

## LESBIANS IN MODERN RUSSIA: SUBJECTIVITY OR SOVIET PRACTICES OF ‘HYPOCRISY’?

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### Abstract

Western researchers of homosexuality in Russia, basing their views on the experience of their own countries, as well as on the modern queer-theory discussion of subjectivity, transfer their notions and concepts on the post-Soviet space and make a conclusion that Russian gays and lesbians don't have a stable, culturally defined identity, that could let distinguish a community and demand its recognition on different levels. In my opinion, the situation in modern Russia is a bit different. And its analysis "from the inside" let me talk not about subjectivities, freedoms and pluralities, but about Soviet practices that are used to represent and achieve lesbian lifestyle in the post-soviet space. The representation of heterosexuality and homosexuality by lesbian women in post-Soviet Russia shows not the floating subjectivity, but a specific form of social space reorganization, which does not prevent them from defining themselves as purely lesbians and conduct a lesbian lifestyle.

Modern Western feminist researchers of identity, sexuality, politics and representation, basing their ideas on the experience and the development trajectory of their own countries, realize the problematic character and insufficiency of rigid and preset categories like homosexual, heterosexual, lesbian. These categories, included in the practically realized politics of identity, introduce rigid segregation of groups' inclusion.<sup>1</sup> In everyday life, a person's experience and practices are much more differentiated and identities are less stable and multiple. Thus, theory and practice make us look for new analytical categories and approaches. One such approach is queer theory, which shifts the accent from identity to subjectivity, and consequently on the plurality of experience, representations and practices.

Western researches of homosexuality in Russia transfer their views in the search for subjectivity on the post-Soviet area and, looking at the appearing image, conclude that Russian gays and lesbians do not have a stable, culturally-defined identity that could allow to distinguish the community and demand recognition on different levels. In their opinion, it is more appropriate to talk about gay/ lesbian subjectivity, producing an amorphous structure of people not limited by an explicit category: people follow homosexual and heterosexual practices at the same time, represent in different situations different forms of masculinity and femininity.<sup>2</sup> But what if these researchers find what they are looking for on purpose? Isn't it a kind of "orientalism" when new and tempting forms of sexuality are attributed to a different country that used to be a closed one and that is exotic in some way? In my opinion, the situation in modern Russia is a bit different. And its analysis allows me speak not necessarily about the subjectivities, freedoms and pluralities, but about Soviet practices of representation and realization of lesbian lifestyle in the post-Soviet area.

Researchers of Soviet society write that there were two public spheres in the life of a Soviet person: (1) an official one (family, work, official events) that was under

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<sup>1</sup> J. Butler, "Gender Trouble," in E. Gapova and A. Usmanova, eds., *Gender Theory Anthology* (Minsk: Propileyi, 2000), 300-301.

<sup>2</sup> L. Essig, "Publicly Queer: Representations of Queer Subjects and Subjectivities in the Absence of Identity," in A. M. Barker, ed., *Consuming Russia* (London: Duke University Press, 1999), 281-283; L. Essig, *Queer in Russia: A Story of Sex, Self, and the Other* (London: Duke University Press, 1999).

the strict control of the state and was regulated by the official written code; and (2) the unofficial one (networks of friends and acquaintances, subcultures, shadow economics) that ensured everyday life and that was regulated by an informal unwritten code. The main norm of Soviet life was the legitimate double standard or the legitimate hypocrisy, when during the official events a person followed one set of rules and in private life another one, never mixing these spheres and having the ability of snappy switching between the two spheres.<sup>3</sup> The lives of many people became a constantly repeating duality – as if broken into two parts. Thus, on the one hand there was the official life, consisting of acceptable public and private life, from the point of view of the doctrine, and on the other hand there was the secret private (or intimate) life. This practice of hiding one's behavior, or "extracting" it from the sight of the neighbors and colleagues and sometimes even family members could be evaluated as a single act independent from outside direction or invasion.<sup>4</sup> Hypocrisy required the learning of the technique and individual elaboration of the switching mechanism between the official and the private world, which finally became almost automatic as a body skill.<sup>5</sup>

