

# NEWSNET

News of the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies

## PERVERTING SLAVIC STUDIES: A LOVE STORY

ELIOT BORENSTEIN, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

*Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from an address given on October 22, 2010 at the Graduate Student Conference, hosted by the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Princeton University. The conference theme was "Undoing Eros: Love and Sexuality in Russian Culture."*

It's a question I'm raising for us as Slavic scholars: what is it we're talking about when we're talking about sex? Or, perhaps more appropriately for Russianists, what is it we're *not* talking about when we're *not* talking about sex? I want to look at three particular issues: first, the often-noted tendency in Russian culture to leave sex outside of the conversation (at least, until recently). This topic provides the strongest justification for my talk's title, since I want to view Russian sexual silence not simply as an issue unto itself, but as something that has ramifications for the major philosophical questions that have animated Russian cultural production. Yes, that's part one. Parts Two and Three follow up with a deliberate, crude sexualization of the relationship between Russia and the West, first with Russia as desiring subject, and the West as the object of unrequited love, and second, at the sexual dynamics that animate the construction of Slavic Studies here in North America. Another way of looking at this material is that I am turning my attention to two broad categories: the

metaphysics of Russian sexuality, with its emphasis on silence that arguably leads either to spiritual transcendence or purely phatic communion, and the metapolitics of Russian sexuality--what I've discussed before in terms of nationalism, crisis, and masculine humiliation. All of these questions can also be seen as different attempts to address the relations between self and other, always implicated in sexuality by the phenomenon's very definition.

As I was planning this paper, it was my sincere hope that I would be able to talk about Russian sexuality without resorting to the cliché that follows the topic around like a lovesick puppy. Would it be possible, just this once, not to invoke the infamous 1987 declaration, "*U nas seksa net*"? Apparently not. Sick to death as I am of this phrase, I realize that the impulse to suppress it is in itself an inverted recapitulation of the very silencing of sex that the words attempt to perform. In *Overkill* and elsewhere, I treated these particular words in tried-and-true Foucauldian fashion, as a speech act that served to incite the very discourse whose existence it wished to deny. While I still stand by this reading, I'd like to turn my attention to an aspect of it that I gave short shrift: what, exactly, is this denial of sex trying to preserve? A blogger discussing this incident in 2003 draws our attention to precisely

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that: he reports seeing the famous “no sex” lady interviewed on a program commemorating St. Petersburg’s 300th anniversary (a connection that I must admit is lost on me). When asked what she meant back in 1987, she “responded that she merely implied that in Russia a more elevated and refined form of human interaction is practiced, that of romantic love” (Joerg Colberg, July 25, 2003, [http://jmcolberg.com/weblog/2003/07/no\\_sex\\_please\\_were\\_russian/](http://jmcolberg.com/weblog/2003/07/no_sex_please_were_russian/), last accessed October 14, 2010). I’m assuming that this opposition is familiar to everyone [...]; certainly, Helena Gosilo has dealt with it rather elegantly in *Dehexing Sex*, where she talks about Russian literature’s heightened emotional vocabulary and impoverished sexual lexicon, as well as the proliferation of ellipses any time blood vessels are engorged, orifices are breached, or fluids exchanged. And, indeed, when we put it that way, who wouldn’t prefer ellipses?

If we indulge for a minute in the sort of historical oversimplification that we would never tolerate from our undergraduates, we have two moments of almost frenetic attempts to incite sexual discourse (the 1920s and the present day), against the weight of a cultural tradition that would overwhelmingly prefer silence. Invoking Freudian notions of “repression” would be the psychological equivalent of ascribing everything in Russian culture to the repressive forces of an authoritarian or totalitarian state: repression explains a great deal, but it’s called repression for a reason. Functioning as one easy answer, it closes off many others. Instead, I propose to take the frequent professions I hear in the Russian media and from Russian acquaintances regarding the higher spiritual value of sexual silence at face value, at least as a place to start. Certainly, it fits the Foucauldian model of a discourse about not talking about sex, but there is much more to it. In this profoundly logocentric culture, there is a strong

desire to maintain sexuality as a realm beyond words.

