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Reviews

Where Did Our Red Love Go?

- Reviews section -

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In *The origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1877), Friedrich Engels argued that the conditions that had given rise to monogamy and patriarchy “ basically, the need to manage the inheritance of wealth ” would soon pass away and take with them the prevailing forms of family and sexual life.

“We are now approaching a social revolution,” Engels wrote, “in which the hitherto existing economic foundations of monogamy will disappear just as certainly as will those of its supplement ” prostitution.” (81) Crucially, Engels did not believe that this social revolution would mean the end of love, or what he called “sex love,” but its realization.

If patriarchy arose with private property, Engels reasoned, then the demise of private property ought to make new, more humane, more equal relationships between the sexes not only possible but also desirable. In October 1917, the social revolution that Engels promised arrived, and with it the chance to test what he had merely prophesied 40 years earlier.

The new revolutionary Russian state granted women the right to vote and equal access to education and employment. It established day care for children so women could more easily work outside the home. Under the 1918 Family Code, it gave married women control over what they earned and owned “ previously, both belonged to husbands. Under the same law, it allowed men and women to divorce more or less at will. And in 1920, the country legalized abortion.

These reforms led to incredible changes, especially for women, but feminist revolutionaries in the Soviet Union sought an even more radical remaking of family and sexual life. On and off the page, few individuals did more to realize that vision than Alexandra Kollontai. Immediately after the Revolution, she became the People’s Commissar for Social Welfare and, in 1919, co-founder of the Zhenotdel, the influential (for awhile) Women’s Bureau.

She also criticized the dictatorial drift of the new country and, out of favor with Lenin, was shuffled out of the state as an ambassador to various countries, first Norway, then Mexico, and finally Sweden.

Before Kollontai left the Soviet Union she published a novella, *Vasilisa Malygina* (1923), translated into English in 1927 with the title *Red Love*. The novella, which tells the story of two lovers in the early days of the Russian Revolution, dramatized ideas she had worked out in earlier essays. In the novella, as elsewhere, Kollontai theorized what love might look like when freed from its capitalist imperatives.

In *Red Love*, for example, the main character, Vasilisa, discovers that her husband, Volodya, has found another lover, Nina. Rather than exercise her control over him, granted to her by marriage, Vasilisa allows him to leave. She sets out to bring up their child on her own “ or rather, with the help of her friend Gusha, and the newly established workers collective.

Basically, Vasilisa transfers her affection from her husband to her comrades and the state. Kollontai does not treat this as loss but as liberation.

Political and Sexual Revolutions

Where Did Our Red Love Go?

The editors of this collection of essays, *Red Love Across the Pacific: Political and Sexual Revolutions of the Twentieth Century*, have provocatively put Kollontai's novella at the center — or more accurately, at the start — of their inquiry into a fascinating if neglected part of 20th century history.

Like a theme in a fugue, *Red Love* — novella and notion — appears and reappears throughout the collection. It evokes the efforts on the part of revolutionaries in the Pacific Rim — everywhere from the United States and Mexico to East Asia (China, Japan, Korea) and Australia — to explore alternative forms of love as they also sought alternatives to capitalism.

As Ruth Barraclough, Heather Bowen-Struyk, and Paula Rabinowitz write in the introduction, “Red Love emerged as a way of naming the various possibilities beyond or provocations to bourgeois sexual morality, and it took on a life of its own as it unfolded across the Pacific region.” (xii-xiii)

Their volume, they write, “represents a new direction in exploring how love transforms subjects in revolutionary, postrevolutionary, and counterrevolutionary histories,” crossing “not just the Pacific, but also the great divide of the pre- and post-Cold War, offering compelling case studies of how the political and sexual revolutions of the twentieth century were alternatively championed or suppressed as regimes rose and fell.” (xv)

Some of those case studies are admittedly more compelling than others. In the first chapter, Julia L. Mickenberg follows some of the American women who traveled to the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s in search of the “possibility of a new kind of love and a transformed relationship with one’s sexuality.” (2)

Indulgently, Mickenberg calls their quest “Revolutionary Tourism.” “In the United States, after the Bolshevik revolution,” she writes, “commentators of all political stripes recognized that something very significant was happening in Russia to women’s position in society and their intimate relationships.” (9) Hearing the news, many women went to see for themselves and reported back — in letters, novels, and nonfiction — what they found.

Mickenberg treats all of these works more or less equally, but perhaps the best known of them was the British journalist Ella Winter’s 1933 travelogue *Red Virtue: Human Relationships in the New Russia*, which found a major publisher in the United States (Harcourt Brace) and was widely reviewed.

