

# The Marxist Case for Abortion: Rethinking the Imagination of Bodies in Soviet Marxism

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article proposes to rearticulate a pro-abortion Marxism to offer an alternative to current debates that posit individual rights versus anti-abortion advocacy. <sup>1</sup> The 2022 decision of the Supreme Court of the United States to overturn Roe v. Wade (1973) raises the specter of the consolidation of the anti-abortionist movement in Eastern European countries, which are strongly influenced culturally and politically by the North American country. To advance a psychoanalytic Marxist critique, I concentrate not only on a critique of individualism but also on a dialectical interpretation of capitalism. I make two arguments here. First, that while US social constructionism saw bodies as formed from a naturally given material, productivist bodies were a vehicle for a Soviet Marxist ideology that aimed to emancipate the entirety of humanity. Second, I trace an ideological shift in Romanian cinema from a Marxist body to a politics of natality, which provided the basis for the 1966 banning of abortion in that country. While I criticize Soviet productivism as a theory that sought to undermine capitalism (like Slavoj Žižek (2014), I see such materialization as the wrong Marxism), I show the relevance of a historical argument for a Marxist pro-abortion politics.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Eastern Europe, Marxism, Romanian socialism, abortion, psychoanalysis*

**HOW TO CITE:** *Popa, Bogdan. (2023): The Marxist case for abortion: rethinking the imagination of bodies in Soviet Marxism. In: Berliner Blätter 88, 147–159.*

Current debates about »postsocialism« investigate the relevance of the term to current circumstances, given that Eastern European states have become pillars of a world order dominated by NATO and economically sustained by the European Union. The concept raises questions about the ability of socialism to endure, circulate, and take new forms as part of a reflection on urban infrastructures, material objects, and subjective experiences in Eastern Europe. For some scholars, ones who advocate dispensing with the term »postsocialism,« concepts such as the »Global East« (Muller 2019) have the advantage of creating unexpected connections between topics and institutions that have been reduced to regional concerns. In reply, defenders of »postsocialism« (Chelcea 2023) ask for the preservation of the concept since it is anchored in an important socialist history that has represented the ideological glue within and between Eastern European countries.

In this article, I add a different angle to the argument about the relevance of »postsocialism.« In doing so, I focus on the importance of a Marxist ideological critique in debates about abortion. The 2022 decision of the Supreme Court of the United States to overturn

Roe v. Wade (1973) raises the specter of the consolidation of the anti-abortionist movement in Eastern European countries, which are strongly influenced culturally and politically by the North American country.<sup>2</sup> In this context, I deploy the term »postsocialism« because it gestures to an epistemology of human bodies that has revolutionary underpinnings, one that is different from dominant individualistic ideas about people's identities. As opposed to liberal rhetoric in the US, which has emphasized abortion being an individual right, I recover a Marxist perspective that concentrates not only on a critique of individualism but also theorizes a dialectical view of human bodies. This epistemology had direct and practical effects on the politics of abortion and reproduction in socialist Eastern European states. As Josie McLellan (2011, 1–4) showed, divorce rates soared and abortion became commonplace under socialism, which indicates that Eastern European regimes had a much more emancipatory politics about bodies than their Western counterparts. Historians of sexuality such as Dagmar Herzog, meanwhile, have documented how in East Germany, unlike in West Germany, sexual liberation was engendered by a »combination of institutional structures and strong rhetorical support in the East that made women's work for wages not only possible but also much less guilt-inducing« (2005, 193).

This article first advances the case for abortion by critically assessing Soviet Marxism. The latter offered an alternative to concentration in the US on social constructionism, but it had its theoretical flaws. I introduce the idea of a »productivist body,« which emerges in Soviet and Romanian politics and cinematography as a modality to understand bodies and their political relationships. While social constructionism saw bodies as formed from a natural given material, productivist ones were a vehicle for a Soviet Marxist ideology that aimed to emancipate the entirety of humanity. While I acknowledge the important historical dimensions to productivism, I also argue that it is plagued by its desire to actualize the secret of capitalism (namely, from its viewpoint, class conflict). Based on Slavoj Žižek's (2014, 148–149) ideology critique, I see capitalism's secret (class conflict) as an impossibility around which it actualizes its production of commodities. The article's second contribution is to historicize the abandonment of a Marxist epistemology about bodies in Romania, which reached its zenith in the »Thaw« period (1955 to 1965) when socialist and capitalist regimes had become ideologically closer to each other. In doing so, I trace an ideological shift in Romanian cinema from a productivist body to a politics of natality, which provided the basis for the 1966 banning of abortion in that country. The politics of natality is an attempt to replace a regime of labor production with a new nationalist ideology, as stemming from the actualizing of the national body in the form of producing new citizens. In this version of Soviet Marxism, the real indicator that could overcome capitalism was no longer labor but population increase.

