

## THE EMBODIED SOLUTION OF 'THE WOMAN QUESTION' IN POST- REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA

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At the center of my essay is the problem of woman's representational changes in Russia during the 1920-30s. On the one hand, this period could be characterized by the equality-discourse; it is a period when women were declared equal to men in juridical, social, and political senses. Frequently this period is called the period of Marxist feminism (Bryson). On the other hand, the whole Soviet period is well known as a period of "false equality." Thus, for an understanding of the significance and meanings of "equality" for Russian women in that period, it is necessary to study more carefully what that "equality" was in the postrevolutionary era. The problem of body representations and experiences from my view point could put more light not only on the dark problem of the "false equality" of women and men in the Soviet Union, but also on the postsoviet gender problems - seen by many women as exemplified by an unimportance of equal rights, antifeminist attitudes, lack of political activity, declarations of traditionalism, and no desire to be leaders. The analysis of body politics could help us to enter the microhistory of such a complicated phenomenon as women's liberation in the Soviet Russia and its consequences.

The sources for this essay are publications about the so-called "sexual question" and "change of the everyday life." Many books were written in Russia and outside on this topic; however, the problem of women's subjectivity and women's identity was not the central theme of those publications (i.e. Golod, Lebina, Etkind, Engelstein, Stites). My interest is on only part of this big problem. I analyze how the difference between femininity" and "masculinity" was constructed at that time.

First I would like to mention briefly the participants in this discussion. They included Bolshevik party and Komsomol activists with

different positions in the hierarchy of these organizations, including persons responsible for a "solution of women's question" (Trotsky, Smidovich, Kollontai, Semashko) and psychologists, clinicians, and psychoanalysts (Zalkind, Nemilov, Rubinstein). The future of these participants was different: while some of them in the next 10-15 years became victims of repression and were excluded from the Soviet history, other participants entered the encyclopedias as prominent figures of culture and science (Semashko, Ketlinskaya). It was a time when the interdependent women's organizations were declared bourgeois, and the pre-Revolutionary liberal feminists' slogans were not mentioned. All the participants in the discussions were to follow strict "class" positions.

The patterns of everyday life were changing dramatically at that time. All the participants in the discussion undoubtedly felt the "subversive influence of the transformation of intimacy on the contemporary institutions" (Giddens: 3). They saw the solution of the sexual question as an important task. The name "sexual question" pretended to overcome sexual difference and presented the problem of sexuality as relationships "out of gender."

How did the participants view the human body? What parts of the old cultural canon were included in the communist one? What gender differences were declared disappearing and which ones remained? How did new ideas about women's body influence everyday life and politics?

### **The male/female oppositions from the view of social evolutionary theory**

All the participants in the discussion valued the scientific data, especially that coming from the "natural sciences." "Every Marxist should be

biologist" (Nemilov: 208). But, the human being, the "crown of the nature," also had its natural part, which should be cultured.

The declaration of "natural" as "correct" was bringing with itself an old justification of gender differences as "natural differences," and thus, justification of different moral and social norms for male and female behavior. However, the social equality between man and woman was declared by the communist regime and could not be discussed openly. The attempt to critique the social equality could be qualified as a rupture of the fragile border between "our" and "alter," revolution and counterrevolution, and mean an exit from the frame of legal discourse. The consequences of differences were presented as not connected to the "main" (social, collective) life of women and were presented as accompanying the description of everyday life or family relations. While the family life as a form of "private" had to die as the result of the cultural changes, all the polemic was accompanied by words aimed to stress the temporality of the problem: "while," "till now," "yet."

Now and in some future years the young girl would be responsible for the home-keeping and family and not only may but has to make part of the homework. It would be very bad if she started to "liberate herself" by the price of the harder work of her mother, aunt, or other members of the family. (Ketlinskaya: 51)

"Yet the state is so poor that it is not able to support your marriage, children, education, or care for parents"(Semashko 1926: 27).

The authors of many publications directly followed the Enlightenment traditions describing "nature." The main actor and recipient of the reviewed publications are constructed as the masculine subject.