Ironically, many of these writers, Winter included, undertook their grand revolutionary tours in the middle years of the 1930s, just as Soviet policy toward women — as expressed in the 1936 Family Code — took a more conservative turn. That did not stop them, however, from finding evidence of the new relationships they sought.

In her contribution “Red Love in Korea: Rethinking Communism, Feminism, Sexuality,” Ruth Barraclough offers biographical sketches of some of the most famous women Communists in Korea in the 1920s and 1930s, when the country still struggled under Japanese rule.

These women included journalists, travel writers, students, even courtesans. Perhaps the most fascinating is Ho Jong-suk, who went from revolutionary writer in Korea to cofounder of its first socialist feminist organization to, after the establishment of North Korea in 1946, an official in the ruling Communist Party.

In that position Ho, like Kollontai, founded a Women’s League that secured basic rights for women within the newly revolutionary country. After that she served as Minister of Culture for a decade, and then for two years as Minister of Justice, where her story turns more sinister. After the Korean War, she participated in the North Korean version of the purges that tore through the Soviet Union 20 years earlier.

Ho Jong-suk both sent others to their deaths and, ultimately, was sent to her death by others, a history that reminds us that proponents of Red Love enjoyed no special privilege, moral or political, when Communism eventually turned on itself.

“Comrade Love” and the Future

Red Love and its challenge to conventional bourgeois sexual morality did not concern women alone, however, as Heather Bowen-Struyk shows in her chapter on “Comrade Love in Japanese Proletarian Literature,” as her subtitle puts it.

At first glance, proletarian literature of the 1930s, with its nearly exclusive focus on male workers as exploited labor and potential revolutionary subjects, often seems to shun love, whether conventional romantic or unconventional Red Love, either of which would only distract from the cause. Through close readings of two classics of Japanese proletarian literature, “The Crab Cannery Ship” (1929) and “The Factory Cell” (1930) by Hayama Yoshiki, Bowen-Struyk challenges this truism, exploring what she calls “comrade love” as a safe but nevertheless new form of Red Love.

By comrade love, Bowen-Struyk writes, she means “the intimacy between comrades in proletarian literature” and outside of literature, presumably “that acquired special significance, becoming the locus of emotional attachment, in a way that not only does not threaten the esprit de corps of revolutionary struggle (as romance or family might be represented), but, on the contrary, serves to strengthen it.” (60)

As Bowen-Struyk also shows, such love had to distinguish itself from earlier traditions of homosexuality in Japanese culture. Nevertheless, comrade love challenged the belief that love was something that only happened between men and women.

Like markers in a box of crayons, some of the essays in Red Love do not fit as well as others, especially when the concept of Red Love drifts away from the historical and biographical and toward the more conceptual and abstract. One or two essays, as well, cling to theoretical lifelines that at times tangle their prose and arguments into impenetrable knots.

Taken as a whole, though, the book, unlike most collections which wander around usually well-traveled territory, breaks new ground on a topic most readers, limited as they are by discipline and geography, will not have known much about before. In this and other respects, it makes a significant contribution to scholarship on the Left and, more generally, to discussions of gender and sexuality in the 20th century.

In the end, however, the book leaves a reader curious about the legacy and possibly unfinished work of Red Love. It took longer than it should have, and remains incomplete, but the West and by the West I mean capitalist democracies eventually made its own challenge to bourgeois sexual morality, whether by guaranteeing more rights to women, lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender people or, for better and for worse, by chipping away at the foundations of monogamy.

In the coming years, should we hope for more of the same? More rights, more equality, and more freedom to pick our sexual partners more or less as we choose? Many liberals would endorse such a future, but having read Red Love, one cannot help but wonder at the limits of such a vision.

Where Did Our Red Love Go?

What distinguished Red Love from (for lack of a better term) the sexual revolution, is the emphasis on economics found in the former and often neglected in the latter. Red Love, and queer and feminist socialisms more generally, remind us that while we might prefer to think that our relationships float free from who works for whom and for how much, they are in no small part still determined by them.

Just ask anyone, especially single parents, who struggle to arrange work, childcare, and their own desires into a meaningful whole. Free universal preschool or the right to use whichever bathroom one chooses may lessen those worries, but they will not eliminate them.

When it comes to family and sexual life, then, we have come a long way, as even Engels would recognize. Red Love, blessedly freed from the paranoid and murderous Communist states that gave rise to it, may yet have something to uncover about traveling the rest of the way.

[Against the Current](#)