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The Historical Trajectory of Gay/Lesbian Identity in Russia as it Relates to Contention

Introduction

People who experience non-heterosexual attraction have always existed—in both Russia and the United States. However, the position these people hold in society has changed and so has their access to power.

The social theorist Michel Foucault described in *The History of Sexuality*, how, in the nineteenth century, the growth of discourses on sexuality in educational, legal, medical, and psychiatric institutions led to the shift of sexual epistemes: what was once simply an act, sodomy, became a “species,” the homosexual.¹ In much of the West, and the United States in particular, the additional influences of capitalism and identity politics led to the appearance of gay and lesbian identities.² As opposed to a simple category imposed by another, an identity implies self-categorization: people lay claim to labels that help them navigate social, and especially public, space.

In Russia, on the other hand, the influences of Orthodox Christianity and communism gave rise to a different conceptualization of sex, gender, and sexual attraction. The homosexual “species” appeared much later in Russia than it did in the rest of Europe and the United States. The particularities of Russian religious, medical, and state institutions did not allow homosexuality to coalesce into an identity per se. Other identities falling under the LGBT [Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transsexual] umbrella similarly failed to coalesce. This difference accounts for the ineffectiveness of Western methods of contention in Russia, as evidenced by the actions surrounding the 2014 Sochi Olympics and the Anti-Gay Propaganda Law. Moreover, it

¹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 43.
² D’Emilio.
demonstrates the cultural specificity of the position of the individual in society, the methods of contending for power, and the institutions through which this contention is most effective.

In the interest of maintaining sociolinguistic and historical accuracy, the terms “gay” and “lesbian” must be used with caution. Although humans have always experienced homosexual attraction and exhibited homosexual behavior, homosexuality as a “species” and an identity are fairly modern developments. Foucault argued that since the 1700s, sexuality has become “inscribed not only in an economy of pleasure but in an ordered system of knowledge,” effectively disciplining the individual as a sexual subject.\(^3\) This system of knowledge focused on understanding sexuality through medical, legal, and religious discourse. Early adherence to the sexual standard was maintained through social surveillance in the form of confession, where any deviation was considered temporary.\(^4\) However, paralleling the shift from punishment to discipline of the body, sexuality became associated with a permanent disposition of the soul.\(^5\) The educational, legal, medical, and psychiatric institutions gained the authority to “formulate the uniform truth of sex” by “defining new rules for the game of powers and pleasures.”\(^6\)

Under this Western \textit{scientia sexualis}, sex, gender, and sexual attraction became institutionalized. In other words, heterosexual monogamy was perceived “as a norm, one that was stricter, perhaps, but quieter. On the other hand, what came under scrutiny was the sexuality of children, mad men and women, and criminals.”\(^7\) The “unnatural” or homosexual was thus separated from the “natural” or heterosexual, and the new categories of “normal” and “abnormal” emerged. Rather than being excluded completely, the “abnormal” was specified, elaborated, and highlighted, incorporating deviant sexual behaviors “into the individual” and

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\(^3\) Foucault, \textit{History of Sexuality}, 69.  
\(^4\) Ibid., 37.  
\(^5\) Ibid.; Foucault, \textit{Discipline and Punish}.  
\(^6\) Foucault, \textit{History of Sexuality}, 69; 48.  
\(^7\) Ibid., 38.
making sexuality not an act, but a species.\textsuperscript{8} It is under these conditions that heterosexual and homosexual individuals came to exist as categories. As will be discussed below, medical and legal discourse on sexuality appeared at a later time in Russia than in it did in the rest of the Western world, and it took a different direction under the strict state control of the Soviet Union. As a result, gender is still deeply institutionalized in Russia today.

In Western discourse, three categories are used to classify sexuality: sex, gender, and sexual attraction. The definitions of these terms, however, are subject to interpretation and vary across theoretical approaches.\textsuperscript{9} These categories are not necessarily interconnected. Sex is usually considered a biological criterion that determines whether a person is a male or a female.\textsuperscript{10} Although some doctors classify sex by the reproductive capabilities of a person, there are a number of potential biological markers of sex, including: genes, gonads, hormones, brain development, genitalia, or other characteristics. These markers do not always agree with each other, and their disagreement may not always manifest physically. As such, no one single characteristic is enough to determine the sex of a person.\textsuperscript{11} The experiences of intersex people suggest that even the biological or “inborn” criteria of sex are actually located on a continuum, rather than in the dichotomous model that for a long time has been dominant in Western society.\textsuperscript{12}

The term gender, on the other hand, refers to the cues that people use to place each other in a category—man or woman. Gender is performative: West and Zimmerman describe it as something that is “done” or created and recreated through behavioral processes that have the

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 44.  
\textsuperscript{9} Vornonina, 35.  
\textsuperscript{10} West and Zimmerman, 127.  
\textsuperscript{11} Hines, 34.  
\textsuperscript{12} Preeves, 33.
power to alter the meaning of gender “at the risk of gender assessment.”\footnote{West and Zimmerman, 126–136.} Gender markers include appearance and behavior. According to nomenclature, here lies the distinction between transgender and transsexual individuals who have medically transitioned, although it is commonly considered more appropriate to forgo this intensive categorization and refer to the group as “trans.” Although there is not much research on the subject, there are people who identify as “gender fluid,” thereby supporting the continuum model of gender performativity.

Finally, sexual attraction is in large part unrelated to either sex or gender. The term refers to the gender that a person is attracted to, and it, too, exists on a continuum. Even in the academic world, there is no truly inclusive model of sexuality. The Kinsey scale suggests that it ranges from “completely heterosexual” to “completely homosexual,” but, given the existence of self-identified asexuals, among other factors, this model is not entirely accurate. When studied from a more critical perspective, sexual attraction is typically split into two categories: identity and actual behavior.

