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1917-2017: Sex and the Russian Revolution

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THE BIG QUESTION surrounding the centenary of the October Revolution: Is this event a hundred years ago still relevant for the left today?

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For decades now, there's been a steady drumbeat of mainstream historians and ideologues telling us that the legacy of October has been, and deserves to be, dead and buried. Yet some people on the radical left persist in arguing for a critical recuperation of the heritage of 1917. I believe these arguments are well founded. In many ways, the strategic insights the October Revolution yielded have still not been surpassed, or in some ways even equaled.

But even on the far left, I'm afraid, there are many more people who appreciate what the Bolsheviks have to teach us about the value of grassroots democratic institutions forged in struggle, the dangers of bureaucracy, the possibility of even an underdeveloped country's breaking with capitalism and the importance of internationalism, than about sexual politics.

In fact, there were also Bolsheviks who had valuable insights about sexual politics. I think we can reclaim the sexual politics of the October revolution, too, as a relevant past, a usable past.

This is a delicate operation, however, because a usable past has to be a historically accurate past. And the conditions for sexual politics in Russia in 1917 were very different from those we face today. So drawing lessons from 1917 for 2017 has to be done very carefully, taking great pains to avoid anachronisms.

I think the lessons are there. But they have as much to do with historical breaks as with continuity.

Catching Up

Why does 1917 matter for sexual politics? Because the first decade of the October Revolution yielded an extraordinary wealth of thinking and activism on issues of gender and sexuality.

The problem is that hardly anybody today knows this, or even believes it when they're told. There's been a big effort to conceal and deny the early Communists' sexual radicalism, by liberals on the right and by both Stalinists and anarchists on the left. As a result, the dominant image today is that the Bolsheviks were sexual puritans.

Stalinists propagated this image by citing a ragtag assortment of quotations from Lenin. Many of these quotations came from unattested recollections years later by people like Clara Zetkin and Nadezhda Krupskaya, [1] Communists who were part of anti-Stalinist opposition currents for a time (Paul Levi's current in Zetkin's case, Grigory Zinoviev's in Krupskaya's) before capitulating to Stalinist orthodoxy.

Other quotations were taken from letters that weren't meant for publication. And others were taken out of context from Lenin's published writings.

No doubt Lenin did have a sexually conservative side. But it's odd to rely on Lenin for a picture of Bolshevik sexual politics. Despite Lenin's major contributions in other fields, sexual politics was never a priority for him. And he played only a minor role in shaping Soviet sexual policies between 1917 and his death.

To get a picture of Bolshevik sexual politics in the first few years after the revolution, Alexandra Kollontai's writings are much more useful. When she was the first Bolshevik Commissar for Social Affairs, Kollontai's ideas were reflected in revolutionary decrees. And her decrees weren't just confined to paper; they were put into practice.

It's true that her ideas fell rapidly out of favor after that, especially once she became a leader of the Workers' Opposition in the party and her current was defeated and marginalized in 1920-21. But even when her ideas about sexuality were being fiercely attacked at party congresses — and sometimes viciously distorted — they were still being debated. It was still not possible, in the relatively freewheeling climate of Bolshevism in the early 1920s, to completely silence her ideas.

The affinity between Kollontai's ideas and the sexual politics of Marxist feminists and radical queers today is extraordinary. Even after the decline of Stalinism, however, most Marxists neglected the rich legacy of early Communist sexual politics.

In the 1960s and '70s, this had a lot to do with many New Leftists' sympathy for China, Vietnam and Cuba, none of which had liberating sexual politics in those years (to put it mildly).

Trotskyists had a better starting point, because they had always condemned the Stalinist recriminalization of abortion and homosexuality. But they too had a problem: their social profile was shaped in the 1930s and '40s by a predominant orientation to male industrial workers, who were often perceived as sexually conservative.

So even Trotskyists didn't initially highlight early Bolshevik sexual radicalism. Some, especially in the Fourth International, began catching up after 1968. But there's still a ways to go. I would like to help continue and accelerate that catching up.

Love-comradeship

Why do I say that Kollontai's ideas had an extraordinary affinity with the sexual politics of Marxist feminists and radical queers today? It hinges on the argument she made in "Make Way for Winged Eros," and especially on her concept of "love-comradeship."