In light of the new anti-abortion politics taking shape in the US, a Marxist case for abortion is still relevant in the form of ideological critique. First, our new predicament needs to create critical temporal and ideological connections to a Marxist politics, which created the material conditions for equality between men and women. »Postsocialism« recovers a dialectical understanding of capitalism, which represents a critique of the key element (class conflict) that plays the role of its own impossibility (Žižek 2014, 148). Second, not only important lessons about how cinematic tropes regarding abortion can travel transnationally but also about how a Marxist epistemology has served as the grounds for pro-abortion politics are provided. In doing so, I argue that a pro-abortion politics is possible on the basis on a critique of individual rights that imagines a better future for all.

## Productivist Bodies: Dialectics and the Subversion of Capitalism

Productivism was an important theoretical thread in Soviet Marxism, particularly in its emphasis on destroying an old capitalist system by abolishing its epistemological premises. Instead of merely living in a world, productive bodies were designed to be political and artistic devices to achieve communism. For Soviet Marxists, productive labor was to be »the foundation of the educational process [and the development of the communist child]« (Pavlidis 2017, 1 – 7). In the words of Anton Makarenko, one of the most influential theorists of pedagogy in the Soviet Union, education was primarily a collective task (ibid., 8). As he also argued, a productivist approach to becoming communist was an anticapitalist program that could lead to world revolution: »The Soviet collective defends the issue of world unity of the working humanity as a matter of principle. It is not merely a biotic unification of people, but a part of the humanity's battle front in the era of the world revolution« (ibid., 9).

Productivism was not only a strong approach in education but also a key philosophy of organizing the political economy of the state. A vital goal for socialists was the refusal of individualistic bourgeois ideology, with Lenin making that task very clear: »We want to establish, and we will establish, a free press, free not simply from the police, but also from capital, from careerism, and what is more, free from bourgeois-anarchist individualism« (C. Vaughn James 1973, 12). As Serguei Oushakine (2014, 203) showed, the political economy of socialists functioned according to a productivist system that rejected the principles of the market economy. Oushakine develops his theory from Boris Arvatov's thinking, who formulated the idea of »a thing« system that offers an alternative to the market-dominated economy. Before becoming a commodity on the market, the product of labor was still »a thing« and was imagined as serving the population's core needs. For Arvatov, as Oushakine (2014, 203) shows, »a thing« was not a commodity in two main regards. First, commodities were designed for the market and did not fit the needs of the people. In reversing this relationship, »a thing« was a product that should correspond to its social value and not to its alleged market one. Second, a commodity relied on a profit-driven marketization that deprived it of its connection to labor production. In turn, »a thing« was aimed at showing its connection to a socialist mode of production and its labor rather to its exchange value. In socialism, not only commodities were transformed but also bodies. The communist production emphasized not only objects but »the forms of being« as well (Arvatov 2017, 111).

The problem with Soviet Marxism, as Žižek argues, is that it sought to discover the secret behind capitalism and to actualize it:

[T]he thing that it masks is not society's hidden essence, but rather the void, the impossibility around which the old of society structures itself. This is why the »critique of ideology« no longer seeks to pierce the hidden essence. Instead, it subverts the ideological edifice by denouncing the element of the edifice that plays the role of the whole's own impossibility. (2014, 148)

Arvatov's »a thing« falls short here, however, given that it does not allow for the difference between an empty space—»an ahistorical kernel around which the symbolic network articulates itself« (Žižek 2014, 176)—and the real »thing« that is produced by socialist regimes. Soviet realism thus sought to actualize »the thing« itself, namely the excess that undermines capitalism. This was a dominant Soviet productivist epistemology with a basis in Lenin's and Marx's ideas, one that focused on themes such as the relationship between art and the people, the class underpinnings of art, and the role of the artist in supporting the

mission of the Communist Party (C. Vaughn James 1974, 1). In the realm of art, this generated a Marxist epistemology of bodies: the basic function of socialist realism was »to create socialism—Soviet reality, and not an artifact« (Dobrenko 2008, xii). The goal was that every object and human person in socialist countries would become a product of a communist and collective artistic production (Arvatov 2017, 107 – 108).

In a revolutionary society, the meaning of art was thus to engender new material relations to escape the fetishization of commodities. Socialist sexed bodies were not only created by communism but they were elements that also sought to lead this transformation. For Soviet Marxists, the process of achieving communism was more important than the idea of a final stage where it had been fully actualized. One of the main innovations of socialism was the emphasis on production itself rather than on a product of labor (Dobrenko 2008, xviii). Communism being considered a process of production is key to understanding the reconceptualizations that would take place in Soviet socialism. This theoretical novelty had extraordinary consequences regarding the production of sexed bodies. Rather than products in themselves, as per individualistic understandings, socialist bodies were a collective entity that accelerated the movement to a higher phase of historical consciousness. Instead of having a gender waiting to be discovered, productive bodies were organized around an epistemology that aimed to fully realize humanity's potential as a whole.

