

# Kristen R. Ghodsee, Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism: And Other Arguments for Economic Independence

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culture and strength of working-class communities in the face of economic dislocation. However, the somewhat arbitrary boundaries around what she includes in the genre become increasingly frustrating and are never fully justified. Regardless of what one thinks of the many writings that do lay blame for poverty and social dislocation on working class culture, such as J.D. Vance's best-seller *Hillbilly Elegy* (New York: Harper, 2016), or the "rust belt chic" that openly appropriates working-class culture, Linkon's failure to engage with it weakens the force and wider applicability of her argument. There are also missed opportunities to explore how deindustrialization and the memories of industrial work have differently impacted those for whom the industrial era never actually brought job security or prosperity – particularly many African-Americans and racialized immigrants. She alludes to their distinct experiences on several occasions but it seems absent from her broader arguments about "reflective nostalgia" and the cultural legacies of the industrial era.

Those minor flaws aside, this is an innovative study that introduces the reader to an incredibly diverse body of literature and art and analyzes it in a nuanced and meaningful way. It does valuable work in bringing together the study of industrial labour and deindustrialization with that of contemporary service work and neoliberalism, and will help us all to navigate through the "half-life of deindustrialization" in the years to come.

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**Kristen R. Ghodsee, *Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism: And Other Arguments for Economic Independence* (New York: Nation Books 2018)**

*WHY WOMEN HAVE Better Sex Under Socialism: And Other Arguments for Economic Independence* is an extension of Kristen R. Ghodsee's popular 2017 *New York Times* article of the same name. Ghodsee claims that the main argument of *Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism* can be simply stated as "unregulated capitalism is bad for women, and if we adopt some ideas from socialism, women will have better lives." (1) Ghodsee supports this argument through a succession of chapters that explore separate topics, including motherhood, leadership, citizenship, work, and, of course, sex.

Writing for a primarily American (and Canadian) audience, one of the most effective outcomes of Ghodsee's prose is to challenge ingrained, often negative, assumptions that Westerners have about Eastern Europe and socialism more generally. As a scholar of Russian and East European studies, Ghodsee's examples come primarily from this region's history. Ghodsee argues that before the transition from state socialism to capitalism in Eastern Europe, women enjoyed a level of social and economic freedom and equality that Western women have yet to experience. Ghodsee's goal is not to present the history of state socialism in East Europe as utopic, but rather to point out that there were some aspects that were positive and could serve as inspiration for building a better, more equitable society. Although the most cynical writer may point to Ghodsee's rose-tinted glasses, for the most part she is clear about and successful at this goal.

The base on which gender equality – at the political, economic, and social

level – in Eastern European socialist states rested was the need for women to be full participants in the labour force. This incorporation into the labour force, Ghodsee demonstrates, necessitated a number of measures that increased gender equality. One of the most significant outcomes of women in the labour force was the need for generous maternity leaves and free childcare. Earning a wage outside of the home also enabled women to more easily become self-sufficient and, Ghodsee argues, seek domestic companionship with men out of desire, rather than necessity. In the West, women living in a capitalist system were actively discouraged to work and forced to rely on the institution of marriage, and subsequently men, for their economic well-being.

The confining of women in the institution of marriage and the search thereof leads to Ghodsee's attention-grabbing title claim that women in state-socialist societies had better sex. This claim is also coincidentally the weakest of the factors that support Ghodsee's main argument. It is unclear exactly what Ghodsee means by better sex. Sexual pleasure, after all, is a highly individualized and subjective concept. The sources, Ghodsee claims, show that socialist women had more sex and more orgasms; women under capitalism have less sex and are less satisfied. It is in this discussion of sexual economics that the heteronormativity of this argument is most blatant. What about queer women? What about non-monogamous and polyamorous people? What about sexual experiences that are not defined by penetration? What defines sex? These are questions that are not sufficiently examined in *Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism* and lead to a second troubling aspect of this book, which is Ghodsee's treatment of sex work. Ghodsee weakly suggests that she is not anti-sex work, but statements such as "women in Eastern Europe are once

