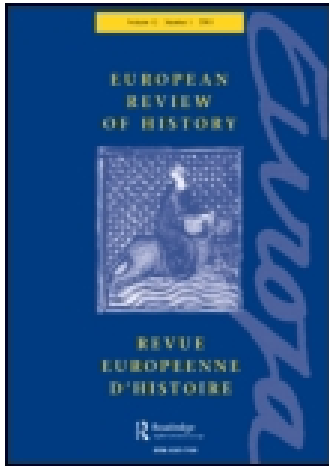


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## Disciplining gender and (homo)sexuality in state-socialist Hungary in the 1970s

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This article discusses how gender and (homo)sexual relations were disciplined in Hungary during the 1970s, part of the Kádár era, named after János Kádár, the top political leader of the People's Republic of Hungary between 1956 and 1988. The first part of the article examines the widespread effects of the New Economic Mechanism of 1968 (which could not be rounded off by political reform) on critical thoughts on family formation, as well as some largely absent aspects of gender equality. The second part of the article presents pieces of empirical evidence on the social existence of sexuality in the context of a system of 'tolerant repression' celebrating asexual socialist reproduction. The article concludes that most Hungarians seemed to be able to negotiate their lives between the constraints of state socialism and their longing for enjoyable human relationships even in the 'uniformly pallid' 1970s.

**Keywords:** state socialism; Hungary; gender; population policy; (homo)sexuality; 1970s

*A Little Hungarian Pornography*, the 'most Eastern European' and 'most helpless'<sup>1</sup> novel of Péter Esterházy, one of the best-known contemporary Hungarian writers, refers to Hungary in the late 1970s and early 1980s as being characterised by 'pornographic circumstances, where pornography should be understood as meaning lies, the lies of the body, the lies of the soul, our lies. Let us imagine, if we can, a country where everything is a lie, where the lack of democracy is called socialist democracy, economic chaos socialist economy, revolution anti-revolution, and so on.'<sup>2</sup> This article specifically focuses on the 'small, Hungarian pornographic circumstances'<sup>3</sup> of the 1970s, part of the Kádár era, a period named after János Kádár, the General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party and the top political leader of the People's Republic of Hungary between 1956 and 1988.

One of the main goals of this article is to discuss how gender and (homo)sexual relations were disciplined in Hungary during the 1970s, first by examining the widespread effects of the New Economic Mechanism of 1968 (which could not be rounded off by political reform) on critical thoughts on family formation and some largely absent aspects of gender equality. The second part of the article presents pieces of empirical evidence for the social existence of sexuality in the context of a system of 'tolerant repression' celebrating asexual socialist reproduction. The article concludes that most Hungarians seemed to be able to negotiate their lives between the constraints of state socialism and their longing for enjoyable human relationships, even in such a 'uniformly pallid' historical period as the 1970s.

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### The effects of the New Economic Mechanism on family disintegration

The early 1970s found Hungary in a situation of political aftershock following the introduction of the New Economic Mechanism in 1968. The economic half-turn, which was brought about by essential changes targeting the reduction of the role of central planning in the spheres of production and investment, greater market orientation for enterprises and the allowing of a larger scope of wages and incomes to be linked to work performance, were frowned upon by the Soviet political leadership, still keeping Hungarian politics under manual control, as ‘dangerous tendencies’ – mainly because of their potential consequences for entailing wider reform of the whole political system.<sup>4</sup> Thus the economic reform, which could not be rounded off by political reform, ‘eventually lost its impetus and entered a phase of stagnation and temporary retrenchment from 1972 on’.<sup>5</sup> The political consequences of this arrested development affected not only those high-ranking politicians who initiated the reform<sup>6</sup>, but also several intellectuals, mainly philosophers, promoters of the renewal of Marxist criticism, who were deposed from the state-party in 1973. The side-tracking of prominent social and political actors connected directly or indirectly to the reform of 1968 was the price to pay for keeping the freshly introduced economic changes in operation and maintaining Hungary’s status as ‘the happiest barracks in the Soviet camp’.<sup>7</sup> This trade-off could be seen as an – at least temporarily – satisfying solution, especially if we trust Kádár’s insight into the depoliticised nature of the citizenry, where ‘for a significant portion of the working masses, the main issues are not questions of politics but decent remedies for the economic and cultural issues that affect their everyday lives.’<sup>8</sup> It is not a coincidence that in colloquial terms, the late 1960s and the early 1970s are often referred to as the beginning of Hungarian ‘refrigerator-socialism’, recalling the rapidly growing access to consumer goods, such as refrigerators and television sets, which used to be considered luxury items.<sup>9</sup>

The intellectuals, expelled from the state-party in 1973, included Ágnes Heller and Mihály Vajda: they had to leave because of allegations of contributing to the ‘disintegration of the Hungarian family and spreading new leftish ideas’.<sup>10</sup> Retrospectively it is not too hard to identify a few warning signs in their work, in which political complaints could easily be grounded.