The difference between the theories of productivism and social constructivism point to important ideological contrasts during the Cold War era. Unlike a US understanding of identity, political bodies in socialism were neither individual territories of freedom nor subjectivities who fought the conformism of an established ideology. They produced instead the aspired-to future society by acting in line with the Communist Party (Goldiş 2016, 90). Yet this iconoclasm was abandoned after the Stalinist takeover of power:

No longer was it necessary to use iconoclasm to attack bourgeois culture, now that the economic basis and social classes that had spawned that culture had been eliminated in the Soviet Union. This is why the Soviet state in the mid- 1930s tilted away from iconoclasm and radicalism in a range of fields, from art and architecture to education and history writing. (Hoffman 2018, 6)

However, Soviet Marxists rearticulated an important element in their ideology: namely how socialism *produces* human subjectivities based on their social value, as opposed to the US emphasis on the social that *constructs* a given body and personality. If the body is a social construction, it does not produce; rather, it merely reflects a social situation that is already given. In turn, productive bodies were imagined as ideological devices to forge better anticapitalist bodies and sexualities. Given that individualism was the tactic and philosophy of capitalism, Alexandra Kollontai, for instance, wanted a communist sexuality that abandoned monogamy: »The old ideal was ›all for the loved one‹; communist morality demands all for the collective« (Carleton 2005, 41). In contrast with a theory that sees gender as the process by which bodies »enter into sociality,« socialism situated human beings in one of material transformation (Verdery 1996, 62).

The process of producing communists was more important than the achievement of freedom for the male and female body alike. The function of the Party was to lead the journey toward realizing communism. In socialist realist films, characters were conceptualized as a critique of the idea of having an individual identity. Since communist ideals did not primarily describe the role of the individual body, they were rather invested in the achievement of collective organizations. Communist bodies, like »the things« produced in socialism, had

rather a use value instead of an exchange one. Via this lens, bodies were, like »things« that had not become yet commodities, entities not separated from their conditions of production. Oushakine (2014, 202) showed that the Soviet system of productivism led to *storage* being its main economic outcome and not, as previously understood, the production of commodities for the market. This emphasis on a process of production vis-à-vis material bodies, rather on the finished product, is consistent with socialists' rejection of individualism. Socialist realist strategies, such as dialectical conflicts between activists and workers, were also designed to generate a new type of human being that had a superior consciousness and education.

How, then, do bodies function as anticapitalist »things« in socialist cinematography? *Alone* is a prototype for master plots in a later Soviet aesthetic (Widdis 2017, 238). It is one of the first Soviet films situated at the point of transition from mute films to audio socialist realism. In it, bodies are shown to become communist when they seek to abolish capitalism. Kuz'mina, a female-bodied city resident in Moscow, has graduated as a teacher and wants to remain and work somewhere urban. She is sent to a post in the Altai Republic. The film critiques the residues of the market economy in the USSR, which were part of Leninist politics in the first years after the October Revolution. What *Alone* does is to show us an interruption in Kuz'mina's desired trajectory because, despite her wanting commodities, she is not yet a commodified subject. Her transformation into a potential Soviet body is realized in an encounter with the sensuous world of the Altai people. In the Soviet imagination, these indigenous people are shown to be closer to labor production and the material world of objects. They grasp, cut, and rub the wool and live in a world where they are part of the natural cycle of life. Widdis (2017, 240) argues that Kuz'mina develops a different sensory relationship to objects when she moves to the Altai, the springboard for her becoming a communist. The film captures the transition from a desire to possess commodities to a socialist experiential world, one deeply connected to the materiality of objects. This new material register is articulated particularly vis-à-vis the use value of objects. In the Altai, Kuz'mina is redeemed because she becomes a producer of »things.« Like the »thing« system that she becomes part of, she turns into a »body thing« whose value is given by her rejection of a profit-oriented world.

A Soviet film epistemology was very influential in Eastern Europe's new socialist countries. For instance, Romania's cinematography after 1948 was shaped by the understanding that communism was an actualized ideal in the new republic, like a production of »what already existed« (Dobrenko 2008, 5). This led to the development of socialist realism in Romanian cinematography, from the 1949 *The Valley Resounds* to late Marxist-inspired films such as the 1982 *Love and Revolution* and the 1983 *Impossible Love*. The idea of a body as a noncapitalist »thing« is present in early socialist films, such as the 1961 *The Man Next to You*. Like Kuz'mina, Corina is a city girl, a lawyer accustomed to urban attractions such as high-end restaurants and museums. But when she falls in love with Ticu, an engineer who works on a construction site in Bicz in the north of the country, she renounces the city life for that instead of a married woman in a small town. Corina's desiring of the world of commodities is shown by her fashionable shoes, skirt, and shirt, which fit with the urban landscape that they are designed for. Yet, this style of dressing becomes an impediment when she visits her husband on the construction site. The fashionable silhouette, similar to the figure of Kuz'mina's body in front of the kitchen shop, shows the lure of the world of exchange value. Corina fundamentally changes when she becomes a piece of a larger assemblage producing state socialism. After she abandons her passive role of wife, she not only contributes to building the dam but also becomes a communist person. The white

