Parasites, Prostitution, and Everyday Vigilance in Socialist Czechoslovakia

An Interview with Dr. Christiane Brenner

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I had the pleasure to sit down virtually with Dr. Christiane Brenner this summer and ask a few questions about her new project on prostitution in socialist Czechoslovakia. Dr. Brenner is affiliated with Collegium Carolinum, a German research institute devoted to the study of the Czech and Slovak Republics. She is also the editor of the journal *Bohemia*, which publishes work on the history and culture of Central Europe. With her current project she is part of a Collaborative Research Center at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich with nearly fifty scientists from different disciplines. The aim of this project is to analyze the historical and cultural foundations of vigilance.[1] The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Victoria Skelton (VS): You began your career studying nationalism. How do you see those early career interests playing out in your current work?

Dr. Christiane Brenner (CB): When I began studying Central European history, I was mostly interested in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At Freie Universität in Berlin I had a wonderful professor, Bedřich Loewenstein, who encouraged us to read the works of nineteenth-century historians. Loewenstein asked us not only to understand how modern nations were "invented" by those intellectuals. It was also important to him that we discuss the impact of those narratives on actual people's lives.

There are many reasons why studying nationalism as ideology and everyday practice can be important to understanding socialism. After 1945, the so-called "People's Democracies" in East-Central Europe were established with the argument of creating social and national justice. Considering the experience of German occupation and the war, it is not surprising that this promise of nationalism was attractive to many people.

VS: In what ways have these experiences informed this new project's emphasis on Czechoslovakian national public health measures?

CB: As a historian, I'm always curious about continuity and change. I want to know how ideologies transform over time. With regard to Czechoslovakia during the socialist period,

[1] For more information, see the Cultures of Vigilance website: https://www.en.sfb1369.uni-muenchen.de/index.html.

I'm fascinated with the paradoxes in gender and family policies. On the one side, there was a strong conservative orientation towards the family, rooted in a nineteenth-century understanding of the nation, the dangers it faces, and women's duties in this struggle. On the other side, Czechoslovakia did a lot for women's emancipation—because in the Communists' view, equal rights for women were part and parcel of the better republic that they were building. By the late 1940s, the Czechoslovak government passed a new progressive family law. A huge number of women entered the job market and higher education. Thus, many demands from the women's movement of the interwar period were fulfilled—and this did, indeed, change society. This duality between gender-conservatism and modernization efforts can be observed throughout the entire socialist period.

VS: This interest in lived experiences during this socialist nation-building in Czechoslovakia certainly shines through in your current project. What can your work on prostitution in socialist Czechoslovakia tell us about socialism as both a political system and a lived experience?

CB: The motivation behind my project is to find out how the socialist state tried to establish what was called the "socialist way of life." I'm interested in how social rules were implemented after the Communist takeover in 1948 in Czechoslovakia and how those who did not stick to these rules were treated. I assume that the state needed the cooperation of the citizens and that this cooperation worked best where socialist norms and traditional norms coincided. "Vigilance" was a key term for socialist societies, but it was mostly understood in political way. Prostitution, however, was not classified as directed against the regime, but as a something that contradicted socialist as well as bourgeois morality. At first glance, choosing to report your neighbor who (you think) is a prostitute, who doesn't regularly work within the socialist labor system, has nothing to do with politics. You don't have to agree with a particular program of a political party or be a party member to tell the police your neighbor is a prostitute. Instead, we see a recurring sentiment that prostitution is bad because people should go to work every day, and prostitution does not conform to the socialist labor regime.

VS: You have specifically looked into local, municipal archives for many of your sources. Can you elaborate on why these archives are so important to your work and for understanding an everyday-life perspective on state control?

CB: Finding archival sources for my work turns out to be more difficult than I had imagined. But I am beginning to understand that these difficulties are related to how prostitution was treated under socialism. According to Marxist-Leninist theory, prostitution was characteristic of capitalist societies. Thus, it was expected to disappear in socialism and although it was not completely taboo, it was not considered a question to be seriously dealt with. I found several traces of prostitution in the chronicles of police departments, and I have seen many court records with women accused of prostitution. Where the local is concerned, there is lots of evidence of prostitution. On the state level—in the government, including ministries—prostitution for the longest time was a non-topic, and it was not clear who from the state authorities was concerned with it. Only in short periods like the late 1960s, in the context of the general liberalization, or early 1980s, when

AIDS became an important issue, was it something that played a role in committee discussions.

