated they achieved orgasm almost every time they had intercourse while another 43% stated they experienced orgasm at least half of the time.³⁷ Despite Schnabl describing sex's purpose as 'pleasure and delight', his writings also reflected the GDR's vision of suitable sex under socialism.³⁸ The political merit of Schnabl's work is obvious as he wrote that sex was only meaningful through the love of two people.³⁹ Furthermore, the instructions Schnabl described only illustrated intimate relations between men and women:

'At orgasm and before his approach, women and men usually have a desire to cling to each other, and often, depending on their temperament, a soft or clear sigh or cry expresses their highest bliss.'⁴⁰

Thus, Schnabl echoed the regime's encouragement of sexual relations within loving heterosexual relationships. Sex was a normal, and to a degree celebrated, part of life in the GDR, however, it

³³ Ina Merkel and Diane Kent, 'Another Kind of Woman', *Gender, Politics and Society*, 24:25, (1991-1992). p.6.

³⁴ For detailed discussion on the function of female orgasm and how to produce female orgasm: Siegfried Schnabl, *Die Lust des Liebens: Frau und Mann Intim*, (Ullstein: Berlin, 1992), pp.80-88, pp.214-220.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Siegfried Schnabl, *Die Lust des Liebens: Frau und Mann Intim*, (Ullstein: Berlin, 1992), p.35.

³⁷ McLellan, *Love in the time of Communism*, p.84.

³⁸ Herzog, *Sex After Fascism*, p.213.

³⁹ Schnabl, *Mann und Frau Intim*, 5th edition, (VEB Verlag Volk und Gesundheit: Berlin, 1972), p.268.

⁴⁰ Schnabl, *Die Lust des Liebens*, p.66.

was emphasized that sex must be part of a committed relationship. Schnabl even warned of the dangers casual sex could cause women's health:

‘Women who have sex with changing partners are more likely to become infected with cervical carcinoma than sexually abstinent women and women with steady partners.’⁴¹

However, despite the regime and Schnabl's attempts to curb this behaviour, many women and men did have sex outside of committed relationships. In the early 1970s, 10% of students and 9% of young workers revealed having sexual relationships with more than one person simultaneously, which suggests an increase in infidelity.⁴² This article does not discuss homosexuality in the GDR, however through depicting heterosexual relationships as the sexual norm, those in homosexual relations were othered and deemed outside of the normative sexuality.⁴³ Evidencing contempt towards homosexuality, Schnabl described contemplation of sexual intercourse with the same sex, suggested one's sexuality was on a false path.⁴⁴ In part, this was due to the stress Schnabl laid on penetrative intercourse suggesting reproduction was a central part of sex.⁴⁵ Therefore, it can be claimed lesbian women did not experience sex as liberating due to the stigma attached to same sex relations. I argue that the encouragement of female pleasure in sex allowed many women to experience sex as a free and enjoyable space in an otherwise unfree society. However, underpinning sexual relationships in the GDR was a heterosexual norm and considering Foucault's theory of Biopower one can question the political dynamics behind the stress on heterosexual sex.

Focusing on prostitution in the GDR reveals that, despite the state's claims that the practice did not exist, the state actively participated in the sexual exploitation of women. Prostitution, according to GDR doctrine, was unnecessary as women were economically independent and loving marriages were encouraged by the regime:

⁴¹ Schnabl, *Die Lust des Liebens*, p.95.

⁴² McLellan, *Love in the time of Communism*, p.96.

⁴³ For discussion on homosexuality in the GDR, see: McLellan, *Love in the time of Communism*, pp.114-144.

⁴⁴ Schnabl, *Mann und Frau Intim*, p.289.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p.277-278.