shoes disappear; Corina, like Kuz'mina, becomes part of the production of »things.« Her subjective self is less of a commodity and more of a piece in a socialist assemblage that is deeply connected to the conditions of producing her own existence.

This socialist epistemology of bodies was deeply entrenched in Romanian socialist film productions. In *The Valley Resounds*, the boundaries between masculinity and femininity were subsumed to Marxist goals of revolutionary activity. Put differently, gender does not exist in this film outside the call to abolish a bourgeois distinction between the »male« and »female.« A key moment in the film is when we are shown that bodies under socialism have to be read according to a productivist labor politics and its refusal of individual identity. Radu, a miner from Lupeni, returns to a construction site (șantier) to bury his brother who was accidentally killed following an act of sabotage by nefarious capitalists. When he walks on a dirt road close to the șantier, he is surrounded by his comrades who cheer him up: »Courage, Radule« (»Curaj, Radule«). Radu decides to speak to his comrades and honor his dead sibling. What does he say to praise his brother to an audience of workers who are mourning the death of their comrade? Radu tells them that »Petre was a good, trustworthy kid. He was like a diligent girl. They did not care enough for his life.«<sup>3</sup>

In *The Valley Resounds*, abolitionist politics rests on the possibility of the reversal of bodily identification, so that man and woman can lose their anchor in capitalism. Socialists took the abolition of capitalism's sexed identifications as seriously as the production of communist people per se. Unlike in the US model of gender performativity, Radu's speech is not an act of disidentification from heteronormative socialism. Radu upholds the political establishment and does not criticize it. His statement is not an act of freedom either, one whereby a heroic character fights against a system of injustice that he/she denounces publicly. The moment of praising a male-bodied character as a girl is, rather, an act of disidentifying from capitalist norms about strictly male and female roles. To praise Petre as »the diligent girl« shows that in the socialist world one could move away from a single sexed identification. In Romanian socialism, the state project had at its core the aspiration to educate a new generation of young activists—not unlike what McLallen (2011, 26) noticed about East Germany's communist youth. Discipline children, indeed, but keep an eye also on their process of moving beyond capitalist ideas about men and women.

In relation to Soviet Marxism, the current analysis of gender erases the communist ideal of abolishing capitalist sex roles. Verdery (1996, 66) insightfully noted that categories of gender were deployed by socialist leaders in Romania as ones of political education. For instance, even when he described it as a woman's supreme mission, the socialist president Nicolae Ceaușescu presented »motherhood« as a profession, which helped equalize »male« and »female« forms of work. Yet the crucial question here is whether gender, along with its assumptions about freedom and individuality, can give us a true account of what socialism was. While male-bodied workers were overwhelmingly idealized as part of the future of socialism, they also showed the path to human emancipation. While gendered identities can reveal a structure of inequality that was to be found at the heart of state socialism, the problem with dispensing with this theory is that doing so eliminates also the Marxist epistemological assumptions about communist bodies. In turn, to rehistoricize socialist histories I draw on the concept of »productive bodies« as a way to excavate a rival theoretical view of gender difference. Rather than acquiring a gender identity, be that of male or female, socialists saw communist bodies as unfinished »things« that sought to destroy the capitalist system.

A second important component of socialists' refusal of individual gender was the dialectical relationship that involved two or more than two individuals. Building communism involved a historical process featuring struggles and failures, but one that could follow the overall direction of human emancipation. In socialist realism, communism emerged from a relationship between two kinds of heroes: the party activist who is sometimes depicted as intellectually brilliant but removed from real problems and the working-class hero who is uneducated but can act effectively to promote socialist goals. In many accounts, dialectics functioned when a party activist and a worker guided each other along the path to communism. This process was theorized not only at the level of method but also of cinematic aesthetic. The technique of montage was considered key to a new Soviet understanding of art and film production. It served as a principle of producing a new society, as well as art objects, by placing two elements in a formative relationship with one another. Unlike the historical strategy of the bourgeoisie, which was focused on representing reality in art (or what Arvatov calls »depictive art«), productivism called for the dialectical production of facts. In Arvatov's words, art should create a new society by uniting an objective gaze with »a montage of actual facts« (2017, 118). When discussing the latter, Arvatov was, like the Soviet film director Lev Kuleshov, interested in the capacity of art to produce a new element out of two juxtaposed images.