Changes that started in Russia at the end of the '80s and the beginning of the '90s entailed the destruction and disappearance of two spheres of life – the unofficial public and the official public ones, thus reshaping the structure of the public and private in the Russian society in the traditional direction for the Western practice: separation of the private sphere, appearance of the market sphere and the sphere of free public discussion, the civil initiative and others. But for the homosexual and lesbian communities, the practice of division of spheres and of hypocrisy is still topical. In spite of the legal (repeal of anti-homosexual law) and normative (discontinuation of forced psychiatric treatment of lesbians) changes, as well as the gay/ lesbian movement rush at the beginning of the '90s, homosexuality has still not become equal in rights with the heterosexual way of life. In the process of "normalization" of society, heterosexuality remained the cultural norm, supported by the tradition and social institutions, while lesbianism was propelled into the unofficial public sphere – into a special tolerated, but not evidently represented area.

Using the terminology of G. Garfinkel, one can say that heterosexuality is the basic sense-making category of knowledge and the experience of people and society – "something that everyone knows" – and that includes publicly approved behavior models known to any decent person.<sup>6</sup> Heterosexuality is not only a value and a norm but also a type of behavior that is shared and supported by all society members. In order to keep the general world-image intact, the only social roles (and their conduct) that get legitimacy are the ones based on the heterosexual identity. Since identities that are "not normal" (or outside the norm) are stigmatized, according to Irvin

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<sup>3</sup> E. Zdravmyslova and V. Voroncov, "The Informal Public in Soviet Society: Double Morality at Work," *Social Research* 69 (Spring 2002), 49-69; V. Voronkov and E. Chikadze, "Different Generations of Leningrad Jews in the Context of Public/Private Division: Paradoxes of Ethnicity," in R. Humphrey, R. Muller and E. Zdravomyslova, eds., *Altered lives and Broken Biographies: Biographical Research in Eastern Europe* (London: Palgrave, 2003), 239-259.

<sup>4</sup> O. Kharkhordin, *Unmask and Dissemble: Genealogy of a Russian Person*, (St. Petersburg European University in St. Petersburg, Letniy Sad, 2002), 352.

<sup>5</sup> Kharkhordin, *Unmask*, 362.

<sup>6</sup> H. Abels, *Interaction, Identity, Presentation. Introduction to Interpretative Sociology*, (St. Petersburg: Aletya, 2000), 150.

Gofman,<sup>7</sup> it makes one display behavior not corresponding to one's identity, but culturally acceptable.<sup>8</sup>

In this study, eight semi-structured theme-lined interviews were conducted with lesbian women between 18 to 35 years of age<sup>9</sup> living in St. Petersburg. Materials of eighteen other interviews from the author's works were used as well.<sup>10</sup>

For the analysis of the interviews, the method employed by A. Rotkirch was used. This method is based on the notion of "triple experience" described by Ch. Pierce. "According to Pierce the triple experience includes the dynamic relationship between the body feelings, institutional practices and cultural interpretations affecting the self-image formation or self-awareness of a person."<sup>11</sup>

Having analyzed the interviews, I learned that lesbian women in the process of social interaction restructure the social area into spheres of representation – realization/ non-representation – non-realization of lesbianism. There are three such spheres: the lesbian sphere, the borderline sphere and the heterosexual sphere.

1. Lesbian Area – the sphere where lesbianism is freely represented and realized. Partners (and life with them) are included in this sphere as well as friends and acquaintances networks, lesbian clubs, internet sites. Information exchange and search for partners take place in this sphere and one can get here support and spend one's leisure time. Close non-homosexual friends are included in the lesbian sphere and the basis for self-representation as a lesbian is the high level of trust "only close ones, friends" (26, interview #4), while the previous communication takes away the risk of stigmatization "And how can we quarrel because of that?" (30, interview #3)
2. The Borderline Area – is the sphere where lesbianism is represented but not discussed. The following people and situations belong here:
  - i) When no attention is paid to the others, and others' private life and behavior are not discussed (street, café) "and what's the difference with whom and how I hold hands, people just walk on the streets and what, do they watch how the others walk?" (30, interview #3)
  - ii) When a lesbian woman has equal status with others (passers-by, fellow-students);
  - iii) When the opinion of others cannot have bad or obvious negative after-effects for the lesbian woman "And what can they do to me?" (24, interview #7). In crisis situations lesbian women can guarantee defense and neutralize the situation. Lesbianism representation in this sphere is expressed in the partner presence and in the expression of tender

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<sup>7</sup> Abels, *Interaction*, 209.