VS: Discussions of both prostitution and the AIDS crisis of the 1980s specifically seem to highlight disparities between government efforts to control already-vulnerable populations and their premise of providing help. Are you drawing similar conclusions from your research so far?

CB: I am still in the process of finding sources for my project, and therefore it is too early for far-reaching conclusions. But there are some things I am beginning to see more clearly. For one thing, I can see in the sources how the socialist state dealt with people who did not fit into the system or violated norms and how this changed over time. From violence and open repression in the 1950s to a discourse treating "difficult people" with the help of experts in the 1960s, we see an ongoing attempt to establish a complex network of control. What strikes me most is the huge gap between this discourse of helping, curing, and integration and the reality of the stigmatization and exclusion of people who would—or could—not adapt.

VS: That sounds incredibly difficult, tracking down people who weren't supposed to exist in socialist society—the process of rendering invisible members of society visible. In the midst of a global pandemic when increasing numbers of men and women are working from home, we have seen a number of conversations about who performs domestic labor, a historically invisible form of labor. Sex work, also often under the purview of women, has been written off as separate from traditional "work." How does this speak to the gendered understanding of work and labor, even in a supposedly equitable system like that of socialist Czechoslovakia?

CB: I think it's a crucial question for the project. A topic like sex work didn't make sense in the socialist world. The socialist understanding of work centered on productive labor, and productive labor was given and assigned by the state. The state organized the whole world of labor, so there was no legal work outside the state. But prostitution belonged to the world outside the state, meaning that it was regarded as a dishonest way of making one's living or making money. This put those women who earned part or all of their living by selling sex at the margins of society.

When the revolution came in the late-1980s, nearly everybody knew that prostitution existed. After all, one could see prostitutes in the center of Prague, at the railway station. So, it really wasn't a secret. Since then, there has been an ongoing discussion of whether to regulate or legalize prostitution. To date no prostitution law has been passed in the Czech Republic. However, municipalities can decide on how to deal with prostitution individually. Especially in the region that borders Germany, many towns have imposed rather strict rules for regulating prostitution. Of course, these restrictions do not put an end to prostitution, and they make it even more unsafe or dangerous for the people to engage in.

VS: The stigmatization of prostitution as a danger to society—this moralizing attitude—seems to be a theme regardless of political circumstances.

CB: The approach of socialist states to prostitution was strongly moralizing. There is nothing especially “socialist” about this view. What was indeed characteristic for socialist states was the practice connected with this discourse—the partial tabooing, or “hiding,” of the existence of prostitution behind other crimes, especially the crime of not working. This tabooing drove and kept people in prostitution in the margins of society.

VS: We still have these debates about prostitution today, and the arguments seem to have remained the same: that prostitutes or poor people or marginalized people don’t contribute to society and the economy. And although socialism ended in the Czech Republic, the attitudes, it seems, did not.

CB: Talking about the approach to prostitution in the Czech Republic today, we consider not only the experience of the socialist period but also about the years following the collapse of communism. After 1989, there was this enormous “sex boom” seen by a part of society as a chance to catch up with the West and experienced by others as liberalization with shocking consequences. Perhaps this explains, at least partly, why the differences in the debate about a prostitution law are so sharp. At the same time, there is a huge lack of empathy for women in prostitution in this debate. They are not seen as valuable members of society but as threats to society and its health. Interest in guaranteeing their rights and making their life and work safer is scarce.

VS: Speaking of empathy, I noticed that you did not name the women you use as examples. Were their names redacted, or are you trying to shield them from any potential impact on their current lives?

CB: For one thing, this is really, really sensitive material, and I always had to provide assurances that I will treat the material with respect and discretion. For sure, it’s exactly as you say. Most of these people are still alive. They have family, kids, and as I said before, they cannot count on support from today’s Czech society.