The classic example hereof in socialist realist film is *Chapaev*. In it, the party activist and the Red Army commander have a tense but productive working relationship. In *The Valley Resounds*, too, the party activist has to work with ordinary workers such as Petre and Radu to fight against capitalist saboteurs. When one dies, the surviving one becomes the person embodying revolutionary hope. Such dialectical conflict is important to the realization that communism is primarily a productive and collective activity of bodies, in contrast with the liberal model concentrated on the transformation of individual identity. In socialist narratives, film characters are helped by other participants in the same struggle to become productive. Individual transformation has to be oriented toward the transformation also of the collective. In *The Man Next to You*, Ticu and Corina change roles with regard to their work on the construction site. When Ticu works as an engineer, Corina is a housewife, but they swap roles when Ticu loses his job and Corina becomes involved in the construction of the dam. The film suggests that they need to help each other in the construction of socialism, while the party secretary, Muică, and other committed comrades are also intricately involved in this process. The film shows that producing socialism cannot be done without laboring with others to produce goods that fulfill people's needs. Similarly, *The Valley Resounds* also focuses on the collective nature of producing a new society but seeks to show further how party activists and workers strive for the same goals.

In productivist theory, the gender categories of »man« and »woman« consolidate the norms of Soviet communism and do not function as potentially subversive identities that are discriminated against under capitalism, as Medevoi (2005, 320) suggested in his critique of queer theory. More than that, categories such as »masculine« and »feminine« were not praised in themselves as valuable, but were instead part of a process of building a new communist person. As Žižek (2014, 185) pointed out about Soviet productivism, its Marxism functioned, however, as a phantasy that did not articulate a full-fledged ideological critique. Soviet Marxism fell short of understanding that dialectics is not primarily about the actualization of a subversive element in capitalism; rather, it is primarily the presence of an impossibility that has historically made the latter function. Ultimately, Soviet Marxism appealed to the imagined embodiment of the »Big Other,« which created its own problems. A prominent example hereof is Stalin's policies:

»In his writings, communists are made of sterner stuff, they are not susceptible to everyday concerns, to the passions and weaknesses of ordinary men. It is as if they possess a sublime body beyond their ordinary physical body, that they inhabit the realm »between the two deaths,« that they are, in a certain sense, »walking dead,« still alive and yet unaffected by passions or furies. In short, that they are the immediate embodiment of the Big Other of History.« (ibid., 185)

For Žižek, then, the biggest issue with Soviet Marxism was its flawed understanding of dialectics. His work represents a substantial critique of this body of work, achieved by proposing a different Hegelian psychoanalytic theory that derives from other assumptions and leads to alternative conclusions. The actualization of genuine class conflict, as would be articulated in Soviet Marxism, is cemented as an impossibility in psychoanalytic Marxism.

### The Gradual Disappearance of the Productive Body

We now move on from early productivism in the USSR to the politics of sexuality in Romanian state socialism in the mid-1960s. Focusing on a 1964 Marxist Romanian film, *The District of Gaiety*, it will be shown how the increased role of anti-abortion trends during the Cold War led to an important shift in the epistemology of productive bodies in Romanian socialism. During the opening up to economic and cultural exchange with the West, the so-called Thaw, socialism's lines of defense—which were organized around socialist realism and productive bodies—started to be seriously transgressed. The US had an important impact on Soviet cinema and television during the Cold War era (Zhuk 2014, 593). The key to inserting capitalist tropes in state socialism's art and cinematography was to integrate them into Marxist ideology. If in *The Valley Resounds* the plot centers on the fight for the abolition of capitalist gender roles, *The District of Gaiety* suggests a change now to new goals such as participating in the increase in population size to help win the Cold War. The anti-abortion themes addressed in the film indicate a gradual withdrawal from the epistemology of Marxist productivism.

Rather than looking at Romania's policy of limiting abortion as derived primarily from the ideology of state socialism, as Gail Kligman (2000, 12 – 15) claims, I introduce the abortion politics of Romanian socialists in the broader context of the Cold War. While the USSR and most of the Eastern European countries had pro-abortion laws, Ceaușescu's Romania chose to limit abortion drastically after 1966. Abortion had been legal for the first time in the history of the Romanian state between 1957 and 1966. My claim is that the Romanian policy of severely restricting abortion was shaped by an international trend toward naturalizing conservative sex roles, as playing out at the end of the 1950s in Europe around the themes of Nazism and its aftermath (Herzog 2005, 96). The conflict between Eastern socialism and Western capitalism was a war over biopolitical weapons such as demographics. As part of this conflict, the idea of natality became a key element in defining the role of women under socialism. Romanian Marxists thought that natality politics offered them a competitive edge in their fight against capitalism, particularly given the growth in birth rates in the US after the Second World War. Both the West and the East wanted to oversee an increase in population size as proof that their politics is better than that of their systemic competitor.

