

MEDICALIZATION OF MASTURBATION TRAVELS EAST:

A Serbian Case Study

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Masturbation is the universal secret shared by everyone but disclosed to no one.

– MICHEL FOUCAULT, 1990, page 43.

IN THE HISTORY OF western societies, the social and moral condemnation of the act of masturbation can be traced. From the Judeo-Christian theological perspective, it is regarded as a sin: the biblical version advances the story of Onan spilling his seed as a refusal of levirate - to father his dead brother's child. Thus, the problem with masturbation was the destruction and waste of the male seed. It was in fact viewed not only as a sin, but as a crime against nature. It was presented as an unnatural sexual act that was shameful and deserving of divine punishment, as it did not have as its goal to procreate, to conceive, but was oriented towards pure enjoyment of sexual

pleasure (Vidal, 2004). For fear of punishment, masturbation was, as the quote above would suggest, treated as a secret.

With the rise of medicine and medical authority from the Renaissance onwards, until the 18th and 19th centuries, however, masturbation started being seen as a pathology, as a disease. This did not mean that the previous moral and theological understandings were replaced. On the contrary, they were even more emphatically justified. Treating masturbation as a disease provided proof that it was a sin. "Scientific rationality does not replace religious or moral injunctions, but joins them in a novel fashion" (Vidal, 2004, p.274).

From the Renaissance, Western culture had begun to develop a new technique for internalizing social norms regarding morality and sexual behavior (Foucault, 1987). These claims are connected with the idea of confessions, as a new form of truth production (Foucault, 1987). In other words, sexuality was made to speak. Masturbation, when viewed as a disease, became something that needed to be confessed to the doctor for fear of worsening one's condition or for fear of death. It could no longer be kept a secret.



The literature on the medicalization of masturbation has been mostly limited to the study of the rise of this phenomenon in Western Europe and the United States. In this paper I will expand this theoretical framework east and present the case study of a publication on anti-masturbation from an Eastern European country, Serbia, from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The reason for looking at a non-western case study is to question to what extent the

theoretical framework for understanding the medicalization in the west is applicable to examples from the east. In this paper I will look at the example of the nineteenth century Serbian physician Đoko Jovanović's book, *How our student dies. Onanism* (Jovanović, 1890). This publication was apparently very popular, having three editions come out - the first edition in 1890, the second in 1912, and the last in 1922. The author, Doctor Jovanović, was a prominent doctor who taught medicine at the Great School in Belgrade (which would later become the University of Belgrade).

Following the theoretical framework provided by the study of western examples, I shall try, by placing this publication in its specific geopolitical context, and by comparing it to the western examples, to answer the question of the social, cultural and political context in which this book was written and why then. In this paper I will show that this publication emerges in times of great political upheaval in the Balkans when the questions of national borders and the processes of nation

building were happening. On this background, focusing on the physical bodies of specific individuals (male students) meant situating these unrests in the realm of medicine. If the cause of the problem was medical (masturbation), then the solution to the nation's tensions and troubles would reside in changing the habits of these young men, disciplining them in order to achieve stability as a nation.



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WESTERN EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN FRAMEWORK

From the late 18th century, Foucault argues, we can start tracing a rupture in the previous regimes of power, the sovereign power, to a new form of power regime that had arisen in the modern era, and that had as its main concern the body (Foucault, 1990). In this new power regime, life itself became the object of power. This new form of power Foucault called biopower - a form of power

arisen in the modern era that is interested in the intimate relations of social subjects with their own bodies, and with the body of the entire population. The rise of scientific practices, such as statistics, had as its goal to create the norm of a (healthy) population. Medicine and doctors were seen as caretakers of the health not only of individual bodies, but of the entire population. They became the arbiters of what was healthy and what was not, and thus they were the ones with authority to bring masturbation out of the seclusion and secrecy of sin. They possessed the medical gaze that would allow them to see on the male body the symptoms of masturbation. The (male) body itself was made to confess because on it the physician read the evidence of masturbation. But this "evidence" that was read on the body could vary depending on the social and cultural context. "Masturbation is a kind of polyvalent causality ... to which doctors in the 18th century will immediately attach the entire arsenal of physical, nervous and psychiatric illnesses" (Foucault, 2003, p.59-60).