‘Today there are only a few purchasable girls in the German Democratic Republic with changing clientele, and even the respectable form of selling oneself to an unloved man for a lifetime has become a great exception.’⁴⁶

The regime viewed prostitution as a barrier to progress, both ideologically and physically; the spread of venereal diseases was particularly concerning to the regime.⁴⁷ Tighter controls against prostitutes were introduced in the 1950s, however prostitution was not officially illegal until 1968.⁴⁸ Since then, Paragraph 249 stated that prostitution was punishable by up to five years in prison. Despite these strict measures, Sharp notes that there was a reluctance to prosecute against prostitution.⁴⁹ It could be argued that the regime afforded women a degree of sexual freedom through the lack of persecution, allowing women the right to decide what to do with their bodies. Moreover, East German women could also benefit materially from prostitution; while informing on Western men, women received luxury goods and experienced ‘glamorous adventures.’⁵⁰ Therefore, despite risks, prostitution could be lucrative. Falck estimates 3,000 women earned their living as prostitutes, however, despite this small number, I believe prostitution illustrates an example of sex as an unfree and constraining space for East German women.⁵¹ Foucault’s principles on technologies of power are significant relating to prostitution in the GDR. Foucault defined two ways to control the body: discipline and regulation; discipline ‘manipulate[s] the body as a source of forces that have to be rendered both useful and docile.’⁵² Regulation was a means to define and centralise that discipline. Falck describes the ‘marriage of convenience’ between the Stasi and prostitutes; prostitutes provided vital information for the secret police through informing on political enemies. As many of these women were vulnerable, they were exploited to carry out the Stasi’s work in exchange for police protection. Biopower’s value is evident once more in the GDR’s sexual culture as women’s bodies were recruited as political tools for the state. Thus, the state used sex as a ‘weapon’ against both its population and its enemies; all while publically stating prostitution did not exist in the GDR.⁵³

⁴⁶ Uta Falck, *VEB Bordell: Geschichte der Prostitution in der DDR*, (Christoph Links Verlag: Berlin, 1998). p.59.

⁴⁷ Sharp, ‘The Sexual Unification of Germany’, p.6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁵¹ Falck, *Geschichte der Prostitution in der DDR*, p.19.

⁵² Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, pp.249-250.

⁵³ McLellan, *Love in the time of Communism*, p.84.

‘Attention to the history of sexuality...alters our assessment of classic topics in East German historiography...it furthers our understanding of GDR’s citizens’ gradual accommodation to life under SED communism.’⁵⁴

Incorporating sexuality into studies of the GDR offers insights into the regime’s most private place; the bedroom. Herzog offers an incredibly insightful history of sexuality through the GDR’s citizen’s bedroom activities. Examining Herzog’s statement, that sex was a free space for women in the GDR, prompts several questions: Was increasing sexual freedom for women a democratic achievement? Or was sex another aspect of life the GDR sought to control? To summarise, I have illustrated how sex can be seen as a free space for East German women. Through focussing on individual phenomenon such as legislation, sexual evolution, sex itself and prostitution we can find instances of sexual freedom for women. However, there was almost always a political function behind this freedom. In comparison to women in West Germany, East German women had greater emancipation; they were provided support from social care services, sexually fulfilling relationships were also encouraged and women’s financial independence meant women did not sell themselves into marriage.⁵⁵ Men were taught by leading sexologists to consider women’s needs resulting in new sexual pleasures for women. Prostitution still existed in the GDR, though on a small scale. These factors illustrate instances of sexual freedom for women in the GDR, however female sexuality also had a pronounced political purpose in the GDR. This is shown through the way in which female sexuality was only encouraged within the confines of married heterosexual and reproductive relations. This points to the idea that the sexual evolution should be seen in light of the state’s attempts to increase reproduction, rather than from any legitimate ideology supporting female emancipation. This relates to Foucault’s theory of Biopower as the GDR sought to control women’s sexuality to produce children for the regime. Overall, female sexuality can be seen as another method used by the GDR to control its citizens hence even within citizens’ intimate sex lives a normative model was presented to which loyal socialists were encouraged to follow.

⁵⁴ Herzog, *Sex After Fascism*, p.188.

⁵⁵ For discussion of sexuality and morality in West Germany see: Chapter 1 and 3 of Herzog’s *Sex After Fascism*.

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