<sup>8</sup> Abels, *Interaction*, 210.

<sup>9</sup> The choice of this age group was determined by the assumption that structural conditions of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods have significant differences. Thus we were interested in women whose worldview was formed in the post-Soviet period.

<sup>10</sup> Nadezda Nartova, "Youth Lesbian Subculture in St. Petersburg," in V. V. Kostyushev, ed., *Youth Movements and Subcultures in St. Petersburg (sociological and anthropological analysis)* (St. Petersburg: Norma, 1999): 209-226 (in Russian); Nadezda Nartova, "Lesbian Community in Russia: Socio-Cultural Analysis of Exclusion" (BA Thesis, St. Petersburg University of Culture and Arts, 2002, in Russian); Nadezda Nartova, "Lesbian Families: Reality Behind the Wall of Silence," in S. Ushakin, ed., *Family Ties: Models for Assembly*, vol. I (Moscow: NLO, 2004), 291-315 (in Russian).

<sup>11</sup> A. Rotkirch, "Love With Words and Without Them: Experience of Lesbian Relationship in the Post-Soviet Period," in E. Zdravomyslova and A. Temkina, eds., *In Search for Sexuality: Selected Articles* (St. Petersburg: Dmitry Bulanin, 2002), 453.

feeling towards her. Others are given the right to decide what kind of relations are these and this is the counterbuffer that guarantees noninterference into the private life “who doesn’t like doesn’t have to look” (26, interview #4), “if they have seen something and understood, that’s their problem” (30, interview #3).

3. The Heterosexual Area – is the sphere where a lesbian woman represents herself as a heterosexual one. This sphere includes significant others: parents and work, where the supposed danger of stigmatization and negative after-effects is very high. In this sphere heterosexuality as the basic practice is not violated. Here the mechanisms of heterosexuality are respected by such behavior as the appearance of a lesbian woman with a boyfriend and the ability to neutralize the problematic situation by referring to a heterosexual experience or the absence of a decent partner: “Mama, just look at modern men, she looks and I say, do you have further questions?” (26, interview #4). The culturally defined norm of heterosexual contract guarantees the concealment of lesbianism if it is not directly named or represented.

The lower a woman’s status in an interaction situation and the higher her dependence level, the more she represents (“performs”) heterosexuality. For example a lesbian can reveal her sexuality to a colleague with whom she has developed trustworthy or friendly relations but almost never to her boss.

For the parents whose socialization took place in the Soviet times, the lesbian way of life is not associated with a safe life strategy for their children. Therefore, learning about the homosexuality of their daughter is considered by the lesbian women as threatening to their parents’ health and wellbeing that the daughters (in their opinion) do not have the right to endanger. The degree of concealment includes in this situation the level of material and psychic dependence, the age of the parents, the living conditions, etc. Lesbian women made “different” combinations of these factors explaining the reasons for concealing their homosexuality.

The condition for the existence of an unproblematic lesbian space is keeping its borderlines that are supported through non-representation of lesbianism and the lesbian space in other spheres. We see this process as a division of spheres in individual biographies, but the process of learning the rules for sphere distribution may be defined as “from mystery to routine”.

Reconstructing their experience in the interviews, lesbian women considered that the period of secrecy and concealment was linked to the time when homosexuality was highly problematic in their own conscience: “First it was difficult. Still the time was a bit different then, I was younger, yes, it was difficult. Because I had to conceal, again talk about my beloved as a neutral body. And now it’s completely gone, no problems, I have kept silence and it’s all and over now” (26, interview #2). An 18 years old informant describes her present life the same way: “We are hiding it... It’s a secret” (18, interview #6), not only from the parents and acquaintances but also from the passers-by in the street “We hold hands in the street only when nobody sees and when it’s crowded we walk just side by side... who knows how people might look at that, it’s not very pleasant” (18, interview #6).

In the period of “formation” and search for acceptable relation models, different aspects are made problematic. A 22 year-old informant (interview #5) undergoes a period of uncertainty in her relations with parents who do not know, and she does not want to tell them. But, on the other hand, she does not want to conceal: “My mother has a weak heart... I wouldn’t like them to know but I also wouldn’t like them to imagine some boy, some heterosexual nonsense” (22, interview #5).