"The culmination and transformation of the understanding

of masturbation from sin to disease in Western Europe occurred with the publishing of Tissot's book *Onanism* in 1760" (Stolberg, 2011, p.169). In his book, Tissot, a Swiss doctor, connected masturbation with the new medical paradigm of nerves, "the central explanatory model of disease in the 18 century" (Stolberg, 2011, p.170). The nerves were understood to be "more or less thick strings running through the body" (Stolberg, 2011, p.177). In this logic of the nerves, circulation of the semen in the body was seen as healthy. This circulation happened through nerves. "They connected the human body with the soul" (Vidal, 2004, p.256) and this was seen as a natural process. The lack of these circulating fluids was seen as the cause of disease and eventually death.

Yet masturbation was not perceived as a disease that came from nature, in fact it was seen as counter-natural. Tissot claimed that it was the urban dwellers more than the people who lived in villages that were afflicted with this disease (Vidal, 2004). In Tissot's view masturbation was the disease of too much free time and

imagination, the disease of the rising bourgeoisie.



The medicalization of masturbation meant that it could stand in the place of larger socio-cultural and political values and norms. Stolberg explained that the rise in popularity of anti-masturbation campaigns in England occurred at the time of the rise of Protestantism. That is, the viewing of masturbation as a disease fit in nicely with the desires for hygiene and marriage of the Protestant faith in the 18th century (Stolberg, 2011). In the United States, during the 19th century, anti-masturbation campaigns became popular right after the Civil War and around political tensions surrounding slavery (Castronovo, 2001). Castronovo writes about this shift of discourse from the slavery of black men to the more democratic slavery of man to himself, slavery to masturbation. Having suffered this shift in focus, slavery became ahistorical and depoliticized. The male body was seen as the embodiment of the desired aspiration of the

nation. If this body is sick, then so is the nation (Castronovo, 2001).

THE EXAMPLE OF SERBIA:

AN EASTERN EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK
The first edition of Jovanović's publication came out at the end of the 19th century in 1890 and had two subsequent reprints, in 1912 and in 1922. Because of the scope of this research I will only focus on the first two editions as they both take place within the Kingdom of Serbia, while the last one was published in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia which would require a much more detailed analysis.

In order to understand the significance of these dates for Serbia and to place the book in its historical time-frame, I shall first place it in the larger theoretical framework regarding the study of the medicalization of masturbation. Second, I shall present a short geo-political history of Serbia that relates to the period of the first two editions - the period after Serbia's independence from the Ottoman Empire to the beginning of WWI.



Jovanović's book addresses not just the health of the individual,

but of the entire population of Serbia. He starts off with demographics, stating that although the country has a high birth rate, the life expectancy is 22 years. "From this simple fact it is plain to see how deadly this is to our family and our country" (Jovanović, 1890). By "this" he is referring to masturbation, which he sees as one of the three main illnesses in Serbia, causing what he called the exhaustion of the nerves. This means that he too, like Tissot, was explaining masturbation through the paradigm of the nerves. In his book, he represents masturbation as a disease that affects the young men of Serbia, and denies the possibility of women being afflicted, because in his view "they are passive in the love act" (Jovanović, 1890). His target audience is male school boys, aged 12-17. They are portrayed as weak, coughing blood, easily distracted, pale and of a general "sad physiognomy" (Jovanović, 1890). All of this, in Jovanović's opinion, was due to lack of semen in their circulations.

Today the seed is considered the noblest gift that nature has given a male organism. In the seed lies tremendous power that gives the

male face power, freshness and beauty (Jovanović, 1890) [...] A man without seed is moody, thin, short of breath, of an unnatural softness, a wimp, and of female character. (Jovanović, 1890)

From this quotation we can infer that Jovanović's understanding of good health rests on the paradigm of the nerves. He views the healthy male body as one in which there is a circulation of the seed throughout the body, and if this is stopped or lost, there results sickness, or worse even, the loss of manhood. The point behind such a gendered framing was to distinguish what kinds of sexual behaviors were deemed as acceptable and which were not. In order to highlight the importance of adhering to social norms of sexual behavior, Jovanović follows the same pattern that can be seen in Western publications. He provides narratives, stories of patients that he has witnessed suffering from masturbation. The role of these confessional stories is twofold. On one side, they are used to establish his credibility and authority as a physician who just by looking at the patient knows that he is a masturbator. On the other side, these stories are a type of

“medico-moral strategy” (Vidal, 2004, 268) that has been used in these types of publications to invoke a moral judgment and repulsion of the reader towards the represented patients and reinforce the values and norms that distinguish accepted from unaccepted sexual behavior.