From the early childhood the child is growing in the conditions of renovated matriarchal society having women around him. The father among them is frequently an alien person. The first signs of the sexual life in man have impersonal character, he still did not elaborated the personal demands to woman. (Tomilin: 29)

It was considered that women, when they are adults, keep inside of them the vivid part of their nature - the reproductive system. It makes

her different from men, who are presented as not connected to the reproduction process at all. This part of "nature" is especially pictured in many schemas as signifying "otherness." The structure of women's reproductive system is responsible for the differences from men - she is "less stable," has a psyche exhibiting "less equilibrium." This problem at the behavioral level should be compensated by the special moral qualities: shamefulness and restraint. "The long time sexual partner is the best solution for woman according to her psychophysiology" (Zalkind: 53). "Free love, casual connections and unstable relationships are against the nature of woman" (Ketlinskaya: 64).

### **The rise in women's cultural level and the problem of personal choice**

"The sexual question," which served as a frame for the discussion, did not take into account the sympathies, preferences, and desires of the concrete man and concrete woman. The discussion about the "sexual question" mostly had a global approach and was viewed as a consequence of the crossing of "nature" and "culture." Following the psychoanalysis of early Freud, many participants claimed the necessity of sublimation, understood as a translation of the animal energy of human beings into cultural forms. The sexual instinct was presented as one of the most dangerous of instincts. Thus, the most important problem was how to teach the masses the "new culture," which would help them to translate the wild energy of the animal part of human beings into the energy of collective creativity.

The bourgeois culture from this view point was seen as badly functioning, a wrong sublimation which covers the "natural" essence of human beings with "false culture." Among the biggest problems of the false bourgeois culture was sexual hedonism - defined as sexual intercourse for pleasure. "The most unrestrained animal is a bourgeois who gave freedom to his spoiled essence" (Smidovich: 28).

The "new culture" had a meaning of connections with the victorious class and insisted on the limitations of joy for saving energy for social activity. "More frequently remember about science, the lessons of revolution: educate yourself collectively, 'suppress' low instincts, make open the social instincts. If you want to solve a sexual problem - you should work for society, be comrade, not male or female" (Semashko 1926: 53).

It is possible to suppose that negative attitudes toward hedonism and limitations on private, personal, and animal traits are gender-neutral. But, the precise analysis of the texts does not give us the possibility to agree with this supposition. "An old tradition to see women as more moral, more modest in relation to sex person than men practically is not a 'prejudice' but an instinctive (unconscious) representation of the special features of male and female sexual life" (Semashko, 1927: 11).

Behind commonly abstract categories of "nature," "class," "culture," and "collective," it is possible to see real differences only in works by L. Trotsky and A. Kollontai. These two authors, while discussing the "sexual question," were mentioning "personality" - not only instincts. "The main form of the fight for stability and culture of the family ties and relationships consists in raising of human personality" (Trotsky in Zukker, 10).

In spite of the fact that these two authors were speaking about human personality only with the aim of enriching collective life, it is necessary to stress A. Kollontai's position, which supposed the possibility of a hedonist scenario of sexual relationships between men and women and the possibility of women's initiative in these relationships. In spite of the tradition to see Kollontai's writings of the 1920s as "free love defense" (usually interpreted now in Russia as an irresponsible attitude toward sexual relationships - Golod, Aivazova), it is possible to see her writings as the creation of a theory of new personal and dialogical (in place of instinctive-reproductive or disembodied-friendly) relationships between men and women. This was a theory, unfortunately, that could not be developed.

If the blind and demanding force would be weaker in the love relationships, if the feeling of love-property and desire to ownership over the lover for ever would dye, if the superiority of men and criminal self-negation of woman could disappear, then the other moments in love could be developed. The esteem to the personality of the other would be more strong, the mutual feeling would be developed, the desire to show love not only in kissing and touching, but also in common action, unity of will, in common creativity would grow." (Kollontai: 181)

Many publications at that time contained phrases about freedom and equality, new everyday life (*noviy bit*) and new morals, but they did not pay much attention to two other conditions of women's liberation without which it is hard to imagine the Western feminist revolution of 1960s. First, is the problem of contraception. As it is known, the feminist revolution of 1960-70s was directly connected with the sexual revolution and beginning of the massive use of contraceptives by the new generation - the pill. The material discussed with regard to the "sexual question" in Russia in 1920s paid little attention to this problem. Even medical abortion frequently was declared to relate more to the issue of poverty than revolutionary gain (Semashko, 1927: 10-11).

It is necessary to mention that in pre-Revolutionary Russian, as much as in foreign publications on the "sexual question" (including several times reedited in Socialist Russia work of German clinician A. Forel), the problem of contraception was discussed. Forel, for example, gives very detailed description of means of contraception which could be used by men and by women, especially stressing that women, for example, have the right to defend themselves from drunk husbands' sexual aggression (Forel: 250-251).