In a psychoanalytic Marxism such as Žižek's, we can understand this transformation from actualizing »the thing« of labor to »the thing« of natality. This ideological fight had a direct impact on Soviet-style communism in Romania, which previously depicted the so-

cialist body as a weapon to help abolish capitalist sex roles. In *The Valley Resounds*, Radu and Sanda are, accordingly, two characters mobilized to show how to destroy such undesirable norms. Under Romania's mid-1960s state socialism, however, the politics of sexuality had shifted to communists now helping the state to produce more children instead. How did socialist politics about natality also change?

Herzog (2005, 64) offers a potential answer here in focusing on the shifts induced by attitudes toward Nazism after the Second World War. »Nazism« was now used as a term and ideological formation to explain everything related to sex: from the alleged marital crisis, to issues of sexuality, to the disappearance of eroticism. In post – Second World War Germany, for instance, Nazi politics constituted the main referent for public debates about sexuality (ibid., 72). While the figure of the Nazi had a particular role in Germany, it was also deployed in state socialism to support its demographic politics. Herzog traces an important transformation at the beginning of the 1950s, when conservative politics intensified its rhetoric: »Many of the sexually conservative attitudes now customarily associated with the 1950s, and particularly with the especially stuffy West German version of them, only became consolidated gradually in the course of the early 1950s« (ibid., 72). The Catholic Church had an important role to play in arguing for sexual restraint. It utilized and solidified the perception that there had been a close connection between Nazi criminality and sexual pleasure (ibid., 75). To mobilize opposition to abortion and contraception, Catholics attacked Nazi politics as that of unrestricted sexuality. Walter Dirks, a postwar Catholic intellectual, bluntly argued, for instance, that abortions emerged from Nazi ideology (ibid., 76).

The conservative movement in Germany deployed the Nazi legacy to underscore why some issues had to be addressed while others must remain undiscussed. For instance, the Nazi emphasis on pleasure and sex outside of marriage was completely discarded since it was a key element that contradicted the narrative about Germans being victims of national socialism. The conservative movement gained many supporters because it was able to portray itself as an answer to the evil of the latter, provided that it presented itself as victim rather than »supporters and beneficiaries« (ibid., 104). Nazism deeply affected not only right-wing politics but also the left's. Unlike what the student movement believed at the end of the 1960s—namely that the Third Reich was sex hostile and pro-family—conservative postwar politics was a new invention in reaction to Nazism (ibid., 98). Both the left and the right in Europe put at the core of their political proposals a refusal of Nazism's legacy, yet they chose different elements to emphasize as key to their respective programs.

In *The District of Gaiety*, anti-abortion politics derives from the same aversion to Nazism that Herzog describes in her study. The socialist epistemology of productive bodies incorporates conservative ideas, given that the problem of natality takes center stage. In the film, Lia and Dima are two young people who are fighting on the side of the Romanian Communist Party. The action takes place sometime in 1938, when a coalition of right-wing parties are in power in Romania. The main theme of the film, namely that true love between comrades leads to marriage and children, is foregrounded from the opening shot. The film starts not only with a wedding in »the district of gaiety« (Rahova neighborhood in Bucharest), but also with Lia and Dima's first meeting at the cinema. The initial shots combine a bride dressed in white and the march of a wedding party with Lia and Dima flirting and walking side by side. The conflict in the film derives from the protagonists' efforts to overcome various obstacles to their continued relationship. Lia's older brother, Gheorghe the second (Ilarion Ciobanu), does not like the budding flirtation between his sister and Dima. In addition, the police try to arrest him and blackmail Lia into denouncing her lover.

In comparison with *The Valley Resounds*, the emphasis in *The District of Gaiety* is on the romantic interest between the two young communists. Kollontai's desire that communism should not be about the individual love of two persons but about a collective process of forging a new society has disappeared from the concerns of Romanian socialists. While Radu and Sanda in *The Valley Resounds* fight for the abolition of capitalist gender roles, Lia and Dima are two characters that share conservative assumptions about marriage and the politics of reproduction. Whereas Radu and Sanda's relationship is a product of the fight against capitalism, Lia and Dima end up in conflict with the fascist police by accident.

*The District of Gaiety* justifies anti-abortion politics as an effect of opposition to Nazism. The plot in the second part of the film revolves around a political murder. Dima witnesses the assassination of a socialist journalist who denounced the exploitative politics of the Rahova factory, runs away, and hides while the police seek him out. Lia is threatened by police agents, but she manages to warn Dima that they are looking for him. The scene that follows Lia's intervention takes place in the office of a gynecologist. The head of the police (Commissar Buhăneanu), who is portrayed as a Nazi, enters the room and asks Lia if she wants to have an abortion. Lia says »no« and leaves the room. The head of the police then asks »the other« people to enter. Female-bodied people, who we learn are sex workers dressed provocatively, enter and take off their clothes. The camera follows the gaze of the commissar who stares intensely at the half-naked bodies. We are watching the sense of satisfaction that the commissar extracts from the scene. He takes off his glasses and his gaze alternates between sexual arousal and childish innocence. To portray Buhăneanu as a voyeur, the film connects the commissar's sexual curiosity to his threatening behavior toward Lia.