Love-comradeship was for Kollontai the form of sexual love appropriate to the age of proletarian rule, much as courtly love was to feudalism and bourgeois marriage and prostitution were to capitalism. Love-comradeship meant for her, by contrast with the privatization of sex and love in bourgeois society, the embedding of sexual love in a socialist collective — in which women were fully

equal and independent.

Of course she rejected prostitution — but she was equally fierce in rejecting long-term sexual couples in which a woman was dependent on a man. This is why she rejected criminalization in the fight against prostitution. She argued that if prostitutes' clients should be arrested, so should "the husbands of many legal wives." [2]

Women's sexual liberation required in her eyes the complete socialization of childcare — and she went very far. Motherhood, she wrote, "does not in the least mean that one must oneself change the nappies, wash the baby or even be by the cradle." [3]

She argued for free and easy divorce, which was official policy. But she also argued against "any formal limits on love," any value judgment on long-term as opposed to short-term relationships, and any imposition of monogamy as a norm.

She affirmed "the value of experimentation in ... love relationships." Not only love but also "fleeting passion" was a legitimate basis for a sexual relationship, she argued; "calculation, habit or even intellectual affinity" was not. (Even today, I think, Kollontai's sharp comments can still make us uneasy!) The keys for her were "complete freedom, equality and genuine friendship." [4]

Same-Sex Relationships

Kollontai in her writings only talked about sexual ties between men and women, not about same-sex ties. This may seem odd to us today. I think it's actually no surprise.

Unlike Germany in the early 20th century, Russia didn't have a homosexual emancipation movement. In Russia, a homosexual community and identity were much more weakly developed. This meant that homosexuality wasn't a priority for the women's work that was Kollontai's focus.

This makes it all the more remarkable that Bolshevik positions on homosexuality in the 1920s were as advanced as they were. I think this was mainly due to the Bolsheviks' internationalism, to the international experience of many leading Bolsheviks in exile before 1917, and specifically to the excellent example set by August Bebel in the Reichstag from 1898 on in arguing for the decriminalization of same-sex acts.

Whatever the reasons, for most of the 1920s in Soviet Russia, a positive spirit was common in dealing with same-sex relationships — particularly lesbian relationships.

There were women in positions of command in the Red Army who were in sexual relationships with other women, viewed as "happy, well-adjusted Lesbians." In Moscow in the 1920s the private arts circle Antinoi staged readings of consciously homosexual poetry and musical and ballet performances. And there were several cases in the 1920s when Soviet courts recognized same-sex marriages as legal. [5]

That this is still news, even to many people who know the history of the Russian revolution fairly well, shows how much work remains to be done to reclaim the radical legacy of early Bolshevik sexual politics.

Contested Politics

It's important to stress, though, that none of these radical positions was ever uncontested in Bolshevik Russia. And they fell out of favor by the mid-1920s, even before the definitive victory of Stalinism — before the recriminalization of abortion and homosexuality in the 1930s.

Kollontai's vision of a fully free sexuality presupposed an extensive socialized infrastructure to free women for domestic drudgery. This never actually existed in Russia in the 1920s. So her vision was largely utopian — as were so many early Bolshevik ideas.

Victor Serge's novels capture the terrible paradoxes of those years: of people starving and freezing in ruined, half-empty cities as they drew up their blueprints for true proletarian culture and the glorious socialist future.

This utopian bent helps account for Kollontai's defeats in Bolshevik debates, such as the defeat of her hard-fought attempt to write the "withering away of the family" into the party program. This led her to warn that "the petty-bourgeois way of life and its ideology is swamping us." [6]

The libertarian family legislation adopted in 1922, which she favored, led to unwanted side effects, notably massive abandonment of women and children and deepening of their poverty. This was one motive for its amendment in a more conservative direction in 1926.

Moreover, even the most radical Bolshevik sexual politics had its limitations. For example, I know of no Bolshevik who advocated the right of independent self-organization for women or sexual minorities.

There were Bolshevik women's organizations in Soviet Russia, and Bolshevik women's conferences, which fought for women's emancipation and became a model for Communist women's organizations in other countries. But the task they were assigned was to promote Bolshevism among non-Bolshevik women and organize the party's work among women.