In 1970 Heller published an article on ‘The Future of the Relationship between the Sexes’ wherein she discussed the potential consequences of the latest wave of sexual revolution(s) that emerged within the Western European student movements, not merely as one of the main forms of revolt against ‘bourgeois ethics’, but also as a means to eliminate human alienation.<sup>11</sup> The most recent sexual revolution, in her view, strives for humanising society by asserting the right to pleasure for everyone, which could only be achieved by introducing gender equality. Heller envisioned a future society without gender-specific sexual-morality norms, where social inequalities between women and men cease to exist by the gradual recognition that the historically naturalised gender differences are in fact consequences of the social division of labour. Heller also saw the decline of the institution of alienated – i.e., property-based – monogamous marriage as inevitable, which could also contribute to the decline of prostitution, while admitting that until actual equality between men and women was achieved, dissolution of monogamy would affect women in a more negative way than men. People in the future, she concluded, not being tied down any longer by the restraints of sexual morality, will make their own choices about the *modus operandi* and the content of their relationships, and in this way they will create a public sphere of communities constructed by equal and free human relations.

However, the article did not make a clear distinction between the existing features of state-socialist and Western societies and thus it implied some sort of convergence between their future developments. Even though the starting point was that a Marxist author, being admittedly dedicated to a Communist future, criticises the sexual and family relations of the West, in the course of her analysis there are no distinct socialist patterns identified as good, or at least better, practices. Lack of gender equality might have been a crucial factor affecting human relations in the West but the author could not – and perhaps did not want to – reassure readers that the state-socialist system had already come up with a good solution to this problem.

In the same journal issue there was a study published on the situation of women in the world of work by Mária Márkus<sup>12</sup>, a sociologist who was also expelled from the state-party in 1973 on the grounds of ‘circumventing the economic reform’ and too much enthusiasm for market orientation.<sup>13</sup> This article provided a sociological contextualisation for Heller’s (missing) gender-equality-related arguments by gently introducing empirical findings on the existing realities of the gender wage gap and workplace discrimination of women (by referring only to American and Polish examples, not Hungarian ones), and the disproportionately high domestic workload of – even socialist – women in comparison to men. In fact, the data presented in the article showed that Czech and Hungarian women spent the greatest number of hours on household chores in comparison to men and women from Belgium, France, Poland, the Soviet Union, the United States and West Germany.<sup>14</sup> However, it should be noted that in the ‘women’s policy’ decree<sup>15</sup> of 1970, the issue of women’s double burden – as well as the gender pay gap and the limited opportunities for the advancement of women in education and politics – was already recognised as one of the ‘women-specific’ problems that should be tackled. This was quite a development considering that in 1953 there was still a ‘housework day’, i.e. one day of unpaid leave per month, made optionally available for employed mothers of at least two children under 14 ‘in the interests of maintaining good housekeeping’.<sup>16</sup>

In another article on ‘Family Form and Communism’ published by Ágnes Heller and Mihály Vajda later the same year, the authors argued that as opposed to the patriarchal nuclear family of the bourgeoisie, the family type best suited for Communist society is in fact a sort of commune<sup>17</sup>, which could be described today as an ‘extended family of choice’.<sup>18</sup> The main requisites of such communes included that all able members of the commune should be involved in productive work (without the option of male breadwinners being the main providers for dependent women), performing internal community tasks and childcare duties (irrespective of having or not having children of their own). Additionally, regarding sexual relationships, these communes do not have value preferences. According to the authors, the sexual value preferences of modern societies could be traced back to two sources: on the one hand, sexuality is intimately connected to ownership issues (especially in the original Engelsian sense of men owning women in the context of families transforming women into the sexual and economic property of men<sup>19</sup>); on the other, it eventually presents the need for looking after children. Therefore, the commune with its basic principle of negating private ownership and its capacity to provide communal childcare services, can also present a perfect solution for avoiding problems that can derive from sexual value preferences. Further advantages of commune-based family life would include the plurality of sexual lifestyles (spanning from lifelong monogamy to promiscuity); solutions for the loneliness of individuals (whose partnership dissolution would not lead to being left alone), couples (who can often maintain previous friendships only with difficulty due to limited time and energy) and elderly people (potentially suffering from feelings of redundancy); quality relationships

(as people would not have to stay with each other just because they got used to it); a smaller burden of domestic duties (with less time spent on household chores); and more leisure time. However, the state-party leaders did not seem to appreciate the potentially sunny sides of commune life: the commune-based family concept implied a certain degree of plurality of lifestyles, which was perceived by them as an excessively liberal approach and an example of 'right-wing revisionism borrowing notions from Western new leftist aspirations that are alien to socialism'.<sup>20</sup>