Western discourse on sexuality is not interchangeable with Russian discourse on sexuality. For example, translation has been a major barrier to the complete assimilation of Western academic discourses on sexuality since Soviet times. Nosova and Heyder discuss how, when translators of academic texts, especially in developing fields such as Gender Studies, encounter words that have no equivalent in the language into which they are translating, they play a role in the creation of new words. They can either choose to directly translate a phrase, descriptively translate it, or transliterate it.\footnote{Nosova and Heyder, 25.} Translators, therefore, have a significant effect on academic discussions in certain languages. Any mistakes that the first translators make may become common usage. However, this influence does not necessarily extend to popular or
“street” usage. There are multiple common translations of the English word “identity” in Russian, including the transliteration *identichnost’* and, the approximation *samosoznanie*. These words are understood in academic literature, but the effect of their meaning in popular discussions is not the same as it would be in the United States. The social meaning of *samosoznanie* is directly tied to consciousness of self and thereby carries a meaning more akin to “self-identification,” whereas *identichnost’* is more of a criterion of how one is perceived by others. This is an important sociolinguistic phenomenon, as well as methodological constraint, to keep in mind.

Another point of divergence between Western and Russian discourses concerns the issue of diametrical opposition. Historically, Western as well as popular conceptualizations of cultural and biological structures have centered on the diametrically opposed categories of good and evil, the Western and Eastern worlds, and male and female. More recently, academics have begun to ease away from the use of dichotomies in their work, seeking instead to talk about spectrums or eschewing a linear perspective entirely. In “traditional Russian academic discourse” according to Nosova and Heyder, on the other hand, “binary oppositions are still widespread…. Often, any doubt of the accuracy of a dichotomy is either not perceived at all or is met with misunderstanding.”[15] If the dichotomization of sexes and genders is not widely questioned within the Russian academic world, then it is highly likely that members of the Russian LGBT communities are also interpreting their own identities and the world around them in a way different from Western and, in particular, American LGBT individuals. This theory is supported by Laurie Essig’s model of Soviet sexual “subjectivities,” discussed below.[16]
It is also worth noting that terms like “transgender” and “transsexual” are historically and culturally specific. There are other cultures where the gender dichotomy does not exist or is troubled as a result of the presence of third sexes or genders, say, for example, the hijra of India.\(^\text{17}\) The use of either “transsexual” or “transgender” to describe the hijra would be inappropriate. Similarly, searching for the existence of these individuals in historical periods where these labels did not exist is also incorrect. As will be discussed later, the legal and medical institutionalization of a dichotomous model of gender in Russia has led to a unique response to people who do not fall neatly into the gender binary.

While Russian and Western discourse on the non-heterosexual “species” has led to parallel models of sexuality, the distinction between the two cultures also lies in their approach to the concept of identity. Homosexual self-identification is a modern phenomenon of Western politics. In “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” John D’Emilio argues that self-identifying gay and lesbian people have not always existed. He explains how the free labor market created by the advent of capitalism “has allowed large numbers of men and women in the late twentieth century to call themselves gay, to see themselves as part of a community of similar men and women, and to organize politically on the basis of that identity.”\(^\text{18}\) Over the course of two centuries in the United States, as capitalism expanded and family members went out to sell their labor for capital, the family gradually stopped being a self-sufficient locus of production. During the country’s early history, when all sexuality outside of marriage was condemned as sodomy, there was no social space for individuals to be gay.

However, as Western, and in particular American, society eventually grew more interdependent, the concept of “family” took on a new meaning: that of the private sphere, a

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\(^{17}\) Nanda; Lorber, 56.

\(^{18}\) D’Emilio, 102.
source of “emotional satisfaction and happiness,” as opposed to the public sphere.\textsuperscript{19} Capitalism aided in the distinction of public and private spheres, and women were relegated to the private sphere, where they were designated the keepers of hearth and home, whereas men would leave the house to make money and engage in political action. Because men had more access to the public sphere, the gay identity that began to develop was more visible than the lesbian identity. Additionally, the advent of World Wars I and II created spaces that were primarily homosocial (i.e., mostly male army regiments and mostly female factories), where homosocial interaction increased the likelihood of homosexual behavior, which in turn increased the chance for the development of a homosexual identity.\textsuperscript{20} Women’s entry into the workplace was also an entry into the public sphere, allowing them the opportunity to develop homosexual identities as well. In the 1940s, urban spaces, where gay/lesbian communities were able to form, therefore became centers of the gay liberation movement. On the other hand, in the rural West, Kinsey recorded homosexual activity, but “little consciousness of gay identity,” suggesting that even in the United States gay self-identification was an urban phenomenon.\textsuperscript{21} Nevertheless, the labels created during those times (e.g., at the Newport Station Naval Training Center in 1919, these included “fairies,” “pogues,” and “husbands”) did not correspond to today’s nomenclature, nor with the discourse of the professional medical elite.\textsuperscript{22} At this point in history, the institutional categorization of sexual behavior was not concrete or cohesive enough for the formation of strong interpersonal identities.

An increase of visibility in urban areas, unfortunately, also meant an increase in oppression. While capitalism decentralized the family economically, it also remapped it as a

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 102–104.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 108.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 106; Chauncey, 205.
location of “love, affection, and emotional security.” Gay/lesbian individuals became “scapegoats for the social instability of the system” and were subject to persecution and surveillance during the McCarthy era and less systematic (but still pervasive) persecution subsequently.\textsuperscript{23} In short, D’Emilio argues,

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capitalism has created conditions that allow some men and women to organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex. It has made possible the formation of urban communities of lesbians and gay men and, more recent, of a politics based on a sexual identity.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

Foucault’s theory suggests that very salient homosexual identity is not a logical outcome of increased freedom in sexuality; it is a product of stricter categorization that is historically and culturally specific to the United States. There are notable drawbacks to this increased salience. D’Emilio argues that the present-day conceptualization of gay/lesbian identities in the United States is built on a mythical history of gay men and lesbians that overlooks the constructed nature of their identities. In the interest of visibility and identity politics, it extends the reality of the present into the past and suggests that “silence, invisibility, and isolation” are essential characteristics of gay life.\textsuperscript{25} As a result, American gay identity politics suffer from an “overreliance on a strategy of coming out” and the biological, essentialist “myth of the homosexual,” which in the early 1970s, at the beginning of the movement, served a “positive political function.”\textsuperscript{26} Since the 1970s, however, the gay rights movement has become locked in place due to the oversimplification of the identity model.\textsuperscript{27} There have been longitudinal studies of sexuality, for example, that have actually discovered that women change the sexuality they

\begin{footnotes}
\item[23] D’Emilio 108–109.
\item[24] Ibid., 104.
\item[25] Ibid., 101.
\item[26] Ibid., 101.
\item[27] Ibid., 101.
\end{footnotes}
identify with over the course of their lives. As it is less dependent on identity politics, the Russian model of sexuality in practice allows for less political maneuvering but more fluidity.