At first glance, such an attitude all but cries out for Derrida. If we set all the hideous jargon aside, we have the basic deconstructive critique of structuralism as a system relying on a center that is itself without structure, a base case that resolves all recursion, a transcendent truth that defies analysis. The deconstructive impulse to make nothing off-limits to critical analysis is familiar in so many other contexts: the feminist notion that the personal is political (there is no realm outside of politics), or even Agamben’s argument that the state of exception defines sovereignty through exclusive inclusion. The very gesture of leaving something out suggests how much it must be brought back in. Derrida refers us to the transcendental signifier, but this concept is inadequate to the role sexuality has played in Russian culture, because what is at stake here is the denial of signification itself. It is as though there were a tacit recognition that sex cannot be just sex, nor can it be something spiritually transcendent, once it is put into words.

The desire to retain a realm entirely *hors discours* is anti-deconstruction *avant la lettre*, and, I believe, can be connected to a pervasive tendency to allow a deliberately underanalyzed notion of sex and gender to reinforce an underanalyzed category of “the natural”. “Natural” gender roles, “natural” sexuality are always available as an implicit reproach to any attempts at radical change: as a safe haven from political and philosophical analysis, they are an ideological “nature retreat.” This, then, accounts for so many of the moments when sex does seem to become part of Russian intellectual discourse, in that it is trotted out as the example of an absolute to which we can simply appeal. This is particularly the case when the subject appears to be gender: by the Soviet period, even when one might assume that Marxist notions of base and superstructure

should work in the other direction, we see an almost reflexive move to transform what could possibly be contingent or constructed into something essential. Platonov does this quite dazzlingly in his essays about sex in the 1920s, but the naturalization of social categories becomes painfully obvious only a few years later: what could be a better example than the idea of the “hereditary proletarian”?

This, however, is when sex is invoked as a category or a concept, discussed as a social and metaphysical phenomenon, but left virtually undescribed. What happens when sexual acts are depicted in fiction? Here we see that preserving sex from Russian discourse serves a double role, in that it also saves sexuality from a disturbing transformation that so often happens in its Russian verbalization. If there is a tendency in Russian culture to avoid analyzing sex in terms of politics and power (so familiar in Western feminist critique), it may well be because the Russian verbalization of sex almost immediately falls into overdetermined metaphors of power. Or, more specifically, violence. Tiutchev famously tells us that words can never succeed in conveying the truth: *mysl’ izrechennaia est’ lozh*. The thought, once pronounced, is a lie. Crudely speaking, a similar transformation happens to sex. Sex, once put into words, becomes violence.

Here I have in mind not the odd coincidence that the titles of so many Russian masterpieces, when rendered into English, sound like softcore bondage (*Crime and Punishment*, *Master and Margarita*, *Master and Man*, *How the Steel Was Tempered*). Nor do I mean merely to invoke my previous work on the sexualization of power relations in post-Soviet popular culture. I’m thinking of the ways that ellipses produce violence as much as they produce sex, and the way sex works as a punchline as long as it’s really about hierarchy and implied violence. I think back to the old joke about

