Sexological Spring?
The international gathering of sexologists in Prague in 1968

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Doctors studying human sexuality in both East and West met at the first international conference – “Symposium sexuologicum pragense” – in Prague during the spring of a watershed year of 1968. Over 300 experts from 19 countries on 4 continents attended. While Americans and Russians highlighted the institutionalization of sexology in their respective countries, the Czechoslovak delegation focused mostly on sexual deviants committing crimes. What does this say about the discipline of sexology, a branch of medicine disciplining desire? What might be the reasons for such preoccupations at a time when the country (and most of the western world) was in political turmoil?

I understand sexology as part of what Nikolas Rose1 coined “psy-ences”: disciplines that wield modern technologies of self and as such structure contemporary societies. Psy-ences play a constitutive role in how we understand ourselves, and at the same time imbue power with an ethical edge. Governing is thus not merely a technical exercise of power but an ethical demonstration of truth, “one essential to each individual person over whom [power] is exercised.”2 Rose, however, connected psy-ences exclusively with the liberal West.3 On the contrary, I will argue that the psy-ence of sexology was present and indispensable for the Czechoslovak regime to navigate the people’s selves according to its changing priorities.

In this paper, I will analyze the documents from “Symposium sexuologicum pragense” and interpret them in the context of what sexology studied in the preceding and following decades. I will focus on the ways in which Czechoslovak experts negotiated their take on (deviant) sexualities with their international colleagues. This paper is part of a broader research project in which I explore the history of sexology in Czechoslovakia during communism. Gender and sexuality in communist Czechoslovakia were to a large extent formed by sexologists. Sexology, a medical branch cataloguing and curing human sexuality, existed in Czechoslovakia on an institutional level since 1921 when Sexological Institute was founded in Prague. Sexology existed uninterrupted during the whole communist period, unlike many disciplines studying people in their social interactions. Sexologists devised fertility treatments, recommended contraception, supplied sexual education, treated disorders in sexual function or desire and advised on marital life. The shifts in their attention were co-constitutive of larger societal changes.

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2 Ibid., 92.
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