The 'philosophers' trial'<sup>21</sup> – the expulsion of prominent representatives of the critical Marxist intelligentsia from the state-party in 1973 – marked the beginning of a period, characterised by political frustration and isolation, which made the rest of the 1970s look 'grey'<sup>22</sup> or 'uniformly pallid'<sup>23</sup>, intellectually featureless, and thus hard to remember. A common survival strategy for intellectuals as well as most people was withdrawal from public life to one's 'personal micro-universe', making it as cosy and enjoyable as possible, and instead of futile efforts to change the unchangeable, trying to perceive the weirdness of the prevailing system as a rich source of self-entertainment.<sup>24</sup>

The conservative turn of the early 1970s was also reflected in the new population policy introduced in 1973<sup>25</sup>, with the main aim being to increase Hungarian fertility rates by propagating a family ideal of three children and the tightening of abortion regulations. The introduction of the childcare allowance (*gyermekgondozási segély* – GYES) a few years earlier, in 1967 – a new form of support for mothers who had been in full-time employment to stay at home with their small children for a maximum duration of 30 months – did not seem to produce the expected positive fertility effects. In 1973, the amount of GYES and other maternal benefits was increased, and the scope of housing benefits was also extended to favour families with children, especially families with three or more children. Additional elements of the population policy included the introduction of family-life education school programmes, compulsory family-planning consultation before marriage and establishing a countrywide network of women's protection counselling services.<sup>26</sup>

Regarding abortion regulation, the government made the wrong assumption about the existence of a causal link between high abortion rates and low fertility rates as they did not recognise that prohibiting abortion could not increase fertility in a social context where abortion was mainly used as a means of birth control.<sup>27</sup> Even though the first hormonal contraceptive, the Infecundin pill, became available in Hungary as a prescription medicine in 1967, taking contraceptive pills was not a widespread practice for years, especially not among the rural population and 'women living in unsettled circumstances', who were the most regular users of abortion services.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, with news of the tightening of abortion regulations, which probably brought back bad memories of the total ban on abortion between 1953 and 1956, a public collection of signatures was started by private citizens to prevent the re-introduction of the abortion ban.<sup>29</sup> This was a unique civil action – nothing similar had happened in Hungary since 1956 – which produced visible resistance in the form of more than 1500 signatures against a state-party initiative which was perceived as threatening a woman's right to self-determination. As could be expected, the action was followed by quick and serious retaliation by the government involving disciplinary measures against the participants. For example, the student who started the signature collection was removed from her university in the fifth – and last – year of her studies without being able to earn her degree. However, this event was also instructive for the state-party leaders regarding certain limits – in this case, related to women's autonomy – that should be respected even or especially within a system of 'tolerant repression'.<sup>30</sup>

It can clearly be seen now that the population policy of 1973 could not produce a long-lasting increase in fertility. However, one of the still active effects of this political intervention derives from its implicit message about the role of women in society: even in the state-socialist context, excelling in biological reproduction seemed to be a stronger expectation than participating in the world of paid work.<sup>31</sup>

### Sexuality and the state-socialist version of bio-power

By the early 1970s, the 'totalitarian androgyny'<sup>32</sup> 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-state-building 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.'<sup>33</sup>

Additionally, there was hardly any possibility for the uncontrolled use of public space in this period, which can also be seen as an important contributing factor in maintaining the general asexual character of public social life. State-socialised cities could be considered 'under-urbanised' in various ways, with less urban diversity and less urban marginality, as well as different forms of use of space than those in Western countries.<sup>34</sup> Less urban diversity derived from the limited capacity of urban services: for example, there were only a few places to go out to, such as cafés, terraces or restaurants, and most of them shut early at night. Budapest, the Hungarian capital, also manifested most of the defining features of other similar state-socialised cities, such as having 'a sense of outright uniformity and boredom'.<sup>35</sup> In general, the unique social-psychological space of the public realm was a missing feature: the urban environments of state-socialist countries did not encourage people to submerge themselves in the world of strangers by meeting and interacting with each other.<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, by the mid-1970s at least some limited – mainly virtual – space opened for the discussion of sexuality-related matters in education, in the media and in academic research. The population policy of 1973 included instructions about the need to provide 'organised education on family planning from a medical perspective'<sup>37</sup>, and the experimental classes on family-life education, or literally 'education [to prepare] for family life' – the maiden name of sex education in slightly coded terms – debuted in several volunteering primary schools all over the country in the school year 1974/5. The content and practical organisation of these classes were monitored by the relevant counties' health departments and a summary of their reports was published in a leading Hungarian public-health journal in 1975.<sup>38</sup> The monitoring results indicated that in most schools the new subject was received by the pupils as well as their parents in a positive way and with interest (even though it was not made clear exactly which age groups took part in the experimental phase of family-life education. There were concrete references only to the involvement of sixth- to eighth-grade pupils, aged between 12 and 14). However, in comparison to city dwellers, the rural population being 'much more conservative, had greater reservation and concern' about introducing education on such topics.<sup>39</sup>