Brezhnev commissioning a bust of himself from a Soviet sculptor. Weeks go by, and when the bust is unveiled, Brezhnev expresses hesitant approval, but wonders why he is portrayed with large, female breasts. The sculptor replies that it is an allegory about the leader's relationship to the Soviet people: with the left breast, he nurses the working class. With the right, the peasantry. Brezhnev asks, "But what about the intelligentsia?" To which the sculptor replies: "For that I would have needed to sculpt your torso." At the risk of draining the joke of all humor through over-analysis (an enterprise for which there is ample precedent), I should point out that it operates through the sculptural equivalent of verbal ellipsis: what's left out is entirely overdetermined, in terms of both sex and power. Popular accounts of Russian power relations inevitably bring up the common saying, "Kto kogo?", inadequately translated into English as "Who whom?" The assumption in these accounts is that

the omitted word is one of violence, but it would work just as well if it were a previously unprintable verb describing sex. Certainly, Vladimir Sorokin has built his entire career on exploiting the slippage between sex, violence, and dominance in Soviet and Russian letters: the almost mechanical acts of rape and sadism in *Norma*, the infamous buggery scene in *Goluboe salo* involving clones of Khrushchev and Stalin (Khrushchev is "kto" and Stalin is "kogo"), and the phantasmagoric climax of *Den' oprichnika*, in which all the leader's murderous henchmen indulge in a "centipede" orgy (an all-male acrobatic gang bang that is a cross between anal sex and a conga line) (you can't imagine how much I wish Sorokin had already written this book when I was working on *Men Without Women*). Even the intrigues of Sergei Minaev's vapid novel *The Telki: Povest' o nenastoiashchei liubvi*, which might best be pitched as *Les Liaisons dangereuses* meets *Entourage*, reveal that the serial manipulation of

multiple sexual partners is actually part of a convoluted power struggle between the sexes, masterminded by the lothario narrator's jilted lover (she leads him to believe he is dying of AIDS, but, unfortunately for the reader, he isn't). Years of Western feminist readings alert us to the fact that sexual silence facilitates ideological power, but recent Russian cases suggest the opposite: frank sexual discussion functions as virtual euphemism for power.

Sexuality is a more culturally comfortable category when it is behind the scenes, shaping ideas in an all but invisible fashion. This is the point in my talk when a young man's fancy so naturally turns to... Slavophiles and Westernizers. Please do not panic: as much as I am sympathetic to any enterprise that "queers" Russian intellectual culture, even Sorokin has yet to imagine these illustrious men in

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## Harvard Ukrainian Summer Institute June 27 to August 12, 2011

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Tamara Nary, *Programs Administrator*

Harvard Ukrainian Summer Institute

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anything like a “centipede orgy” (sadly, now, we can no longer say the same for ourselves—just be thankful that I’m not using PowerPoint). Instead, I have in mind the erotics of the central relationship that preoccupied these Russian thinkers: that of East and West, with Russia in the middle. These rather tiresome debates are not just about Russia’s future, they are about Russia’s past and Russia’s very identity. In other words, they represent a particularly adolescent self-consciousness. As Russia comes of age, it no longer recognizes itself in the mirror, and doesn’t particularly like what it sees. Americans would address these issues with chirpy practicality: instead of philosophical tracts, one imagines a helpful guide: “My Body Politic is Changing” “Your Body Politic and You”. The questions of cultural origin also suggest a guidebook, but for younger audiences: Russia, where do I come from? When a Western civilization and an Eastern civilization love each other very, very much, they want to get as close to each other as possible. Eventually, they produce Russia. The perpetual Russian search for a “third way,” a “third path,” resembles an Oedipal denial of origins, an adolescent protest of unique individuality.

These are admittedly cheap comparisons, but they do cast the Russian cultural preoccupation with the nation as synthesis, or as the mystical resolution of opposites, in a slightly different light. Here I recall the Symbolist fascination with alchemical marriage, which Viktor Pelevin transforms so wonderfully in *Chapaev i pustota*. World culture will be saved by an alchemical marriage between East and West, somehow embodied as the star of the Mexican soap opera *Simplemente Maria* and Arnold Schwarzenegger, respectively. Dmitrii Bykov puts several further twists on the idea in his scandalous novel *Zh.D.*, which reimagines Russia as the ideological and literal battleground between two hostile nations that

are also eternally attracted to each other: the *Variagi* (more or less the Russians, as imagined in the crypto-fascist writings of Grigorii Klimov, Lev Gumilev, Aleksandr Dugin, and the Book of Veles) and the *Khazary* (the Jews, as reimagined by Arthur Koestler on the one hand and Gumilev on the other). The situation is complicated by the existence of a “native population” that is not simply “Russian/*variag*” but often misidentifies itself as such, and the apocalyptic consequences of the birth of a child who is the result of a complicated, notionally three-way miscegenation.