Power relations are the key to understanding the difference between the Russian and American conceptualization of homosexuality. Sociologist Michael Mann describes social power as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be able to carry out his own will despite resistance.” Power can be distributive, where one person obtains power over and at the expense of another; or collective, where people cooperate to gain power over each other. Each person’s search for distributive and collective power leads to the formation of institutionalized structures in society, which are “necessary to achieve routine collective goals.” As a result, “distributive power, that is, social stratification, also becomes an institutionalized feature of social life.” According to Mann, the four sources of social power, the networks that have the greatest capacity “for organizing intensive and extensive, authoritative and diffused, social cooperation,” are the networks of ideological, economic, military, and political power. However, it can be argued that another important source of power is sexuality. Sexuality is located within a complex web of institutional power structures. It is part of the family institution, although not exclusively. At various points in history, both religious and medical institutions have attempted to claim authority in dictating proper sexual behavior. On the other hand, sexuality also plays an important part in organizing attempts to access power and to negotiate for more structural power through institutions like those of politics and mass media.

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28 Diamond.
29 Mann, 6.
30 Ibid., 6–7.
31 Ibid., 27–28.
Mann argues that this model provides “a simple answer to why the masses do not revolt.”

Essentially, because they “lack collective organization to do otherwise, they are embedded within collective and distributive power organizations by others.”

On the other hand, philosopher Axel Honneth argues that contention is not just political in nature, but can be viewed from a moral perspective, insofar as “the motives for social resistance and rebellion are formed in the context of moral experiences stemming from the violation of deeply rooted expectations regarding recognition,” which “are externally linked to conditions for the formation of personal identity.”

In other words, Honneth suggests that acts of contention only occur when people are treated in a way that does not reflect their worth as human beings. Moreover, these struggles for recognition only materialize “if the subjects are able to articulate them within an intersubjective framework of interpretation that they can show to be typical for an entire group.”

If one cannot identify oneself as a member of a collective undergoing systematic disrespect, collective action cannot occur. While Mann’s argument provides us with a model for understanding how gender as a power relation is institutionalized, Honneth’s position, which he terms “moral grammar,” provides a framework for how salient identities make collective action possible.

Throughout history, power has been continually renegotiated through acts of contention. Tilly and Tarrow describe contentious performances as “relatively familiar and standardized ways in which one set of political actors makes collective claims on some other set of political actors.”

For example, mass demonstrations are a form of contentious performance. Contentious performances are path dependent: the actions taken by one group are built off of historically

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32 Ibid., 6–7
33 Ibid.
34 Honneth, 163.
36 Ibid., 163.
37 Tilly and Tarrow, 11.
effective performances. Although a performance will only be repeated if it delivered the intended message, a contentious performance will only be recognized in society as such after it has been continually used for a while. The more it is recognized, the more effective it is in achieving its goal, at least, until it becomes commonplace. Moreover, a particular performance exists not in isolation, but within the context of all of the other contentious performances used by a group. Contentious repertoires “are arrays of contentious performances that are currently known and available within some set of political actors.”

For example, the gay rights movement in the United States uses tactics like mass demonstrations, petitions, lobbying, press releases, and public meetings, all of which have already been developed and reinforced as an effective contentious repertoire by the civil rights movement.

Identity politics and the American (and Western) models of contending for power cannot be easily transposed onto the situation in Russia. Due to Russian and Soviet isolation, the historical development of Russia is significantly different, as is the relationship of Russian LGBT individuals to society and power. In the United States, identity politics focused on stopping discrimination against inherited traits are an ideological centerpiece of the contentious repertoire. In her comparison of American and French approaches to sexual harassment, for example, Abigail Saguy notes how, while the French built the legal opposition to sexual harassment through the penal code and the more socialist rationale of the exploitation of structural inequality, the American stance on sexual harassment was built through precedent in court cases and arguments built off of Title IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, “which prohibits discrimination on the basis of several group identities, including gender.”

Identity politics were used during the suffrage, abolitionist, civil rights, and women’s rights movements and, thus, have

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38 Ibid., 11.
39 Essig, *Queer in Russia*, 55.
40 Saguy, 130.
gained primacy and social acceptance as valid methods of contention. As a result of path dependency, a focus on identity is an important part of the contentious repertoire in the United States.

Upon closer inspection, there are several problems with applying this model of LGBT contention in Russia. First, contention in Russia does not historically happen through the courts. Due to the vertical structure of authority in the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and in Russia today, most changes are made by people with access to political power, which presently includes the president, prime minister, and legislative branch. Second, due to the Soviet political focus and tendency toward collectivism, individual identity has never been “a major organizer of social and political action,” and questions of identity are not a crucial part of currently accepted repertoires of contention.\textsuperscript{41} However, Western influence has increased in the post-Soviet era, and dynamics are slowly changing. For example, there are a number of people who self-identify as gay or lesbian in Russia today. However, there is no reason to conclude that Russia will follow in the footsteps of the West and (especially) America. The path the Russian LGBT movement takes today depends in large part on the regional specificity of repertoires of contention and their historical development in Russia.

This paper now turns to the culturally-specific, historical trajectory of gay/lesbian identity in Russia in order to demonstrate that while sexuality based on a strongly polarized model of gender is institutionalized in law and medicine, there is currently no cohesive collective gay/lesbian identity in Russia as such. Instead, institutional forces have led to the development of a more fluid “queer subjectivity,” in which members are able to maneuver for resources, but which lacks the interpretive framework to support a collective struggle for recognition.