Classes were usually held jointly by faculty members and invited speakers, mainly doctors and health visitors – even though the original idea had been that this new form of education should be provided mainly by members of the health-care services. In practice,



however, it turned out that teachers' involvement could not be avoided: teachers might perhaps have lacked up-to-date biological and anatomical knowledge, which seemed to be the core of the expected messages to be passed to pupils, but teachers tended to use understandable language instead of complicated medical terms, and had educational experience that medical experts usually did not have. There were also some general conceptual issues raised – such as whether each age group should learn the same content or if there should be age-specific teaching modules, whether these should be mainly one-off classes or taught for at least half a year's duration, whether the use of textbooks and visual aids would be necessary in the future, or whether medical schools should provide special in-service training courses to prepare medical experts for these new teaching tasks, most of which have remained unresolved not only during the 1970s, but also in the following decades and even today.

Additionally, in the case of some specific problems pointed out by several health departments, very clear guidelines and detailed advice were provided. For example, 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 6<sup>th</sup> grade because children won't start masturbating in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade after [participating in this] class – this [masturbation] has started already much earlier.'<sup>40</sup> Others suggested that children should start family-life education well before primary school: in crèches and kindergartens. This proposal was received with approval: 'Kindergarten teachers and doctors have to provide good family models and involve children in appropriate gender role plays. Parents should [also] be warned that it is not advisable to handle little girls as if they were boys and to dress little boys in a girlish way.'<sup>41</sup> In some schools they questioned whether it really is useful to hold family-life education in gender-segregated classes. In this respect there was no central decision made, the main goal being that all pupils should gain some basic knowledge regarding both genders.

One of the sensitive topics that had already surfaced in these discussions was covered in more detail a couple of years later in the pages of the *Iffjúsági Magazin* (Youth Magazine). The magazine started in 1965 and became an influential source of information on sexuality-related matters especially from the mid-1970s, when specific opinion columns, written mainly by psychologists and medical experts, were introduced, with a regular focus on adolescent sexuality.<sup>42</sup> In an article published in 1977 on 'Taboo Issues in Public', masturbation was discussed for the first time in the magazine's history. Jenő Ranschburg, the expert psychologist, pointed out that boys aged 14–15 tend to masturbate but at the same time many of them suffer from anxiety and remorse, as they incorrectly assume some dangerous consequences of masturbation such as spinal atrophy or impotence.<sup>43</sup> In the same year another psychologist brought up the same topic again, emphasising that 'masturbation is an innocent matter, and the fewer problems we make of it, the more unnoticeable and innocent it remains.'<sup>44</sup> It should also be mentioned that the same psychologist published the first Hungarian sexual-psychological overview of the 'modern theory of sexuality' in 1972, where a paragraph was even devoted to homosexuality in the chapter on the 'problem of the sexual instinct'. The author described sexual perversions as sexual activities where satisfaction is achieved by means other than copulation or rubbing with different-sex genitalia, and where not only different-sex but also same-sex partners could be involved; in the context of sexual perversions, homosexuality was simply defined as 'sexual contact with a same-sex partner'.<sup>45</sup> This report, while still pathologising, represented a step in the direction of creating more public



knowledge on homosexuality. However, homosexuality-related topics did not appear during the 1970s in the youth magazine. This can also be explained by the role of the magazine, which could be seen as that of a sensitising agent (of the state) towards sexual issues, boosting topics relevant to new institutional practices, such as compulsory family planning and family-life education, to make them familiar, and thus more acceptable, to people.

As public discussion of sexuality-related matters was scarce in this period, media representations of sexuality were mainly limited to print-media products aimed at young people and women, like the *Youth Magazine* and the *Nők Lapja* (Women's Magazine), which still exists today. This magazine was first published in 1949 by the Democratic Alliance of Hungarian Women with the active support of the Communist Party, turning it into a kind of state-socialist *Cosmo* by the 1970s and 1980s, with limited scope for gossip from the West and advertisements for goods produced only by other Eastern European allies, such as the East German Wella hair-care products or the Bulgarian Pomorin toothpaste.<sup>46</sup> However, during the state-socialist period one of the primary functions of the *Nők 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.<sup>47</sup> (This was an issue of increasing importance, considering the fact that between 1970 and 1979 the rate of children aged three to five attending kindergarten increased from 53% to 85%.)<sup>48</sup>

In 1970, 'the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Hungary' was celebrated by the magazine by initiating a debate in a series of articles on the Hungarian (state-socialist) ideal woman, which was centred on expectations towards modern – i.e. working – women, while positioning them in a conservative family context.<sup>49</sup> This debate revealed that while normative expectations about ideal femininity had gone through a certain degree of modernisation, especially regarding the increasing participation of women in paid employment<sup>50</sup>, the prevailing ideal of family life, including the unequal division of domestic work, remained largely unchanged.