again commodities to bought and sold – their price determined by the fickle fluctuations of supply and demand" (11) leave very little room for acknowledging that sex work is work. Ghodsee's argument relies on the idea that women cannot be empowered in an economic system in which they have to trade their sexuality for economic security and gain. Ghodsee does not grapple with the fact that sex workers have historically been some of the most economically independent individuals in capitalist systems, and that sex work is ultimately an industry that deals in pleasure and intimacy, the desire for which does not disappear in a socialist state. As Sophie Lewis notes in *The New Inquiry*, Ghodsee's discussion of sexual liberation and gender equality under the social welfare programs of Denmark conspicuously fails to mention the country's thriving sex industry.

Although Ghodsee's argument stumbles a bit in the realm of the intimate, *Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism* does successfully establish the centrality of state regulation in both establishing public services that increased women's independence and ensuring that these policies benefitted women from all spectrums of society equally. Ghodsee contends convincingly that a society can only strive for social equality if every level of government enforces policies that demand this equality; otherwise, the most privileged in society will inevitably benefit over all others. Concepts that centered collectivity, rather than individualism, in socialist states also served to positively affect the lives of women in these countries.

*Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism* is an accessible introduction to this era of eastern European history and the social and political policies that affected gender and labour relations in these socialist states that would engross both the academic and casual reader. In

the undergraduate gender studies or political science classroom, this book could serve as a potentially effective source for informed debate. As Ghodsee establishes, the improvement of gender and labour conditions requires increased engagement and participation amongst the populace, especially women; widespread change occurs not at the individual level, but rather, as Ghodsee shows, when the collective acts.

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**Jakub S. Beneš, *Workers and Nationalism: Czech and German Social Democracy in Habsburg Austria, 1890–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017)**

QUITE DIFFERENT answers have been given to the question of the relationship between nationalism and socialism. While the German Marxists Friedrich Engels and Karl Kautsky famously predicted the eventual melting “into thin air” of national differences under the capitalist mode of production, the Austro-Marxist Otto Bauer, for his part, viewed nations as ineradicable components of human societies and cultures. This solid monograph explores how Czech and German Austrian workers, who made up one of Europe’s biggest Social Democratic movements, came to embrace ethnic nationalism in the last decades before the outbreak of World War I and therefore justified Bauer’s approach.

The decade of the 1880s in Austria witnessed severe governmental repression that left a deep imprint on the collective psyche of the workers’ movement. In particular, this period of persecution convinced workers that the triumph of socialism would inevitably redeem a history of privation, injustice, and sacrifice.

Indeed, a scenario of suffering and redemption, which borrowed symbols and rituals from Austrian Catholicism (residual echoes of the rural traditions many of these workers had been raised in before migrating to the cities), animated the various forms of agitation – the May Day celebrations, for example – of the Austrian workers’ movement. Furthermore, through the end of the 19th century, nationalism found little support in the workers’ movement – a reality well illustrated by workers’ negative reactions to the nationalist and bourgeois-driven chauvinism that exploded in the wake of the Badeni language ordinances of 1897.

This internationalist ethos, however, was soon challenged by the emergence of tensions and divisions along ethnic lines. The first turning point happened in November 1905 when, under the influence of the revolution in Russia, the Austrian popular classes mobilized themselves on a massive scale in both Vienna and Prague – the two major cities that had experienced rapid industrialization since the 1860s – and demanded a reform of the electoral system. These extraordinary moments of political participation bore fruit: the first elections to the *Reichsrat* – the parliament of the Austrian half of the Habsburg monarchy – held in May 1907 on the basis of universal, secret, direct, and equal male suffrage. The elections gave the Social Democrats 23 per cent of the popular vote and 87 deputies – the largest single party in a 516-seat parliament. Besides ending their social marginalization, these results convinced German and Czech Social Democrats (the latter, in particular, who found inspiration in the militancy of their radical Hussite forebears) that they were justified in their bid to claim leadership of their respective nation. Indeed, Beneš concludes, charges of indifference on the part of bourgeois nationalists “prompted counterattacks that