\textsuperscript{41} Essig, \textit{Queer in Russia}, 56.
Religion and Law of the Orthodox Slavs

A history of Russian sexuality begins with the conversion to Christianity in the 980s, because no reliable records prior to conversion to Orthodoxy exist. Even then, medieval theological texts only discuss sexuality in a prescriptive sense: they are religious in nature and dictate moral guidelines or necessary penances for sins. These sources do not reveal the patterns of self-identification of people who engaged in homosexual behavior at the time. However, they do reveal how the religious institution, which organized society in medieval Russia, established the foundation for a conceptualization of gender that deviated from that of the Latin West. Slavic Orthodoxy condemned the act of homosexuality in ways that deemed it destructive to the community, reflected inherited Byzantine ideas about gender relations, compared sexuality to disease, and underscored the notion of the family as an economic institution.

In her book on the sexuality of the Orthodox Slavs, Eve Levin describes how the Orthodox church was one of the main organizing institutions in society, especially during the absentee rule of the Tatar-Mongols when it was the only institution “that was not held captive by the infidels.” Sexuality, being a matter of morality and family, fell completely under the jurisdiction of the church. The church’s support of communal life as well as the notable lack of the concept of privacy in communal relations precluded homosexual behavior, or at least made it very difficult to engage in homosexual relations. The church encouraged “true” believers to confront sinners, even in sexual matters, and stressed that this was a mark of “true friendship.” Contrary to Foucault’s model of confession as a reflection of increasing self-surveillance, in Slavic Orthodoxy, the religious institution encouraged the community, not just individuals, to

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42 Levin, 21-22.
43 Ibid., 8–9.
44 Ibid., 22.
45 Ibid., 34.
46 Foucault, History of Sexuality, 37–38; id., Discipline and Punish.
surveil themselves as well as others. The fact that sexuality became an official legal matter subject to state control only under Peter I and his policy of Westernization suggests that social control over sexuality remained less rigid in Russia for a longer time than it did in the West.

Furthermore, Slavic Orthodoxy supported a conceptualization of gender and sexuality that focused proscriptions on violations not of “natural” and “unnatural” sexual behavior, but of “natural” and “unnatural” gender roles. When the Slavs were converted to Christianity, they inherited from the Byzantine Empire some of the non-ascetic elements of Hellenic culture, which accepted, if not promoted, homosexual activity. Instead of classifying sexual behavior by sex or gender, they classified it by gender role, in that there were active and passive partners. The act of sexual intercourse reinforced the stratification of power. In other words, it was considered demeaning for an adult male citizen to play the passive role in sex. These valuations made their way into Slavic Orthodox penitentiaries, where, for example, anal sex was considered a more serious offense than intercrural sex, and the passive role was sometimes deemed less sinful than the active, instigating role.47 Here, too, lies the social opposition to a man “‘mak[ing] himself resemble a woman’ by shaving his beard.”48 Following this logic, sex between two passive individuals, such as two women, was considered less serious, although it could become serious if a woman tried to take an active, male role in sex. Lesbianism was also frowned upon in canon law texts as a remnant of pagan practices.49

Moreover, the Slavic conceptualization of sex at the time considered all sexual behavior, not just homosexuality, as impure, and viewed sexual desire as analogous to disease.50 Literature “portrayed sexual desires as of Satanic origin,” and sometimes even mentioned demons who

47 Levin, 199–204.
48 Ibid., 202.
49 Ibid., 160-161.
50 Ibid., 13, 36.
would tempt men into homosexuality.\textsuperscript{51} Although Slavic Orthodox priests stopped short of denying marriage or recommending self-castration like the Bogomils, an aversion to sexuality was nonetheless strongly ingrained in Slavic society.\textsuperscript{52} Due to its geographic isolation, as well as the East-West schism, Russia did not partake in the renaissance of the twelfth century and never embraced the concept of romantic love. In fact, it has even been suggested that “Augustine’s conjugal debt and the idea of courtly love remained unknown until the middle of the seventeenth century.”\textsuperscript{53} As a result, “proper” love was depicted as love found through spirituality. Following the ideal of the Virgin Mary, true saints were thought to conceive without intercourse, and a truly Christian husband would avoid exposing his wife to the “Satanic dangers of sexual intercourse.”\textsuperscript{54}

The religious institution had more jurisdiction over regulating sexuality than did the institution of the family. The family existed for economic, not emotional reasons. Men and women were thought of as part of separate social spheres. Even the consummation of a marriage was not required.\textsuperscript{55} This division did allow for the possibility of more homosexual contact “by restricting heterosexual options.”\textsuperscript{56} Since men interacted more with men than they did with women, there were more opportunities for homosexual relations to develop. Levin notes that in the late fifteenth century, a travelling Englishman remarked that in Russia homosexuality was much more “tolerated” than in England.\textsuperscript{57} Homosexual behavior, then, was frowned upon by the church because it threatened the gendered social balance. The penance for certain types of male homosexuality was equal to the required penance for incest, murder, or adultery by a married

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 49–50.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 45.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 76.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 14, 76, 63, 61.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 79–135.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 203.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 203.
woman. In other words, the most forbidden things were the ones that were “extremely disruptive to family and social order.”\textsuperscript{58} Interestingly, in some penitential codes, the consequences for male incestuous homosexuality were still less serious than those for “incest with female relatives.”\textsuperscript{59} The threat of pregnancy, which could destabilize the familial structure, was still seen as more dangerous than homosexuality. However, because the punishments of the church did not operate parallel to legal consequences for homosexuality, the “price” of engaging in non-normative behavior was lower. Due to the prevalence of homosocial environments and relatively lax institutional punishments, there was more room for homosexual behavior in Russia than in the West until the reforms of Peter the Great, who attempted to “westernize” the country and its morals.\textsuperscript{60}

\textbf{Westernization and Theories of Sexuality}

Although Peter the Great began to “westernize” Russia in the 1700s, Orthodoxy still had a profound effect on Russian society for centuries afterwards. When it comes to legal regulation of sexuality, homosexual acts are first mentioned in Article 166 of Peter the Great’s Military Articles of 1716, which state:

\begin{quote}
If someone desecrates a lad, or a man lies with a man, they should be punished as noted in the previous article. If the act is committed through violence, then they should be punished with death or be sent forever to the galley. \textsuperscript{61}
\end{quote}

Even the legal code was influenced by religion, as this chapter of the code focuses on sodomy and other sexual sins. Moreover, the articles only apply to soldiers on active duty and address only homosexual behaviors, such as the act of lying with men, rather than homosexuality as an identity. The appearance of such legal codes suggests that in the 1700s, Western ideas

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 136.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{61} Ежели кто отрока осквернит, или муж с мужем мужеложествует, оные яко в прежнем артикуле помянуто, имют быть наказаны. Ежели же насильством то учинено, тогда смертию или вечно на галеру ссылкою наказать. Adiutant.
concerning the division between the public and private spheres had been appropriated by Russian lawmakers and were soon to become socially recognized. The nature of this division affected both the conceptualization of non-normative behavior (as a public or private problem) and the laws pertaining to such behaviors. Despite legal and religious prohibitions, “legal prosecution was extremely rare and public tolerance was generally high,” especially in “literary and artistic circles,” where “many men and women explored their homoerotic desires in popular venues.”