Besides media representations and experimental school programmes, a third major source of knowledge about the social existence of sexuality was 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.<sup>51</sup> When respondents had to form a hierarchy of 11 categories, including physical health, a happy marriage, children, living without financial problems, interesting work, an orderly sexual life, professional success, a lot of spare time, good friends, belief in something and eating–drinking, having an 'orderly sexual life' – whatever that meant for the respondents exactly – was not among the main priorities: it was ranked in fourth place by young male workers and in sixth place by young female workers and male university students; female university students, placing it in eighth place, attributed the least importance to this value. The first three values for young male workers included physical health, a happy marriage and living without financial problems. The first three values for young male university students were interesting work, physical health and a happy marriage. Young female workers focused mainly on physical health, a happy marriage and children, while the priorities of young female university students were interesting work, a happy marriage and physical health. The findings of this pioneering research also illustrated that, in comparison to university

students, young workers started sexual life earlier but had less sexual knowledge: their sexual scripts included less foreplay and less frequent use of contraception, while also putting more emphasis on virginity and expressing less tolerance towards homosexuality.

A specific section of the survey presented eight stories about sexual practices, which were identified by the researchers as 'typical' and 'widespread'<sup>52</sup> in Hungarian society. There were four female characters: Krisztina, the virgin who wants to have sex only after being married; Zsóka the 'demi-vierge'<sup>53</sup> (the half-virgin) who would practise petting but avoid penetrative sex, following the principle that everything is allowed if it goes without trace<sup>54</sup>; Borbála, the unwed single mother who was used by her male partner for sex but being left by him after falling pregnant, now devotes herself to bringing up her baby in decency; and Otilia, the prostitute, who meets her casual partners in night bars and sleeps with them for financial reward. The three typical male figures included the unmarried womaniser András, whose only goal is to have as many female sexual partners as he can; the homosexual Konrád who has always been attracted to men but has never been involved in any scandals; and the regularly masturbating Tibor, a healthy young man who, for various (untold) reasons, is unable to satisfy his sexual desires in other ways. The eighth story was about an unmarried couple who fell in love and who after a while felt that it was completely natural that they would have sex. Respondents had to evaluate on a five-point scale<sup>55</sup> not only how much they liked or disliked the main character of each story, but also had to indicate whether in their view these characters were appealing or unappealing for society at large.

According to the research findings, the most-liked characters included the 'free-love' cultivating couple and the single mother (the latter being the absolute favourite of young female workers, while the other three groups of respondents favoured the couple somewhat more); all groups of respondents indicated that these forms of behaviour were much less appealing to society at large than to them. In the respondents' view the least appealing characters included the prostitute, the homosexual, the half-virgin, the womaniser and the regular masturbator. However, they also indicated that in their view social attitudes towards prostitution and especially homosexuality were much more negative than their opinion. The virgin character was viewed in an ambivalent way: 28% of the respondents expressed positive opinions, 37% expressed negative views and 35% had neutral views about the presented – very determined – form of virginity, while all respondents thought that social attitudes towards virginity were much more positive than their own.

For all groups of respondents, except the young male workers, the most rejected character was the prostitute. Her practices were evaluated negatively for two main reasons: 'the prostitute's behaviour cannot be grounded on material need in our [socialist] society'<sup>56</sup> and the dangers of emotionless sex leading to the development of personality impoverishment. Additionally, young female workers referred to the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases. However, there were also a few tolerant views expressed, pointing to the fact that sex work cannot be maintained without clients' demand. The reception of the 'demi-vierge' (the half-virgin) was only slightly better than that of the prostitute by university students, while young workers, especially young female workers, showed more understanding towards this form of behaviour. Quite a few respondents blamed hypocrisy for such behaviour by recognising how difficult it might be to satisfy a sex-demanding partner, to avoid pregnancy and to keep one's marriageability intact all at the same time.<sup>57</sup> The homosexual character was the one most rejected by young male workers, and the one second most rejected (after the prostitute) by young female workers; university students observed the prostitute and the half-virgin (and in the case of female students also the womaniser) characters with more dislike than the homosexual. The homosexual character

was viewed mostly with a mixture of rejection and pity: 'this is an illness that cannot be squarely condemned'; 'it is up to him whether he seeks treatment'<sup>58</sup> – but some respondents also expressed a certain level of understanding by pointing out that 'he has the right [to do it], if he doesn't violate others, and does it with similar ones.'<sup>59</sup>

These sexual stories and their reception can be seen as designating the potential scope of sexual scripts that were available in state-socialist Hungary, both at the socio-cultural and the interpersonal level in the examined period. The presented findings revealed a certain level of contradiction between the perceptions of personal and social attitudes towards different forms of deviations from the institutionally prescribed forms of sexual normativity, as well as signalled how different behavioural and value preferences may intersect with gender and class positions even in an allegedly classless and gender-neutral state-socialist context.