I’m not sure what I will do with naming these women. I do not want to sound like the police, nor do I want to suggest an inappropriate familiarity and talk about the women as if they were my friends or sisters.

VS: How do you handle naming the police officers and other officials who were enacting this sort of state surveillance on women accused of prostitution?

CB: I could identify one of the judges who presided over numerous processes with women accused of prostitution because she was also involved in a scandalous trial with a member of Charter 77. So, I can reconstruct her professional career with published material on her. She is a public person, so I don’t see a problem using her name.

VS: Over and over again, there seems to be a theme of almost social or class distinction in socialist Czechoslovakia—between this judge and the women accused of prostitution, for example—the women who are marginalized and those who are not. This is fairly common

in most conversations about prostitution, but the socialist political context complicates our understanding of that disparity. To what degree does your current project deal with how the state managed inequality in Czechoslovakian society?

CB: That's a very important question. Czechoslovakia was, at least, since the 1960s, a society with a high degree of social equality. This was largely because of the enormous shifts caused by social policies after the communist take-over in 1948. While the vast majority of society was rather homogenous, the percentage of really poor people was small. Likewise, the milieu of so called "asocial people" was not numerous, but it was exceptionally burdened with difficult living.

When looking at the life stories I can reconstruct from my sources, the one thing I can say is that it was not easy to make a fresh start after being sentenced for prostitution. Once you were part of this non-society at the margins, you were put on a register, and it was very hard to find a way out.

After the Stalinist period, the socialist state gave up the utopian idea of turning all people into "new socialist men" and accepted that deviant behavior would continue to exist. But it is important to see that the policies toward criminals and so-called parasites—forgiving on the discourse level, repressive in practice—also served to discipline and integrate the majority society.

VS: This project sounds exciting and multifaceted. Where do you see yourself going from here?

CB: If I could, I would go back to the archive tomorrow. Among the things I want to do next is visiting the archives of "spa towns" like Karlovy Vary and places where events like huge fairs attracted an international public to understand how prostitution was monitored or silently tolerated in those contexts. I am also in the very beginning of researching the files of the secret police, who probably not only tolerated prostitution but also used it for their own purposes. But I think the most important thing now, after a year of working mainly with sources of control and correction, is talking to witnesses. I'm thinking of experts in law, psychiatry, and sexology, but first, I want to do interviews with former prostitutes. Of course, the court records provide basic information about their lives, but they give very limited insight into their experiences, emotions, their individual agendas. Their perspective should play an important role in my book.

The editors of the Central European Yearbook are grateful to Dr. Christiane Brenner and Ms. Victoria Skelton for taking the time to provide our readers with this fascinating interview about new research. We wish both of them much success with their ongoing and future projects.

Christiane Brenner earned her Ph.D. at the Freie Universität in Berlin and has studied modern Central European History in Lyon, Munich, Berlin, and Prague. Since 1998 she has been a researcher at the Collegium Carolinum Research Institute for the History of the Czech Lands and Slovakia and the editor of *Bohemia: Journal of History and Civilization in East Central Europe*. Most of her research is dedicated to the history of post-1945 Czechoslovakia. In recent years, she has focused on youth, gender, and sexuality in socialist societies. In July 2019 she became part of the SFB (Collaborative Research Center), "Cultures of Vigilance," at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich with her project "Guardians of Socialist Morality: Prostitution and Vigilance Practices in Czechoslovakia (1945/48–1989)." Her publications to date on the history of sexuality in socialist Czechoslovakia include: "Doing it the Right Way. Pronatalism and Sexuality in Socialist Czechoslovakia (1948-1989)," in *Odvaha nesouhlasit. Feministické myšlení Hany Havelkové a jeho reflexe,* eds. Věra Sokolová and L'ubica Kobová (Prague: Fakulta humanitních studií Univerzity Karlovy, 2019), 426-439; and "Nová společnost – nová láska? Partnerství a sexualita v osvětových knihách pro mládež," in *Mezi pionýrským šátkem a mopedem. Děti, mládež a socialismus v českých zemích 1948-1970*, eds. Jiří Knapík and Martin Franc (Prague: Academia, 2018), 513-521.

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