Apart from the church and the state, the growing community of intellectuals, writers and artists also had a significant ideological influence on Russian society. Historically, writers have held an esteemed position in Russian culture as ideological guides that define the moral way of life. The views of several key writer-philosophers on gender would come to inform later perceptions of homosexuality. Coupled with Orthodoxy, their ideas continued to play a crucial part in maintaining ideological power until the Russian Revolution. In Russian literature, philosophies of gender [filosofii pola] began to be discussed in the middle of the eighteenth century. Deviating significantly from theories prevalent in the West, they fall into three major categories: slavophilic [slavianofil’skaia], rationalist [ratsionalisticheskaia], and religious [religioznaia].

The three philosophical categories, though different, all perpetuated the dichotomization of gender. Men and women were constructed as polar opposites who, when united, would make a complete whole. The Slavophiles, one of whom was A. S. Khomiakov, argued that God created the family in order to “overcome the antagonism of the sexes,” and because of this gender differentiation, antagonism and the subjugation of women were the natural work of God. The rationalist point of view was represented by N. G. Chernyshevskii, who argued that the

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62 Essig, *Queer in Russia*, 4.
63 Petrova, 26.
64 Преодоления полового антагонизма. Ibid., 26.
“domination of the strong man over the weak woman was the source of all of the others forms of oppression, exploitation, and repression.”

65 His utopian model of progress, however, was too forward thinking for its time, and thus largely ignored. 66 Representatives of the category influenced by a religious conception of gender included philosophers such as V. S. Solviev and V. V. Pozanov, as well as writers such as L. N. Tolstoy and F. M. Dostoevsky. 67 Although their points of view varied, the way they conceptualized gender was based on general religious values rather than Orthodoxy in particular. Orthodox religion understood female sexuality as something dangerous and powerful that could taint even virtuous men. It could, according to Russian folklore, even trap the Devil. 68 Tolstoy valued abstinence and believed that distancing oneself from sexual desires was the path to holiness and human achievement. Dostoevsky offered a different model in which women were alternatively represented as either “paragons of the Madonna” or “paragons of Sodom.” Not all of these points of view coincided closely with Orthodox values; some philosophers considered love or the act of sex to be the height of godliness. 69

In short, as R. G. Petrova argues, while the West viewed gender differentiation as an ontological or epistemological problem, mainstream Russian thinkers considered it a metaphysical or spiritual-religious concept. While in some cases, Russian philosophies ascribed to women positive, even godly qualities, women were still considered inferior to men. 70 As opposed to the romantic ideal, which emphasized devotion and love, thereby leaving room for justification of homosexual behavior, in Russian ideology it was the perfect union of man and

65 ... что доминирование сильного мужчины над слабой женщиной — источник всех остальных форм угнетения. Ibid., 27.
66 Ibid., 27.
67 Petrova, 27.
68 Levin, 54.
69 Petrova, 28–29.
70 Petrova, 30.
woman that reigned supreme. Sexual identity was firmly rooted in gender, not in attraction. At this time, therefore, neither the ideological nor the legal systems identified homosexual behavior as something relating to identity. It was not until homosexual behavior began to be considered a medical disease or a political crime (i.e., treason) that homosexuality became a species, rather than a trait.\footnote{Essig, \textit{Queer in Russia}, 5.}

**Soviet Repression**

Initially, the Russian Revolution brought with it hopes of the complete overthrow of oppressive, bourgeois structures. Boleshevik feminists, like Aleksandra Kollontai, had hoped that the Revolution would change “established ‘Bourgeois’ sexual morality.”\footnote{Levin, 11.} In 1917, the 1872 anti-sodomy code was repealed, along with other imperial laws, and for a time, homosexuals lived in relative freedom at least from punitive legal action.\footnote{Essig, \textit{Queer in Russia}, 5.} However, as the Soviet government under Stalin began to define and solidify the idea of a “proper” Soviet citizen, the boundaries between the public and private spheres were renegotiated, extending the reach of the party even into the sexual lives of ordinary people.\footnote{Baer, 12.}

Moreover, the Soviet Union built upon the Slavophile tradition of creating and maintaining ideological separation from the West. The state actively engaged in boundary work, boldly demarking the lines between the proverbial “us” and “them” through ideological campaigns that defined the qualities of an ideal Soviet citizen. This was done in order to “purify” the population from bourgeois influences, and, later, fascist tendencies. Anyone holding opinions that were deemed Western or opposed to mainstream Soviet ideology was encouraged and forced to leave the country, punished, or killed. By this logic, individuals engaging in homosexual
behavior became identified as more than just deviants but ideological traitors.\textsuperscript{75} This was especially true of men, among whom consensual sex became “punishable by up to five years of hard labor” in 1933.\textsuperscript{76}

Despite the presence of women in the public sphere under Communism, lesbian behavior was labeled as a symptom of disease: “persistent schizophrenia.”\textsuperscript{77} Cures were even developed, including drugs, aversion therapy, or ultimately, in case of failure, confinement in a psychiatric institution. All of these “solutions” were also common in the West. There is one significant difference, however, from the Western conceptualization and pathologization of female homosexual desire. According to Soviet theories of gender relations, the acceptance of a sex change operation was a valid solution to homosexuality.\textsuperscript{78} The rationale for this culturally-specific exception lies in the nature of the Russian conceptualization of sex. Owing to the influence of religion, law, and institutional family relations, sexuality was historically defined in terms of a polarity of the genders. From the Russian point of view, when a man and a woman are in a relationship, they become part of a harmonious whole. This focus on polarity rather than sexual attraction is what would later influence the post-Soviet idea that a sex change was a fully rational solution to the problem of homosexual attraction.\textsuperscript{79}