A conservative politics of sexuality begins to inform, then, the socialist narrative about the future of Marxist society. This represents the deployment of productivism in the new circumstances of an emerging Cold War debate about natality. Sexual pleasure and Nazism are indistinguishable, almost as if they cannot be thought of separately. In the following scene, Lia is beaten by a police officer who informs the commissar that she does not want to denounce her lover. In response, the commissar tells Lia that she will be released from detention if she betrays Dima. When she refuses, Buhăneanu threatens her with abortion. Lia begs the doctor to let her keep the baby. The commissar calls the doctor and asks him to perform the abortion. The doctor refuses because, he argues, his professional ethics will not overstep the explicit interdiction of a patient. The commissar uses Nazi language to argue that the hysterical communist, »Lia,« will give birth to a criminal and a degenerate, who will be of inferior race. As a final argument, the commissar claims that in the Third Reich abortion politics with regard to communists is official law. The doctor tells Lia that she needs to keep a secret and asks her to pretend that she had an abortion. To show how generous the doctor is, his final line is »God bless you« (»Dumnezeu să te ajute«)—serving to contrast his religiosity with the commissar's fascism. To underscore the message about the increasing danger of Nazism, the following shot is an excerpt from a newsreel about Hitler and goose-stepping SS soldiers.

*The District of Gaiety* marks an important shift in how productive bodies are deployed in Romanian socialism. Reproduction thus becomes a key site for justifying the politics of the Romanian Communist Party. Like in Germany, where Catholic intellectuals deployed images of Nazi sadists to buttress support for their cause, national socialism helped Romanian socialists to increase the pressure to regulate sexuality. Abortion was an issue that simplified a broader range of topics touching on body control and desire. To prepare the grounds for justifying the Party's decision to severely limit abortions, the film deploys women's bodies to promote a rhetoric of natality. A woman consciously keeping her child is

counterposed with a Nazi who wants to deny her that choice. Women's decision to have babies, as a measure to fight Nazism, was an important element in anti-abortion rhetoric of the mid-1960s. Invoking Nazism was not the only vehicle for strengthening normative ideas about sexual behavior, however. In the 1966 *Virgo*, sex outside marriage leads to the death of two young people by suicide. The vehicle for criticizing nonnormative sexuality herein is not the figure of the Nazi but Greek mythology, which cautioned that unrestricted sex can lead to incestuous relations. Unlike casual sex, which can be tied to multiple stories about the sources of such deviant behavior, abortion politics had to be politically connected to the legacies of Nazism.

If we compare *The District of Gaiety* with earlier Soviet productions, the difference vis-à-vis abortion politics is significant. In the 1927 *Bed and Sofa*, Liuda chooses to keep her baby despite the opposition of her two lovers. In the film, Liuda and her husband Kolia live in a one-room basement in Moscow and have marital problems. When Volodia, Kolia's friend, arrives, he starts a relation with Liuda, but he reveals himself to be even more dictatorial and insensitive than Kolia. In the end, Liuda decides to leave town; like Lia, she seems to embody the figure of the emancipated communist. In *Bed and Sofa*, abortion is the strategy controlling men deploy in the face of women's own desires. Like Lia, Liuda refuses to abort—but this time her lovers (Volodia and Kolia) ask her to go see a doctor at a private clinic. Rather than fascism, an abusive and noncommunist masculinity seems to be the target of the director's anger here. Both in the USSR and under mid-1960s Romanian socialism, pro-natalist policies portray women as liberated—but only when they aspire to becoming mothers. Thirty years later, however, Romanian socialists would need the figure of the Nazi to underscore the necessity of an increased population size to help win the Cold War. The productive body, a key anticapitalist epistemology for Eastern Marxists, hence begins to gradually incorporate elements of a conservative sexuality from Western Europe.

## Concluding Remarks

The term »postsocialism« remains relevant because socialism still »has as a potential future,« as Chelcea (2023, 10) argues. Since »(post-)socialism as an ›unfinished business« (ibid., 10) is a condition taken seriously by scholars and activists alike, I proposed to recover a Marxist epistemology about bodies alongside simultaneous acknowledgment of its theoretical failings. To offer an alternative to current individualistic justifications about abortion, I argued that we need ideological critique based on historical examples illustrating not only the potential but also limits of Soviet Marxism here. Instead of the current slogan »my body is my right,« it was suggested to see the human body as the site where the contradictions of capitalism are materialized. Bodies function as an element of their own impossibilities, since they are required to labor, be part of commodification, give birth, and to flourish.