This, in turn, leads me to the ill-starred alchemical marriage so longed-for in the twentieth century, but apparently never fated to come true: the marriage of Russia and America. In the States, this was an idea that never received all that much enthusiasm. Former Oberlin College President, physicist and delightfully earnest New Age[r] Robert Fuller spent much of the late eighties lecturing on his idea for “AmerRuss,” the convergence of the two late twentieth-century empires into one supranational enlightened entity. His original 1986 *Whole Earth Review* essay, later retitled “One World Scenario,” would be entirely forgotten now if it hadn’t been taken up by American right-wing militias and millenarian Christians who see it as another sign that the black helicopters will be coming for them any minute. But in the Soviet Union/Russia, America was more than just the official enemy: it was the object of unrequited love for generations of young people who, as they tend to do, eventually turned into generations of old people. This should all be familiar territory (jeans, rock and roll, Sylvester Stallone and *Star Wars*), and much has been written about the disappointment expressed within the post-Soviet Russian media and cultural industries at the fact that, with the Cold War now over, America had moved on. Think of all the libidinal energy each side invested in the other: here, the

Cold War becomes the equivalent of endless foreplay with no release. This is not to say that there aren’t plenty of arguably good reasons for Russians to be ill-disposed towards America, but that there is, at times, a vehemence that seems more interpersonal than geopolitical: all these years, we were leading Russia on.

Where, then, does that leave us, North American Slavists? As the few people left who still care about our old dance partner. If Russia didn’t play quite the same formative role in the American cultural imaginary that America did in Russia’s, this hardly means that the American attitude was all business. For America, Russia is exotic, but not *too* exotic. An American desire for an eroticized Russia can be found throughout the history of American cinema. From Greta Garbo’s cold and sexy *Ninotchka* to a parade of Bond girls (who give us the other terrible cliché of our topic, “From Russia with Love”), Russia is repeatedly embodied as a woman who is sexy, alluring, but somewhat closed off—her face shows limited, controlled affect, but she is not “inscrutable.” Indeed, she is potentially *quite* scrutable.

For Slavists in North America, the sexual question has, I think, been almost as vexing as it has been in Russia, if for different reasons. The Western critical response to Russian sexual discourse inevitably becomes both a part of that very discourse and a part of a complex process that itself deserves examination. The revival of Russian public interest in Russian sexuality can be considered an attempt at self-knowledge; the impulse behind the Western interest in the phenomenon would presumably be different. If Russia so easily plays the role of “Other” to the West, it is difficult to avoid seeing the Western critical relation to Russian sexuality as itself erotic. Indeed, the insularity of Soviet

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society was inherently provocative, since there is nothing more erotic than that which is obscured from view. Journalistic accounts of Russian life, such as those of Hedrick Smith (*The Russians*. New York: 1984: 188-191, 239-242) and Martin Walker (*The Waking Giant: Gorbachev's Russia*. New York: 1988: 179-181), inevitably included discussions of the mysteries of the Russian sex life: how they managed to find the time and place for sex in a country where private space is an unimaginable luxury, and how the birth rate was kept so low in a country with little reliable birth control. The sexual question was posed almost in parallel to the economic one: inquiries about both the ability to put food on the table in an economy of scarcity and the capacity to make room for sex in puritan (and overcrowded) conditions often elicited that classically frustrating Russian refrain: "*Vam eto ne poniat*". The situation used to be exacerbated by the Soviet censors: what, after all, can be more intriguing than that which we know has been hidden or excised?