One of these examples is the case of a boy who lived in the village and started becoming sick - coughing blood, growing weak and doing poorly in school. The point Jovanović wanted to make with this particular story was to show that the disease was not limited to the urban areas, but was widespread in Serbian villages as well. This is a different understanding of the illness of masturbation than the one in Western Europe that was considered a disease of the civilized, urban bourgeoisie. The reason I bring this example here is the fact that he presented this young man not only as a masturbator but as a homosexual, calling his homosexuality a “perversion” (Jovanović, 1890). In the story, the patient also confesses that he has never slept with a

woman, but during the breaks when he was in the village he would “chase chickens, turkeys and fillies to perform this strange urge” (Jovanović, 1890).

The underlining point of this story is to shock the reader and to present a strong distinction between acceptable sexual practices and unacceptable ones. Even though these were all social norms, the authority of the medical expert made the unacceptable acts not only forbidden but deadly as well. In this we can see the shift that occurred in the 18th and 19th century with regards to the question of authority, though the norms and values themselves did not change as much. “At the time when religious arguments lost their influence on contemporary society, medicine provided a new justification for traditional forms of acceptable sexual behavior and sexual moderation” (Stolberg, 2011, p.212). In this sense, the logic of the publication from Serbia can be read as similar to the logic of the previous publication in the West. It is even highly likely that Jovanović, given that he was well versed in the fashionable medical paradigm of

the nerves, could have read the works of Tissot and others, and fashioned his book to resemble Tissot's. The question that needs to be asked, though, is why this publication came out when it did, that is, what were the socio-cultural and political events that set the background for this discourse on sexuality?

In the beginning of the 19th century Serbia as an independent country did not exist, it was divided amongst the Ottoman Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. From 1860, the part of Serbia that was under the Ottoman Empire gained some autonomy by becoming a dukedom within the empire. It was only after the rebellion and war against the Empire that Serbia became a Kingdom in 1882. It is in this period that the Serbian education system emerged. The same year that the country was proclaimed a monarchy, the Serbian Great School was established in Belgrade, paving the way for the creation of the first University. All of the teachers and all of the learned individuals of Serbia before that had gotten their education in Central and Western Europe: Budapest, Vienna and Paris (Mitrović, 2007).

Unlike other monarchies, Serbian monarchs did not come from a long lineage of nobility. The two competing royal families, the Obrenović and the Karadorđević, both stem from the leaders of the two rebellions against the Ottoman Empire. On coming to power, King Peter I Karadorđević had to tackle the mounting debt and corruption that was left behind by his predecessor as well as growing political tensions with both Austro-Hungarian Empire (over Bosnia and Herzegovina) on one side, and the residing Ottoman powers on the other. From 1912 until 1913, the Balkans were shaken by two wars. These wars were seen as a prelude to the First World War that started after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, Bosnia in 1914 (Mitrović, 2007).



I suggest that the reason why the discourse on masturbation arose at that time, and why its target were young men, was because of the fears related to the formation of the new nation state. The question of masturbation was not only seen as a self-inflicting disease that

harms the individual but that harms the person's family and, most importantly, the nation, for as Jovanović wrote, "Killing yourself, you are killing the country" (1890).