This male-criminal/female-disease characterization remained the dominant model for understanding homosexuality in the Soviet Union. Moreover, this static model clearly contradicts Foucault’s more dynamic model of Western sexuality, which promotes further study of sexuality and thereby supports a growing number of views on sexuality and identifying labels.\textsuperscript{80} While twentieth-century Western scholars engaged in critical analysis of sexuality, Russian academics

\textsuperscript{75} Essig, \textit{Queer in Russia}, 5–24.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 29, 43.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 23–52.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 23–52.
\textsuperscript{80} Foucault, \textit{Discipline and Punish}, 28.
suffered from a “sex-phobia” that was derived from very strong, very conservative party censorship. In fact, the threat of the homosexual label in the Soviet Union became a tool of political control, that is, a threat used by the KGB to keep citizens in order, rather than a consequence of increased medical or legal categorization. This aversion continued to be prevalent even as the Soviet Union fell apart, leaving no room for “homosexual” to be adopted as a category of identity.

The Collapse

Using boundary work to contest power, members of sexual (as well as dissident) minorities began to challenge the system already in Soviet times. This practice is still common in Russia today. Sociologist Laurie Essig argues that a fixed homosexual identity does not exist in Russia; instead, she proposes the model of “queer subjectivities” to explain Russia’s homosexual culture before the intervention of Western activities. Essig argues:

Unlike identities, subjectivities did not require actual bodies to feel ‘represented,’ nor did they require individuals to practice ‘being queer’ in certain ways. Instead, individuals could behave in ways that were both queer and straight without having the existence of ‘queer subjectivities’ threatened. The concept of “queer subjectivity” stands in opposition to gay and lesbian identities in the United States, which are so closely linked to representation, political action, and recognition as human beings, to use Honneth’s terminology, that there could be no gay rights movement otherwise. The movement, in turn, helps shape people’s self-perception of themselves as gay or lesbian.

At one point, sexuality in Russia almost became an identity in the same way that it is in the United States. A movement “found its voice” in 1989 through the efforts of Evgeniia Debrianskaia. While there was no precedent in Russia for identity politics, Debrianskaia was a

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81 Baer, 10–11.
82 Essig, Queer in Russia, 163.
seasoned “professional dissident” and versed in the tactics of boundary work. Her efforts to resculpt the us-against-them dynamic were well-timed because of the weakened state of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. In fact, many sexual activists rode the wave of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which led to the decriminalization of homosexuality under Yeltsin. Americans attempted to help, but their efforts were often perceived as patronizing attempts at educating Russians on sexuality without consideration of cultural specificity. Moreover, Western activists lacked the cultural information necessary to act effectively. Though for a time it seemed like a gay/lesbian identity could form in Russia, the efforts of activists went unrewarded, and the groups’ ability to mobilize fell sharply after Putin’s rise to power. Ultimately, in Russia there was no historically reified ideological framework for a movement based on identity politics. Even today, in Russia, there is no strong link between recognition and individual identities. Daniel P. Schluter argues that while gay fraternities do exist in post-Soviet Russia, gay communities do not. Their networks are not sufficiently dense to allow for the mobilization of “a community of interconnected institutional actors, roles, places and relationships, as well as individuals.”

The flexibility of the “queer subjectivity” model means that LGBT individuals can maintain families while still engaging in homosexual activity, without troubling their perceptions of themselves. In this sense, families are simply a way to capitalize on economic and social resources otherwise unavailable to single individuals. While there is a movement toward accepting fluidity in the United States, D’Emilio argues that the gay/lesbian identity is currently so rigidly ensconced in the politics of recognition that it is a limiting factor in the attainment of

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83 Ibid., 58.
84 Schluter, 137-147.
85 Ibid., 6.
86 Essig, *Queer in Russia*, 97.
further rights.\textsuperscript{87} One only has to consider the substantial skepticism of people who come out as bisexual, especially when their sexuality is reduced to whoever they are currently dating, to see this point in action. In Russia, however, LGBT individuals seek access to and contend for power through other methods. For example, they have access to substantial power in the realm of the arts. Homosexual subjectivity is closely linked to aesthetic and intellectual tastefulness, especially in the fields of writing, acting, dancing, and singing, and in that manner LGBT individuals can gain the respect of the Russian public.\textsuperscript{88} This was the case for poets such as Mikahil Kuzmin at the beginning of Soviet rule and is still the case for certain contemporary artists, such as playwright Roman Viktiuk, who can express their subjectivity through their work.\textsuperscript{89}

Homosexuality has also been reidentified in Russia by association with certain Russian cultural values such as suffering and sensitivity. Homosexual (usually) men that can claim to have a “Russian soul” are set in opposition to the consumerist identity-driven gay culture of the West. In essence, by drawing boundaries between themselves and the West, Russian homosexuals can gain more power and credibility at home.\textsuperscript{90} This boundary drawing is so strong that many LGBT individuals in Russia are closely associated with Nationalist movements, and they supported and were supported by Zhirinovsky.\textsuperscript{91} The homosexual man and woman can gain power by exploiting sources of economic power already available to them while simultaneously holding onto political power by using boundary work to emphasize who they are \textit{not}, rather than who they are. This difference between boundary work and American identity politics as tools of

\textsuperscript{87} D’Emilio, 101.
\textsuperscript{88} Essig, \textit{Queer in Russia}, 83–104.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 98–101.
\textsuperscript{90} Baer.
\textsuperscript{91} Essig, \textit{Queer in Russia}, 140.
contention helps explain the ineffectiveness of both Russian and Western responses to Russia’s “gay propaganda” law.

**Contending the Gay Propaganda Law**

Russia’s culturally-specific approach to gay/lesbian identity is evident in a recent piece of legislation on this issue. In June 2013, the Russian Federation passed an anti-LGBT propaganda law that severely limits the rights of non-heterosexual individuals to freedom of speech. The bill was the federal version of a measure that had already been passed in several cities and regional governments, including St. Petersburg and Sochi.  