They were not supposed to collectively fight the prejudices and privileges of working-class men within the party. This limited their ability to resist the conservative backlash in the party once it began.

Another constraint was Bolsheviks' uncritical reliance on science. For Marxists in the early 20th century, religion was seen as the main source of sexual prejudice, and science as an ally against it.

For several years, the Bolsheviks' anticlerical libertarianism and their push for scientific modernization seemed to go naturally together. But eventually, as with Lenin's enthusiasm about Taylorist management techniques, they diverged.

The left's generally favorable attitude towards eugenics was a symptom of the same problem. There was still little understanding of the role that a growing scientific establishment could play in buttressing bureaucratic authority, in sexual matters as in others, and in curtailing self-activity.

Lessons and a New Start

What lessons can we draw from all this today? Positively, we can point out to feminist and queer activists the strong affinity between Kollontai's vision of women's sexual autonomy and love-comradeship and a contemporary queer ideal like polyamory.

Too often today, as the word “polyamory” catches on in the mainstream media, it’s being used just to mean “non-monogamy.” But originally for radical queers it meant much more than that. Like “love-comradeship” for Kollontai, it implied a valorization of friendship and shared commitment over a mere consumerist pursuit of orgasms.

At the same time, we should emphasize the materialist basis and class content of Kollontai’s program, especially the need for wholesale socialization of domestic labor and childcare as a precondition for sexual liberation. And we should emphasize the precondition that the Bolsheviks didn’t see: the independent self-organization of the victims of gender and sexual oppression, inside labor and socialist movements as well as the wider world.

All that, I would say, is the easy part. The hard part is adapting Bolshevik sexual politics to today’s very different class and social environment.

In a way, we suffer from the opposite problem from what sexual radicals had to contend with in the 1920s. Back then, class politics risked crowding out sexual politics. Today in feminist and queer milieus, it’s class politics that has a hard time getting a hearing.

In Russia in 1917, and for years afterwards, there were millions of working-class people who identified strongly as working-class. The Bolsheviks didn’t have to invent working-class culture; they were born as part of it. They took it for granted.

That was also still true in Western Europe in the first decades after the Second World War, and to a lesser extent in the United States. When the second wave of feminism and lesbian/gay liberation took off, a fair proportion of its activists were young people who, even if they didn’t necessarily have working-class jobs, came from working-class origins and were interested in making links with the working-class movement.

Today, by contrast, following the fragmentation and disorganization of the working class by 40 years of neoliberalism, a very great proportion of objectively working-class people no longer have that strong class identity.

In my experience, young people today coming to feminism or queer activism don’t often spontaneously radicalize to any great extent on the basis of class issues. That doesn’t mean that they often consciously have good things to say about capitalism. But unconsciously, they often seem to take it as a given in all sorts of ways.

That doesn’t mean that anti-capitalism is objectively any less necessary. In 2017 as in 1917, the logic is inescapable: There can be no true sexual liberation without overthrowing the capitalist foundations of domestic and personal life.

But in 1917, anti-capitalism was the starting point, and sexual liberation came later. Today, we sometimes have to tackle things the other way around.

It’s harder for young people today to be radicalized in working-class battles, because working-class battles are scattered and on the defensive. So it’s lucky for the left that many young people today are being radicalized around gender and sexuality, as in the fight against racism.

But winning young feminists and radical queers to Marxism isn’t easy. Frankly, I don’t think many young people out there today spontaneously see socialism as sexy. But I think reclaiming the lost legacy of Bolshevik sexual radicalism can help convince them that it was, and is.

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P.S.

* Against the Current n° 193, March-April 2018:

<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/5244>

Footnotes

[1] Clara Zetkin, "Lenin on the Women's Question," <https://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1920/lenin/zetkin1.htm>; Nadezhda Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, Chicago: Haymarket, 1917. See also Alexandra Kollontai, *Selected Writings*, translated by Alex Holt, Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1978, 202-3.

[2] Kollontai, *op.cit.*, 271-2.

[3] *Ibid.*, 142.

[4] *Ibid.*, 289, 288; Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 110-1; Kollontai, *op.cit.*, 230, 259, 229.

[5] Healey, *op.cit.*, 61-2, 143-4, 47, 68.

[6] Kollontai, *op.cit.*, 301.