The issues of "public health arose in the period of the creation of the nation state" (Peling, 1997, p.276). This is true for this case study as well, because the first publication came out only a couple of years after Serbia's independence from the Ottoman Empire, the second during the Balkan Wars which were also about the questions of borders and state formation, and even the last edition in 1922 was riddled with internal nationalistic and ethnic disputes in Yugoslavia. For this reason, it is important to understand what type of nation-formation process was taking place during the time of the first edition of the book. The biggest difference between western and eastern representations of masturbation was in the approach to intellectualism. In Vidal's analysis of Tissot's work "too much intellectual work is an obstacle" (Vidal, 2004, p.260) and a cause for masturbation, given that the "gens de lettres" have too much time on their hands and let their

imaginations run wild. Jovanović, on the other hand, sees masturbation as the cause for poor intellectual achievements. His primary concern is with the prospering, future Serbian intellectuals, the ones that are supposed to build the nation.

There is a living connection between the brain and the sexual organs, and the more one masturbates the stupider he becomes. It makes him into an idiot and a moron. Yet equally it is idiots and morons that masturbate the most (Jovanović, 1890).



The fear for the mental health of the emerging nation can be understood from Gellner's perspective on the construction of the nation state, especially of a collectivity that was previously subordinate to a larger entity (Gellner, 1998), such as the Ottoman Empire. He argues that for this type of nation construction and reproduction of national and nationalist ideology, a key role is played by the new intellectual elite (Gellner, 1998). If the

nation's intellectuals are perceived as inadequate, their lack of self-control and their deviant sexual behavior put in jeopardy the entire nation-building project.

At stake was an issue far greater than the liberties that young men were taking with their bodies: for if the physical body provided a template for the republic, did the spectacle of sexually degraded white men also suggest the collective body's lack of political virtue? (Castronovo 2001, 63).

As Castronovo pointed out, the issue was not just that masturbation, as a disease, was affecting physical bodies, it was that it was harming specific types of bodies. Male bodies, as the bodies of desired citizens, are seen as the creators and pillars of the nation. The issue was that it was expected to be reciprocal, that is to say, that the nation depended on its citizens and depended on them to behave in a certain way "because it (the country) rightly expects ... help with its endeavors" (Jovanović, 1890). Focusing on the bodies of young men allowed not only for a tighter control of sexuality, as I have mentioned above, by

creating ideal norms of sexual behavior in opposition to socially perceived deviant expressions of sexuality. Thus, this book can be read from a Foucauldian perspective as a form of biopower, the power to dictate what a healthy sexuality should look like. In this sense, sexuality and sexual behavior can be seen as a crucial identity marker. By creating a definite opposite to desired sexual behavior, such as masturbation – as a form of deviancy from the norm – biopower is asserted on and through the body of the individual, creating disciplined and docile bodies of citizens (Foucault, 1987).



The physical body of the young Serbian students embodied the political turbulences and crisis of the times when there were growing uncertainties with respect to the stability of the independence gained through revolution and war. With these political and economic tensions, the discourse about the actual physical body of the citizens is read as the cause and the cure for the growing political issues. Shifting from the real body politic to the actual bodies

allows for questions and problems concerning the everyday lives of the citizens to move from their historically and politically situated context to the ahistorical, a contextual universal sphere of illness and health.



CONCLUSION

To conclude, by placing Đoko Jovanović's book *How our student dies. Onanism* (Jovanović, 1890) in both a specific geopolitical and larger theoretical context, it can be stated that this specific discourse of medicalization of masturbation was used to change the focus of growing anxieties over the problematic nation-state formation going on at the time, from the economic and political causes to the realm of the medical, that is presenting the afflictions and troubles of the nation as a disease that attacked the bodies of young men, which disabled their mental capacities and created problems for the entire nation. The cure for the nation's problems was not seen in politics and economics but in medicine. This is by no means a unique usage of anti-

masturbation campaigns for this purpose. As Castronovo pointed out, a similar usage was documented in the United States after the Civil War when slavery was questioned.



What is different between this case and the previously studied cases from the West is the understanding of the cause of masturbation. As Vidal pointed out, in the Western countries masturbation was seen as a disease of civilization – of too much intellectual stimulus, exclusive to the urban population. In the Serbian case, in contrast, it was widespread in both rural and urban areas and it was caused by lack of intellectual stimuli and masturbation itself hampered intellect and memory of the afflicted. This was a problem not just for the individuals themselves but for the entire process of nation building, if understood from a Gellnerian perspective of the importance of the intellectual elite in the process of the formation of the nation. □

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