As the title suggests, it was an amendment to an already existing law, which focused on the protection of children from exposure to sexual content, such as pornography. The amendment, however, included the protection of children from “information propagandizing non-traditional sexual relationships.” More specifically, it levies a fine against people who expose minors to material: 1) “that encourages the formation of non-traditional orientations in minors”; 2) that describes the “attractiveness of non-traditional sexual relations”; 3) that leads to a “distorted understanding of the social equivalence of traditional and non-traditional sexual relation”; and, lastly, 4) that “encourages interest in such relations.”

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92 Council for Global Equality; Reidy.  
93 Федеральный закон Российской Федерации от 29 июня 2013 г. N 134-ФЗ г. Москва «О внесении изменений в статью 5 Федерального закона «О защите детей от информации, причиняющей вред их здоровью и развитию» и отдельные законодательные акты Российской Федерации в целях защиты детей от информации, пропагандирующей отрицание традиционных семейных ценностей». Rossiiskaia gazeta.  
94 Информации, пропагандирующей нетрадиционные сексуальные отношения. Ibid.  
95 Направленной на формирование у несовершеннолетних нетрадиционных сексуальных установок ... привлекательности нетрадиционных сексуальных отношений ... искаженного представления о социальной
The logic of this bill seems to follow in the footsteps of the KGB, which used labels as ways to control citizens. It is but the latest in a series of restrictions on freedom of speech in Russia following Putin’s return to his third term as president. According to a report by the Human Rights Watch, since his return, Russian “authorities have introduced a series of restrictive laws, harassed, intimidated, and in several cases imprisoned political activists, interfered in the work of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and sought to cast government critics as clandestine enemies, thereby threatening the viability of Russia’s civil society.”

It is worth noting that earlier drafts of the bill used the word “homosexuality” [gomoseksualizm], which suggests two things: first, that the bill was originally targeted specifically at homosexuals; and second, that the prevalence of other sexualities (i.e., bisexuality, pansexuality, and asexuality) is sufficiently low in popular culture that they were only remembered in the revision process. Admittedly, one of the groups under the LGBT umbrella—trans individuals—does not technically fall under the jurisdiction of this law. Transgender people have “been allowed to change their legal gender on identity documents since 1997, although there are many obstacles to the process and invasive surgical requirements remain in place.”

This reflects the strongly institutionalized model of gender in Russia; sexual attraction is considered a facet of one’s gender, not a factor independent of it. As such, it is more acceptable for an individual to change their sex to match their sexual attraction, rather than to challenge traditional gender roles. The rigidity of gender roles is further reinforced by beliefs of the

равноценности традиционных и нетрадиционных сексуальных отношений . . . вызывающей интерес к таким отношениям. Ibid.

96 Human Rights Watch; Smith-Spark.
97 Baranovskaia.
98 Council for Global Equality.
Orthodox Church and its tight relationship with President Putin, whose own use of Russian machismo culture to endear himself to citizens reinforces traditional gender roles.99

Effectively, the anti-LGBT propaganda bill silences any positive mention of non-traditional orientations and facilitates discriminatory censorship. Moreover, by associating this censorship with the protection of minors, the law both increases popular support for this initiative and widens the scope of its applicability. In theory, the law does not prohibit the existence of an LGBT community or its various manifestations (e.g., a gay club), although it does limit the community’s right to expression (e.g., the gay club’s ability to advertise). In practice, since children can be found anywhere in the public sphere, any public expression of support for LGBT individuals could be deemed illegal. In this manner, visibility—which could have been a significant method of contention for Russian LGBT individuals—is rendered ineffective. This dual approach to sexual minorities, where they are allowed to exist but not to be seen, at once reflects and perpetuates the absence of identity politics in Russia. It reinforces the lack of access to political recognition that is symptomatic of queer subjectivity.

Unsurprisingly, the law evoked an international outcry from human rights organizations, celebrities, and individuals. In the months leading up to the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, there were several requests for a United States boycott of the proceedings that originated from across the political spectrum. Notably, social liberals opposed the Russian Federation’s hostility toward and discrimination against LGBT individuals.100

Despite the heightened attention and increased pressure on Russia preceding the Olympic games, conditions which would ordinarily increase the effectiveness of protests, international

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99 Radio Free Europe.
100 Bernstein.
efforts proved largely ineffective. Efforts proved largely ineffective. Foreign protest on an individual scale, particularly in the United States, ended up being either misdirected or overreaching. The movement to boycott Stolichnaya vodka resulted in an anticlimactic revelation that the brand is not Russian, but Latvian. Organization FuckH8’s plan to send pro-LGBT coloring books to Russian children did not help the cause but simply reinforced stereotypes, both about imperialistic Americans and the ulterior child-converting motives of LGBT individuals. Subsequently, as soon as word spread about the coloring-book plan, Gosduma representative Aleksei Zhuravlev requested that measures be taken to prevent the distribution of these books, and Vitalii Milonov released a reversed version of the coloring book, which argued “that in the West, children are seized from poor and single parents in order to give them to same-sex couples.” There does not seem to be evidence that any of the FuckH8 coloring books ever arrived at their destination. Arguably, the results of the coloring book protest were not only ineffective, but counterproductive.

Furthermore, the International Olympic Committee [IOC] and Russia both had strict prohibitions on acceptable behavior at the Olympic site. The efforts of Western organizations to circumvent these restrictions, which included an attempt to create a “movable pride house” in the Olympic village, a line of clothing centered on the non-discriminatory Principle 6 of the Olympic charter, and lobbying to encourage Olympic sponsors to show their support, fell flat. The request for a pride house was rejected, clothing was sold but not worn by the athletes, and sponsors held tight to the IOC restrictions. All of these failures illustrate the difficulties of organizing worldwide campaigns, even with the increased communicative capacities of the

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101 Bernstein; Higgins; Omansky; Gessen; Naimark; Thomas.
102 Higgins.
103 . . . что на Западе у бедных и одиноких родителей детей отнимают, чтобы отдать однополым парам. Davidson; Gender Z; Dzerzhinskaia.
104 Gessen.
Internet.\textsuperscript{105} Moreover, the organizations displayed an inability to adapt their foreign techniques to the Russian social scene, and failed at supporting Russian activists as well.\textsuperscript{106} Many of the efforts reflected an identity-driven conceptualization of sexuality that is completely ineffective in the context of Russian politics of contention.