In light of this argument, current forms of pro-abortion politics should not be limited to a liberal defense of bodies as the property of individuals. Abortion rights should be protected, rather, because they allow for a socially flourishing life and the development of multiple senses. In Marx's language, in an emancipated future »the senses have therefore become directly in their practice *theoreticians*« (1959, no page; italics in the original). But a Marxist pro-abortion politics also needs to understand the limits of Soviet socialism, which sought to actualize elements that function rather as impossible limits to capitalism itself. Stalinist bodies were supposed to suffer a transubstantiation and become *sublime bodies*, because they incarnated historical necessity (Žižek 2014, 185). And that was the key problem under-

mining socialist regimes. Any positive project of future socialism should understand that revolutionary bodies need both an emancipatory element and a serious account of their actual material impossibility. By working with this paradox, we can start accepting a defense of Marxist pro-abortion politics moving forward.

In this article, it has been shown that socialist Romania offers two key historical lessons about gender and abortion. First, anti-abortion politics were embraced because, at least in cinematography, the socialist government absorbed the conservative politics about natality of Western European countries. During the Cold War, the politics of demography had become a key point of contention that led to Ceaușescu's decision to restrict abortion. A similar historical trajectory can be seen as current possibility, particularly in a political climate that represents a new phase in the old Cold War divide. Demography is a key variable in the economic standoff between China and the US, which makes the recent decision of the latter's Supreme Court relatable to future decisions about the necessary military recruitment to sustain a war. Parties of the right and extreme-right in Europe offer a politics that emphasizes the role of families and natality to help strengthen nation-states. Ceaușescu's anti-abortion decision reveals that film holds a key position in the propaganda apparatus because of its popular appeal and wide availability. The 1966 abortion ban in Romania might serve the anti-abortion politics of current times, which will organize itself—like Stalinism—around so-called subversive material elements in capitalism: namely family, children, and national security.

Second, I suggest that a refusal of anti-abortion politics can be deployed in terms that do not presuppose an individual right to abortion. Instead, a pro-abortion politics can be conceived according to a socialist imagination of human bodies, where they are not deemed individualistic entities but constitute people working together to achieve an emancipated society. In this regard, abortion should not be seen primarily as a right. Instead, it can be conceptualized as a modality by which bodies become part of a revolutionary society that has to fundamentally transform its mode of production. In postcapitalist society, which will have a different distribution of social roles, abortion should be part of fulfilling the needs of all. In pursuing emancipation, our judgments will not be based anymore on individual orientation; we will dialectically transform reality as social organs instead (Marx 1959). The socialist lesson is that, historically, abortion was justified on the grounds that a body would be better at feeling and living than its capitalist counterpart.

Yet, any imagination of a pro-abortion Marxism will have to take into account the eruptions of the real, as emerging from bodies' own material impossibility. Socialist imaginaries need to abandon communist cartoonish bodies, »who confront every obstacle only to emerge stronger still [which] is [the] same phantasy as the cat whose head explodes [after getting] blown off by dynamite but who, in the very next scene, appears once again intact and continues his pursuit of ›the class enemy‹, the mouse« (Žižek 2014, 185). The project of a Marxist pro-abortion politics has not yet started. Our uses of history need to acknowledge that, although important, Soviet Marxist policies were a mistake; paradoxically, this could lead us to a newer form of abortion politics.

## Notes

- 1 This article draws on my previous published work in *De-centering Queer Studies: Communist sexuality in the flow during and after the Cold War* (Manchester University Press, 2021). I want to thank Dr. Čarna Brković and Dr. Beate Binder for their invaluable assistance during the editing and publishing process.
- 2 Aratani, Lauren (2022): Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and House colleagues arrested during pro-choice protest. In: *The Guardian*, 19 July. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/19/aoc-arrested-protest-abortion-rights-democrats>
- 3 In the original Romanian: »era ca un copil bun, încrezător. Era ca o fată vrednică. N-au avut grija de viața lui« (my translation).

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## Films:

### Romania

- The District of Gaiety (Cartierul veseliei*, Marcus, 1964)
- Impossible Love (Imposibila iubire*, Vaeni, 1983)
- Love and Revolution (Dragostea și Revoluția*, Vitanidis, 1982)
- The Man Next to You (Omul de lângă tine*, Popescu, 1961)
- The Valley Resounds (Răsună Valea*, Călinescu, 1949)

### USSR

- Alone (Odna*, Kozintsev and Trauber, 1931)
- Chapaev* (Furmanov, 1934)
- Bed and Sofa (The Third Meschanskaya*, Room, 1927)

