Sarah Waterfeld

Sex with Gysi

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Presented by: Ivana Perica

This satirical novel depicts the first major crisis in the history of Die Linke (The Left Party or simply The Left), which in 2007 brought together the factions of the German left that had not previously been adequately represented in the German parliament – the Bundestag. *Sex with Gysi* is an entertaining document of a possible beginning of the end of The Left – or a premonition of an ominous, perhaps final split, which, however, did not occur until early 2024, when Sahra Wagenknecht founded a new party. The content alone – a story about the failed attempt to give the party a new direction – points to the novel's clear political orientation. However, politics are negotiated here both in the realm of the main character's private life (marriage and motherhood) and in the interval between opportunistic chances for investigative journalism and the overarching question of serving or harming the “only hope” (271) for left-leaning voters and sympathisers in Germany – their Left Party.

While working in the bar *Die Eins* in Wilhelmstraße, in the immediate vicinity of the Reichstag (a historic building in which the German parliament has its seat), an overambitious student and wannabe investigative journalist named Ronen Wellmer overhears an extremely interesting telephone conversation: Gregor Gysi and an unknown interlocutor are arranging what appears to be nothing less than group sex. Guided by his ambition to be the journalist who uncovers a major political scandal in the country, Ronen has no idea that the words 'fellatio', 'rapina seminum' and 'gangbang' are code words invented by Gysi after the magazine *Der Spiegel* revealed that The Left Party's parliamentarians are under observation by Germany's domestic intelligence agency (see *Der Spiegel*).

Gysi himself is worried about the future of The Left which finds itself in a predicament after Gesine Lötzsch resigned as co-chairperson for private reasons. This is one of the most difficult periods in the party's still young history: members are not interested in connecting with the working class, which should be its main electoral body; the party lacks a work ethic and real political rigour in its leadership structures; finally, it is expecting big losses in the next elections (which will follow in 2013). In addition, the left-wing voters are turning to new and unorthodox international events such as the election of François Hollande as the President of France and the upsurge of the left-wing party Syriza in Greece, the extra-parliamentary Occupy movement and the rise of protest parties such as The Pirates (The Pirate Party Germany / Piratenpartei Deutschland).

The dynamics within the party take an unexpected turn when Syana Wasserbrink, a research assistant in the party's so-called East Office (Ostbüro) and a complete newcomer to the Bundestag, dares to submit her candidacy for the party chairmanship – an undertaking that is doomed to failure from the outset, but which she hopes will trigger a generational discussion about hierarchies and the right of women to speak within the party ranks. Syana, mother of two and wife to a depressed

Andreas who is having a hard time with her career move, is herself the offspring of a West German activist couple who are on record with the German secret service for their anti-state activities in the 1970s. With an anti-authoritarian upbringing but no sympathy for the GDR, to which large sections of The Left are still nostalgically attached, she embarks on her unexpected career leap partly out of sincere commitment and partly to compensate for her unsatisfactory private life. As a lateral entrant to the party, Syana encounters the mistrust of many experienced party members who have made much greater investments in their political careers. She does not run for the leadership position in the party completely on her own initiative, however, but is in fact persuaded to do so by a few colleagues. The mastermind behind the operation is in fact the wily old bird Gysi himself, who sees her West-German origins and her politically and privately clean record, free of controversy and affairs, as a good opportunity to give The Left new impetus and polish up its reputation in the public eye. As far as Syana's authentic motivation is concerned, she wants to draw attention to the extra-parliamentary left's dissatisfaction with the party structures (241) and hopes to bring about a change of course in the entire party climate. Regardless of her bold intention to simply give members an impetus to disagree and criticise, Gysi sees her candidacy as a good chance to resolve the crisis. Alluding to Syana's endeavour as a sign of a deeper crisis in the party membership, he warns his comrades: "You must elect a party leadership that ensures that fights like the one we are currently experiencing can no longer take place." (188) For Gysi, Syana is therefore a more than necessary *pharmakós* – a scapegoat that the party needs to cleanse its ranks and emerge from the crisis stronger and emboldened.

Combining the genres of detective story, relationship novel and social novel, *Sex with Gysi* is told in the third person, but with a shifting focalisationthat allows the reader to get to know the thoughts, doubts and hopes of most of the protagonists. Syana's role as a woman in big politics is by no means stylised as heroic: sometimes she is even ridiculed, but she is by no means stereotypical. Her agenda is emancipatory in the sense that the novel represents the point of view of those who are too young and too inexperienced to get involved in politics. Her role as a woman fighting on two fronts – personal and professional – is also significant here, suggesting that one should not expect a Holywood-esque success story of a political newcomer but the bitter reality of a West-German leftist in the high-ranking East German establishment, and a female character who must overcome the obstacles of gender. The main character's plans, her speech at the party congress, her recalcitrant attitudes and her rebellion against the political stance of her partners are by no means free of irony. Not least, the fact that the main protagonist's name is reminiscent of the author's name – Syana Wasserbrink clearly echoes Sarah Waterfeld – says something about the diminished heroism and dwindling hope in The Left. In an interview she gave to the journal *Edition F*, the author points out the parallels between Syana and her own candidacy for the party chairmanship (see Follmann and Waterfeld). Ultimately, the novel is not only a document about the downfall of a party, but it is also revealing in terms of the failure, or impossibility, of initiating a discussion from within.

Ridiculing the attempt to encourage self-criticism among comrades, the novel restricts its political 'message' to a single train of thought, which, however, remains unsaid: when Syana unexpectedly meets Gysi at the back of a hall where the party congress is taking place, she wants to warn him about the state of things, yet she is unable to speak. This encounter takes place at the very end of the novel, and it can be said that *Sex with Gysi* in fact has two endings – one told from Syana's perspective (270–272), the other from Gysi's (285–286). While she hesitates to address Gysi directly and explain the real needs of The Left to him, but otherwise behaves respectfully, his hesitation is explicitly gendered: he decides not to engage in conversation because Syana, a woman of a new generation, would surely accuse him of sexual harassment, even rape: "That's what these young, ambitious things do these days. If you spurn them, they immediately come at you

with sexual assault. Gysi decided not to take any risks in this respect. He nodded briefly in her direction, clicked his heels together and hurriedly entered the hall. They were already waiting for him." (286)

Further reading:

Follmann, Silvia, and Sarah Waterfeld. "Wir werden von Angst regiert." Interview. *Edition F*, 2015, editionf.com/sarah-waterfeld-sex-mit-gysi/. Last access 16 Sept. 2024.

Der Spiegel. "Delicate Operation: German Intelligence Watching Far-Left Politicians." 23 Jan. 2012, www.spiegel.de/international/germany/delicate-operation-german-intelligence-watching-far-left-politicians-a-810773.html. Last access 16 Sept. 2024.

Waterfeld, Sarah: *Was vom Hummer übrig blieb*. Berlin: Eulenspiegel Verlag, 2016 (sequel to *Sex with Gysi*).

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This title was not censored before publishing

Storytelling

The Political Novel: A Palimpsest

By: Ivana Perica