The decision of Western organizations to adopt a “‘speak out, don’t walk out’ strategy” in Russia was motivated in part by the request of the majority of Russian activists.\textsuperscript{107} While some U.S.-based Russian members of the LGBT community urged people to simply boycott the Olympic games, the Russian LGBT Network urged people to “speak up” instead, noting that Olympic boycotts have been “not utterly promising in regards [to] the potential to bring a change.”\textsuperscript{108} Some “thought it was defeatist,” while “others argued such a stand would be perceived as unpatriotic and cause a backlash.”\textsuperscript{109} There were Russian activists who did come out to protests during the Olympics in St. Petersburg and Moscow, but their numbers were small and their protests “low-key.”\textsuperscript{110} They were beaten, arrested, and threatened with rape by police officers. These are the reasons why Masha Gessen, a prominent Russian-American journalist and gay-rights activist, notes that the international community “missed their mark.” They could have, for instance, helped pay the fines levied against arrested protesters. Their failure to support the Russian activists with appropriate means shows the ineffectiveness of using tactics more well-suited to advocating for marriage equality (as in the case of the United States) and translating them to a completely different political environment.\textsuperscript{111} Social power structures vary, and taking this into account is crucial.

\textsuperscript{105} Naimark.
\textsuperscript{106} Gessen.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{108} RIA Novosti; Russian LGBT Network.
\textsuperscript{109} Gessen.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
The differences between Russian and Western conceptualizations of LGBT politics are exacerbated by the ideological differences between Russian and Western activists and theorists. In accordance with the Foucauldian belief in discourse as a tool of power, there is a strong resistance in Russia to the imposition of Western models of sexuality on Russian society. However, there are also divides between the tactics of Western and Russian queer activists. Western activists operate in closer cooperation with academic theorists who have the freedom to develop new conceptualizations of sex, gender, and sexuality. On the other hand, Russian queer activists are forced to address rights and safety concerns while academic discourse on non-heterosexual sexualities is effectively silenced by the Propaganda Law. Essig describes how after a speech at a queer studies conference in St. Petersburg, sponsored by the Center of Independent Social Research, a Russian activist accused her of “cultural imperialism for [her] insistence that the history of sex is different in Russia than it is in America.” While Essig made every effort to “say that knowledge about the meaning of sexual practices is not more advanced, more scientific, or more legitimate in the United States,” she notes that the activist did have a point. Theory and activism are not one and the same. They run parallel to each other, but the goals of theory, namely, the development of conceptual models to better understand sexuality, are not the goals of activism, which aim to improve the rights and conditions of real, every day LGBT individuals.

There is a divide between leading ideas in the world of queer theory, where sexuality is thought to be “written onto the body by the surrounding culture as well as a lifetime of practices,” and the real world, where that same idea is often considered to be “dangerous.” Activists may push the “born this way” model of sexuality because they consider it to be “the

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112 Essig, “Queer Russia.”
113 Ibid.
best way to protect gay rights” in Russia. Consequently, it is important to keep in mind that the very nature of academia is one that makes an academic “privileged to the point of imperialism,” and this privilege must be taken into account in any study. Given that knowledge is power, it is also important to note that activist discourse and academic discourse do not necessarily correlate. Moreover, the lack of well-established discourses in any Russian institution that support activists’ efforts undermines their effectiveness.

**In Conclusion: What Does That Mean For Global Activism?**

In Russia, the cultural meaning of an individual’s decision to engage in homosexual behavior has followed a trajectory very unlike that of the United States. In the West, capitalism led to the professionalization of medical, psychological, and legal institutions earlier than in Russia, thus allowing for the advent of a more nuanced and analytical discourse on sexuality. Capitalism also precipitated a clear division of the public sphere from the private sphere, allowing for the formation of homosocial environments, which made homosexual behavior more visible. Homosexual individuals were inclined to adopt homosexuality as an identity because of path dependence and in order to contend for power via identity politics. In Russia, on the other hand, for a long time, homosexuality was stigmatized primarily through the church, which used the rhetoric of disease to discredit sexuality in general and maintain the structural status-quo in families. It was only after Peter I’s efforts at Westernization that legal and medical institutions began to develop discourses on sexuality alongside religion.

Still, stigmatization was not entirely oppressive as both religion and legal codes targeted specifically homosexual behaviors, not homosexual feelings. In the Soviet Union, homosexuality became a species as the government worked to renegotiate the boundary between public and

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114 Ibid.  
115 Ibid.
private life in order to manage the citizenry. Given Soviet aversion to identity politics, neither movements based on collective disrespect nor discourse on sexuality took root. Male and female homosexual behaviors became separated, and for women, sex-change operations were considered a valid solution to homosexual desire—a reflection of the Russian focus on gender polarity, rather than sexual attraction.

Attempts by Western activists to help Russian queer individuals in the 1990s were thwarted by this conceptual difference in the perception of gender. The failures of the international outcry against the gay-propaganda law suggest that this difference remains a salient barrier to cooperation, and the law itself stifles any communication on the topic of gender itself. Due to the strength of boundary work as a political tactic in Russia, there is no sexual revolution that can trickle down from Western efforts. The tactics used during moments of Russian-American feminist cooperation are being systematically discredited through Russia’s desire to distance itself from the United States so as to maintain a discourse that is considered legitimate in Russia. The question remains what new methods of contention will develop in Russia.

Under Honneth’s model, there can be no collective movements unless members feel a sense of solidarity. Individual identity is one way to engender solidarity, but the model also suggests that movements can develop from collective identities. The current efforts of Russian queer activists seem to be tending in the direction of the collection of data on violence to prove that theirs is a category that is deserving of protection.116 Also relevant is the effect of the Internet on Russian LGBT individual’s ability to build networks and communities. The Internet exists simultaneously as public and private space, making it a powerful tool of social organization and identity formation. The Internet may become a place where a purely Russian

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116 Coming Out.
form of identity will be allowed to flourish, and where communication can occur, circumventing the bans on public visibility.

Works Cited