### **Privately kept homosexuality: typical and widespread?**

One of the most unexpected components of the survey – following a brave decision by the researchers – was the inclusion of homosexuality in the repertoire of typical and widespread sexual practices. The complete sexual story of the homosexual character was the following: 'Konrád is not interested in women; he has always been attracted to men. He seeks the acquaintance of men who are similar to him, with whom they can satisfy each other's sexual needs. He is discreet in his relationships; he has never gotten himself into a scandal because of [his homosexuality]. He thinks it is completely his and his partners' business that they deal with their sexual life in this way.'<sup>60</sup> This narrative presents Konrád in a rather neutral – though slightly distancing – way, the only potentially negative element being the reference to the possibility of some sort of homosexuality-related scandal, which he has successfully been able to avoid. However, it should be observed that such an approach limits homosexual practices to the publicly unnoticeable sphere of privacy (only of men, in this case), and thus implies that in the given social context only the manifestations of privately kept homosexuality might be perceived as typical and widespread.

The relevant legislation on same-sex practices also reflected a similar interpretational framework. In Hungary, homosexual activity between consenting adults, or more precisely men, became decriminalised in 1961 on the basis of the following arguments:

Homosexuality is either an inborn sexual perversity rooted in a developmental disorder or such acquired anomaly that develops mainly within neurotic people as a result of some sort of sexual impression during childhood, adolescence or at a young age. According to medical observations even in the case of acquired homosexuality or those who wanted to free themselves (from homosexuality), the most sound therapy could hardly ever lead to the desired result. Homosexuality is a biological phenomenon and can therefore not be handled legally as a crime. Finally, in the course of its legal regulation the practical point should be considered that criminalization of such behaviour would provide a wide scope for blackmailing.<sup>61</sup>

However, there were different ages of consent set for heterosexual and homosexual relationships, which remained in operation until 2002. While the age of consent for heterosexual relationships had been 14 since 1961, the age of consent for homosexual relationships was set at the age of 20 in 1961, and at the age of 18 between 1978 and 2002.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, the circle of potential perpetrators and victims also changed in 1961. Gender equality was introduced regarding perversion against nature for which men and women could equally be prosecuted, but 'perversion against nature' conducted with an animal was no longer penalised. Furthermore, there was a special clause introduced for 'perversion against nature conducted in a scandalous manner', for which one could be

sentenced with up to three years of imprisonment.<sup>63</sup> The clauses on the different ages of consent and for potentially causing public scandal provided especially good opportunities for state authorities such as the police – as well as extortionists at the interpersonal level – to keep (alleged) homosexual practices under close control. Thus the long tradition of specialised state surveillance on homosexuality could continue after 1961, too, as the compilation of ‘homosexual inventories’ providing information on potential blackmail victims – potentially being coerced into becoming police informers – has been part of regular police work, especially in urban areas, since the 1920s.<sup>64</sup>

The lack of private space and the surveillance of public spaces and private lives, along with the legally institutionalised stigmatisation of homosexuality, constituted serious burdens to men and women who were attracted to their own sex in this period. At the same time, many men with homosexual interests found a way to connect with each other and build an alternative lifestyle that could be called – especially in retrospect – (politically) opportunistic in the sense that they had to settle for being ‘locked into the world of cruising areas, bath houses and public toilets’.<sup>65</sup>

In state-socialist Hungary, especially in Budapest, gay men had been inventing and applying various partner-seeking strategies, involving bath houses, public toilets, cinemas, and personal tricks, to list a few.<sup>66</sup> A 75-year old man, for example, explained that practically all public toilets were potential meeting places for gays. However, there were also certain risks involved: ‘I had a case once,’ he said:

I was caught ... well, I wasn't caught effectively in the middle of the act but he [a plain-clothes policeman] noticed that I stayed around the toilet, going up and down, and then he came up to me and asked for my ID, where he saw what my job was and where I worked [During state-socialism all citizens had to carry their official ID all the time: the ID contained information on one's job and workplace as unemployment was considered to be a crime]. Then he asked me how a person with such qualities can be involved in a thing like this ... well, tell me a better place in Budapest where I can meet gays, I am telling him, tell me, and then I will start going there ... I can meet gays only at toilets and bath-houses.