At this later time, Soviet publications practically unanimously rejected every means of contraception, qualifying its use as perversion. Having sexual intercourse with contraception was also classified as a "false culture." S. Smidovich, for example, writes that that French bourgeois have all the newest condoms" (Smidovich: 124). Thus, the same use of contraceptives that was welcomed before the revolution, was, in the 1920s, presented as a sign of bourgeoisness, counterrevolution, and violation of nature.

The second absent topic in this discourse is the topic of equal distribution of parental duties. In the majority of the publications, women are presented as tied (staying in some kind of symbiotic connections) to children, while it is stressed that men "according to their nature" are free from the consequences of the sexual act. In spite of the declaration of Bolshevik theory that private and closed bourgeois families should give a place to a collective education of children, as in the case of home duties, the texts are full of reminders that women are "still" responsible for children.

**The rise of the cultural level as a way of constructing differences**

One of the most important problems discussed in the instructive literature at that time was the difficulty of control over the “natural part” of human beings as a whole. The majority of the participants who took into account the difficulties of changes in economic policy first of all insisted on educative measures. Maybe it sounds strange, but as one of the examples of the “correct” regulation of the “sexual question” Rousseau (“Sofia”) is mentioned (Rubinstein: 61).

It could be inspired from these ideas that men and women should make similar efforts to control their instinctive natures. However, in the publications, it is possible to see multiple examples of the different, gendered requirements for control. According to the authors of the majority of the publications, the nature of women, which was different from men’s and as a consequence of her low cultural level and special natural structure that gave only her the possibility to bear, give birth, and educate small children, needs more strict control from society. “The class demand from woman the conscious selection of the father of her child” (Zukker: 10).

According to the ideas of many participants in the discussion, this kind of control does not limit the freedom of women, because in any case she has a different nature. Trying to illustrate, V. Ketlinskaya writes: “It is interesting such an example one of the followers of the ‘new everyday life moral’ who used to wear a leather jacket, and short nails and hair desired to be married to a Komsomol member. ... And to her red marriage party she brought shoes with high heels, panties, clear short skirt...” (Ketlinskaya: 63).

What conclusion did Ketlinskaya, a Komsomol leader herself, reach about the behavior of this Komsomol member? That she should think more about ideology? That she is following “false culture”? No, the Ketlinskaya remark was different: “when you try to throw nature out the door, it will enter through the window” (Ketlinskaya: 63).

It is possible to say that many participants in the discussion on the ‘sexual question’ used “natural differences” to rethink the declared equality with the aim of vindicating first sexual and then, in a hidden form, social inequality. The discussion shows the maintenance of the double standard and its previous form of justification: women’s nature would mean tragedy in the world of culture. “Those few moments of happiness which brings to woman her service for the “genius

of gender” can not reimburse all that suffering and problems which fill the life of every, even absolutely normal woman” (Nemilov: 61).

To make the tragedy connected to her nature smaller, woman should be more conscious or more controlled than man. “It is necessary cruelly to prevent a widely spread view, even among conscious women: “When man is allowed to do something (speaking about sexual life) why cannot woman as well? This is inequality, prejudice. The rule is “as man, as woman.” This view is very dangerous. The sexual life of woman is not equal with man’s. That is why woman is a woman and man is a man” (Semashko, 1926: 79).

Thus, it is possible to say that the analysis of the discussion on the “sexual question” makes us suppose that the natural differences among men and women are so big, that the declared equality is practically annulled by them.

### Conclusion

On the basis of the material analyzed here, it is possible to say that the main condition of the definitions of “masculinity” and “femininity” in post-revolutionary Russian discourse is of difference defined by nature - reproductive system differences. This helps to divide gender differences, making part of them “the product of the old system” (which should be renewed) and the other part presented as simply “natural,” obvious. The “obvious” part of differences is constructed not on the basis of sexual differences, but on the basis of the social meanings of their consequences in the context of the new morality. Thus, to the mid-1920s, doubts about the possibility/necessity of full equality are present. At the same time, it is possible to say that ambiguity and a non-articulated border between “biological difference” and “social equality” in the field of cultural revolution could help in understanding the phenomenon of Soviet and post-Soviet gender problem formulations. “The biological tragedy,” the capability of bearing children, slowly is converted in Soviet politics of difference, which undoubtedly made woman not simply different, but worse with respect to man. However, not only women, but men as well were lacking control over their bodies, which helped to convert the cultural differences among them in hidden and silent ways during the whole Soviet period.

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