Given the libidinal dynamics of the Cold War, though, the timing of North American scholarly interest in Russian sexuality is striking. Why do we talk about it now, and why did it take our field so long to get around to saying something? A decade into the twenty-first century, we have a fairly substantial body of scholarship on the topic--the works of such North American scholars as Brian Baer, Gregory Carleton, Susanne Fusso, Helena Goscilo, Dan Healy, Ronald LeBlanc, and Eric Naiman, not to mention a list of last names that would surely set off alarm bells among certain circles in contemporary Russia: Laura Engelstein, Laurie Bernstein, Frances Bernstein, Eliot Borenstein, and Evgenii Bershteyn--a veritable Elders of Zion of Russian sex. Most of the North American scholars I've listed are not part of the Russian diaspora, and I think all of us are cognizant of the potential pitfalls

when talking about the sexuality of another culture. In such cases, either the foreign interest or the foreign subject matter can easily assume the air of the pathological. After all, why study the sexual practices or sexual discourse of a particular country unless one expects to find something radically different from what is considered the norm? This is perhaps one of the reasons that the Western approaches to Russian sexuality tend to be social constructionist, whereas the Russian ones rely more on a faith in "biology" or the "natural." When we study Russian sexuality, we implicitly assume that we will find something different. Wouldn't this be the case for all foreign scholars dealing with sex in the culture they study? Perhaps, but, again, I think we're stuck in the particular dynamics of Russian-American relations. While I admit that I have not done a longitudinal study, I'm willing to bet that things are playing themselves out different in our field, in part because of the assumption of difference. This could be my ignorance: maybe American experts on Scandinavia are finding something really intriguing about sex and gender in Norway. But even if they are, it means something different for their discipline.

Trying to figure out the dynamics of a process in which you yourself are so professionally invested is never a simple proposition--claims of scholarly neutrality look a bit laughable. And, in the interest of full disclosure, I'll admit what several of you already know, which is that I used to be married to a woman from the Russian Federation. Rest assured: the fact that my first marriage was the worst mistake of my life in no way informs my view on this subject matter. But this does, with a great deal of embarrassment, lead me to the third big cliché of our topic, one that we all know from our years in college, graduate school, and after, but that is never part of the scholarship itself: infatuated by things

Russian, North American student of Russian goes to the Soviet Union/Russian Federation, falls in love with a local, gets married, and lives... happily every after? For the last part, I refer us to Tolstoi on happy families. As I bring up this humiliating scenario, I recall one of the most important lines on this season of *Mad Men*: "No one likes to think they're a type." My point, which I hope is obvious, is this: perhaps better than anyone, Slavists knew about the libidinal attractions of the Cold War. Certainly, those of us old enough to remember the drama of divided spouses, kept apart for years by cruel Soviet bureaucrats who refused to issue exit visas, can make the connection to Romeo and Juliet, or, more appropriately, Pyramus and Thysbee (with the proverbial "Iron Curtain" serving as dividing wall). So why did it take us so long to start talking about Russia and sexuality?

The answer has to do with politics, but politics of a specific kind. First, there is the overwhelming seriousness that framed the Cold War: wherever one stood on the political spectrum, there was the very significant possibility that our ideological conflict could lead to global annihilation. By comparison, Russian sexuality did not seem that compelling an issue. But more significant for scholars of literature and culture is a reflexive backlash against the great power politics that rendered mutually assured destruction thinkable. This, in itself, was seen as an anti-political, rather than a political stance. If such a proposition might seem naive today, it's worth considering the motivations that led to it. During their heyday, Slavic Studies and Sovietology were a huge pig feeding at a rich government trough, and literary scholars were lucky to be the pig's distaff end. Faced with an area studies model that rendered all Soviet literature a kind of sociological proof-text for explaining Soviet "real life" and ideology, the best Slavists of their generations retreated to the

realm that was the least compatible with this approach: aesthetics.