A 73-year-old retired teacher reported that while he was still living in the countryside he heard about gays going to ‘those bath-houses’ in Budapest from someone who was from Budapest but was not gay himself: ‘So when I arrived in Budapest, naturally the first thing was to race there.’ Another 75-year-old man referred to the old Híradó cinema as an accidental gay-meeting venue, functioning a bit like a tame dark room. It was an unusual cinema, with the continuous screening of only newsreel programmes. ‘People were standing by the rows of seats at the two sides, waiting for a seat to be released ... and suddenly I noticed that someone approached me and started to paw me in the dark,’ he remembered of the first experience he had there. A 64-year-old teacher recalled the introduction of the following gay-men-seeking tactic in his intellectual friends’ circle: ‘I started to spread the news in this circle that I am gay, and then one day someone said that wow, it is really interesting that last week X [another man] also mentioned that he was gay ... and then I was looking for a way to meet this X in person, and from this [encounter] a few weeks or months long liaison could start.’

There is much less information available on the variety of lesbian practices and lifestyles from the state-socialist period: the social visibility of lesbian women in public spaces has been even more limited than that of gay men. According to a lesbian interviewee, even in the very few cafés and bars with a regular homosexual clientele – such as the *Egyetem Presszó* or the *Diófa* restaurant in Budapest – the proportion of lesbian women hardly reached 10–15%, while cruising areas, bath houses and public toilets were not used at all by lesbian women. Instead she referred to the possibilities

provided by low-cost travelling options to other Eastern European locations, especially East Berlin, which she had visited several times because she 'found friends, there was a community (of lesbians) there'.<sup>67</sup> East Berlin was perceived by her as having a more accepting and cultured climate in comparison to Budapest<sup>68</sup> – and visits could be returned by East German lesbian friends for whom during the state-socialist period Hungary remained the 'most Western' location they could get to. Organising holidays in popular East European resorts, especially on Yugoslavian and Bulgarian beaches, was a relatively widespread practice among gay men as well. It was not only a way to seek casual partners, but could also lead to the establishment of longer-term relationships between gay men from different Eastern European countries.

## Conclusion

A closer examination of gender and sexuality-related issues during the 'uniformly pallid' 1970s in state-socialist Hungary revealed the – often erroneous – functioning of a state-socialist bio-power regime aiming at disciplining individual bodies as well as regulating the population through interventions and regulatory controls.<sup>69</sup> In this context plurality of lifestyles could be seen as a disintegrating force threatening the effective functioning of the system. State-aided modernisation of women's roles was seen to be a contrast to the prevailing ideal of family life, characterised by traditionally unequal division of domestic work. Furthermore, the 'gender gap in the socialist analysis of women's condition'<sup>70</sup>, obscuring the specific oppression that derived from women's centrality in (biological) reproduction and the patriarchal relations that structured social life, remained a characteristic feature of this period.

As state-socialist morals celebrated a specifically asexual socialist reproduction, sexuality was delegated to social invisibility and surrounded by hypocrisy. For example, the mixed experiences, both in conceptual and practical terms, of experimentally introducing family-life education classes – being a semi-concealed form of sex education – in the mid-1970s were connected to the fact that the exact scope and content of the new subject remained largely unspecified. At the heart of this matter was also the question of how to integrate – or rather how not to integrate – sexuality into discourses on health, family and eventually, population issues, which seemed to be a challenging task for the administrators of a state-socialist version of bio-power.

In comparison to the first decades of Hungarian state-socialism, official attitudes towards non-reproductive sexual practices could be seen as relaxing, which made some space for certain tolerable deviations from the institutionally prescribed forms of sexual normativity. Manifestations of 'private homosexuality' could be seen as belonging to this category – however, legislation on the different ages of consent for homosexual and heterosexual relationships and the public-scandal clause provided good enough opportunities for state authorities to keep homosexual practices under close control. Even though lack of private space and the surveillance of public spaces and private lives constituted serious burdens for most people, they seemed to be able to negotiate their lives between the constraints of state socialism and their longing for enjoyable relationships with partners of a different and/or the same gender.

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## Notes

1. Esterházy, *A Little Hungarian Pornography*, v.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Romsics, "Economic Reforms," 75.
5. Ibid.
6. Such as Lajos Fehér, Deputy Prime Minister between 1962 and 1974, and Rezső Nyers, member of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party between 1967 and 1975, who originally conceived of the ideas for the New Economic Mechanism.
7. James, "Falsifying History," 177.
8. János Kádár is quoted by Romsics, "Economic Reforms," 69.
9. Vársárhelyi, "Megszámláltattunk," 112. The author quotes census data indicating that in 1960 only four out of 1000 people had a refrigerator and 10 out of 1000 had a television set; by 1970 there were 103 refrigerators and 171 television sets owned by every 1000 people in Hungary.
10. Ludassy, "1973," 56.
11. Heller, "A nemek közötti kapcsolatok," 301.
12. Márkus, "A nő helyzete," 291.
13. Ludassy, "1973," 56.
14. Márkus, "A nő helyzete," 295.
15. MSZMP KB, "1013/1970. Nőpolitikai határozat."
16. Zimmermann, "Gender Regime," 11.
17. Heller and Vajda, "Családforma és kommunizmus," 1661.
18. Heller, "Válasz Ungváry Rudolfnak," 62. Here Heller also points out that the traditional family has indeed disintegrated but it has been replaced not by the extended family of choice, i.e., the commune form, but by the world of lonely, egoistic individuals.
19. Engels, *The Origin* (Originally published in German in 1884.)
20. Ludassy, "1973," 57.
21. Ludassy, "1973," 61.
22. Agárdi, "Azok a szürke," 32.
23. Könczöl, "A nihil árnyékában," 75.
24. Ibid.
25. Minisztertanácsi rendelet, "1040/1973."
26. Batár, "Család, jövő, társadalom," 698.
27. Gábos and Tóth, "A gyermekvállalás támogatásának."
28. Tischler, "Az Infecundin-sztori," 58.
29. Ludassy, "1973," 59.
30. Ludassy, "1973," 61.
31. Aczél and Szikra, "A jóléti állam."
32. Zdravomyslova and Temkina, "Gendered Citizenship," 98.
33. Takács, "Queering Budapest," 195.
34. Szelényi, "Cities under Socialism."
35. Bodnár, *Fin-de-Millénaire Budapest*, 29.
36. Lofland, *A World of Strangers*.
37. Minisztertanácsi rendelet, "1040/1973."
38. Kismartoni, "A családi életre nevelés."
39. Kismartoni, "A családi életre nevelés," 263.
40. Ibid.
41. Kismartoni, "A családi életre nevelés," 264.
42. Murai and Tóth, "Doktor úr kérem," 153. For example, in 1972 they discussed the issue of whether kissing on the street is acceptable (according to the magazine, it is not really recommended it is but tolerable). Between 1973 and 1975 one of the hot topics was virginity, in the context of the double standard that young men demand "physical contact" – i.e., sex – from their partner, while at least in theory only want to marry a virgin.
43. Murai and Tóth, "Doktor úr kérem," 153.
44. Ibid.
45. Buda, *A szexualitás modern elmélete*, 70.
46. Kádár, "Otthonod az uradé," 91.
47. Kádár, "Otthonod az uradé," 85.



48. Tárkányi, "Európai családpolitikák," 246.
49. Kádár, "Otthonod az uradé," 90.
50. Tárkányi, "Európai családpolitikák," 246. Between 1949 and 1975 the rate of female active earners increased from 29% to 44%.
51. Heleszta and Rudas, *Munkásfiatalok és egyetemisták szexualitása*.
52. Heleszta and Rudas, *Munkásfiatalok és egyetemisták szexualitása*, 41.
53. Heleszta and Rudas, *Munkásfiatalok és egyetemisták szexualitása*, 43.
54. Heleszta and Rudas, *Munkásfiatalok és egyetemisták szexualitása*, 224.
55. On this scale one indicated the most disliked and five indicated the most liked practices.
56. Heleszta and Rudas, *Munkásfiatalok és egyetemisták szexualitása*, 42.
57. Heleszta and Rudas, *Munkásfiatalok és egyetemisták szexualitása*, 44.
58. Heleszta and Rudas, *Munkásfiatalok és egyetemisták szexualitása*, 45.
59. Ibid.
60. Heleszta and Rudas, *Munkásfiatalok és egyetemisták szexualitása*, 227.
61. Országgyűlési irományok, "1958. Vol.1," 270. Translated from the Hungarian by the author.
62. Takács, *How to Put Equality*, 35. Since 2002 the age of consent has been set at 14 for same-sex as well as different-sex sexual relationships.
63. Ibid.
64. Pál, *A homoszexuális probléma*, 65.
65. Research interview conducted in 2002 by the author with László Mocsonaki, founding member of Háttér Support Society for LGBT People in Hungary and a leading Hungarian gay activist.
66. The following cases were taken from the author's research interviews, conducted with elderly Hungarian gay men and lesbian women who had same-sex experiences during the state-socialist period.
67. Ibid.
68. McLellan, "Glad to be Gay."
69. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 138–40. Foucault has conceptualised the manifestations of bio-power in the context of Western (mainly European) capitalism, but in my view his approach can be applied without too much difficulty to (mainly Eastern European) state-socialist contexts, too.
70. Popa, "The Socialist Project," 51.

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