Our field's former reluctance to address sexuality, then, has multiple causes. In part, there is something less like prudishness and more like self-consciousness, in that so many of us were uncomfortably implicated in the subject matter. More important, though, is the fact that sex itself was not the taboo: the taboo was politics. At roughly the same time that the rest of literary studies was examining the unbreakable ties between the personal and the political (thanks to feminism) and the hidden role of ideology in cultural production (thanks to Foucault, Said, and Derrida), scholars of Russian and Slavic literatures were understandably running away from politics as fast as they could. And, really, what possible appeal could ideological critique have for Slavists? The cultural studies model of politics is conspiratorial: scholars uncover hidden political agendas and deconstruct implicit ideologies. For Slavists during the Cold War, this was not just shooting fish in a barrel: this was how we were considered useful. And this was what we needed to avoid. When discussing Russian sexuality, I find myself repeatedly arguing that, for the West, Russia has functioned far less as a sex object than as a politics object (even when sex is involved): everything is interpreted through a beguiling haze of politics. And are Western scholars really to blame, when the country is governed so provocatively? In the Slavic world, political and ideological interpretations were the last resort of the lazy and unimaginative.

But politics and ideology are the things that make the cultural study of sexuality compelling--I don't think anyone in this room does work on sexuality that could be considered phenomenological. How many of us have had to suppress a sigh when faced with a question about what Russians "really" do or did in bed, and explain

that we're not talking about "real life"? The primary frustration, though, is not with naive misunderstanding, but with the sense that we have been fighting battles that other fields resolved two or three decades ago. Our field's traditional distaste for ideology is exacerbated by a reflexive preference for theories and approaches with a Slavic pedigree, as if we somehow internalized the essentialist "blood and soil" notions of nationality put forward by extremists from the countries we study, even if all of us consciously find these ideas repulsive. Russian and Slavic Studies have only begun to overcome an oppressive "SEEJ mentality" (a pun that, in itself, points to our insularity: how many people outside of this room could get it)? Certainly, there is a valid argument to be made that we were fortunate to be able to sit out the worst of the Culture Wars. And I personally feel a sense of disciplinary schizophrenia and contrarianism as I hop from one field to the other. After spending all last weekend at an interdisciplinary dissertation workshop on gender and culture, I do find it refreshing to be at an event where the word "neoliberal" is not uttered so often that it would seem like a verbal tic if it weren't pronounced with such contempt. (For those of you who aren't familiar with the term, there will be a reeducation session after my talk is over.) But we congratulate ourselves at our own risk. At the same workshop, one of the participants casually made the comment that "of course, Queer Theory is over." I had to repress the urge to say: "Really? But we just got here!" All the parties end before the Slavists arrive. *Russkii chelovek na rendez-vous*, like hell.

The point is that North American Russian Studies has only recently begun to emerge from a sexual silence that appears to resemble the silence preferred in the culture we study, but actually results from our own local taboos about things other than sex. This is not to say that

Russian and Slavic Studies hasn't been astonishingly blind to sexual implications: after all, most of us do belong to an organization that had to go through years of entirely unironic soul-searching about whether or not to give up a name whose acronym looks like a seventies blaxpotation spelling of "ASS." (Am I really the only one who remembers the embarrassed confusion of hotel clerks when making reservations with our convention discount? "So you're with...uh... the Slavic Studies conference?") It is not sexual prudishness that has delayed the study of sexuality, but a profound discomfort with ideology. We should be quite happy with ourselves that we've begun to overcome this barrier and talk about sexuality and gender. But we shouldn't be too busy patting ourselves on the back to ask an importation question: what else might we be missing? The study of eros should not be the only thing that brings us out of our underground. Otherwise, we're not really leaving the underground at all: it's just Undergroundhog's Day, and, scared of our own shadows, we'll retreat back into our hole for six more weeks of critical winter.