The greater a woman's homosexual and/ or social experience, the better the skill to divide the spheres and the more of a routine character this process has. For example, a 30 year-old informant (interview #3) answered the questions just by nodding as her way of life did not cause any tensions: she has a private life, a permanent partner, friends whom she can tell everything, work where she occupies a high position and where she does not discuss her private life. She successfully earns her living, she is competent, she is not interested in lesbian clubs and passers-by and she spends her leisure in a jazz club. This amounts to the fact that her lesbianism is so much "included" in her everyday life that it practically cannot be distinguished from the routine.

What is interesting is the fact that young informants say that they need some social organizations, some people to change something in the society: "Something should be done, of course, it's very important" (18, interview #6). This means that they need external favorable conditions to realize the lesbian lifestyle and supportive organizations. "Competent" ones do not see any sense in these organizations: "I don't need them for example. Me personally. And, after all, what problems could arise that I would like to go to some center?" (26, interview #1).

Lesbian women not only learn to divide spheres of representation – realization/ non-representation – non-realization of lesbianism, but also acquire competence in each sphere: women know the rules of the "game" in the lesbian as well as in the heterosexual space: "I just know how to make them [men] interested, how to keep the game going" (26, interview #1). Such sphere division does not make these women uncomfortable, does not cause emotional stress, they do not see themselves discriminated: "I think I have a normal life of full value, not restricted by anything" (26, interview #1). A similar double game is a routine, an everyday thing.

The lesbian sphere is constructed as a specific "private" one (a hidden sphere of experience protected from the external heterosexual control and interference where an individual can be him/ herself<sup>12</sup>), the unofficial public sphere. In the areas where important others and/ or potentially important others are present, women represent heterosexuality trying thus to avoid negative after-effects and unforeseen situations. Thus both, the traditionally "private" sphere (the parents, the family), as well as the traditionally "public" sphere (the work), are the official "public" sphere where an individual follows the normative expectations (of heterosexuality).

However, the lesbian sphere is not only a personally created one – it is a specific structural sphere in the society that includes public institutions like clubs and internet sites oriented on lesbian community and on the networks of friends and acquaintances existing outside individual biographies and plural ones acting in this community. The fact that the lesbian space is an independent strictly limited sphere with its own rules and limitations is supported by the stories of "entering" the lesbian sphere: the lesbian sphere should be found, accepted as one's own, interiorized and integrated in one's lifestyle as a unity. That means one has to enter the community and support it by one's practices and actions. Let us have a closer look at that in the empirical material.

As the homosexual experience is in the first place and to a great extent exclusive, only accessible to a limited number of people, and, in the second place, it has (as we have seen above) limited possibilities of representation in the public sphere, a lesbian woman, experiencing for the first time homoerotic feelings, has practically no information about other lesbians, about lesbian lifestyle, etc.: "I didn't

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<sup>12</sup> J. Bailey, "Some Meanings of 'The private' in Sociological Thought," *Sociology* 34 (3/ 2002): 384.

know anything at all” (30, interview #3), “And where, for whom to look for? Where and how do they find each other at all? What can I do?” (26, interview 1).

Learning about lesbian clubs or internet sites, getting first homosexual acquaintances entails the widening of the lesbian world of a woman “I didn’t know at all that the world is so big, in this respect” (22, interview #5), getting confidence “... I just became freer in Petersburg,<sup>13</sup> became freer now. Maybe I became freer exactly when I met some people. Yes, I think it happened then.” (26, interview #4), and, to a certain extent, freedom: “It was the first time, we kissed openly for the first time in a crowd that might become familiar or was familiar to us. We danced for the first time, danced as we wanted to – it was great” (26, interview #2).

Thus, having entered the lesbian sphere, a woman gets maximum possibilities for realization and representation of the lesbian lifestyle. Moreover, different elements of the lesbian sphere (clubs and friends) form a whole of “one’s own” space. No doubt, norms and rules of behavior at home and in a club are different and formally these are the private and the public, but this sphere can be detached on the basis of common homosexual experience, and is actually an undivided lesbian sphere.

Learning the skills to divide the spheres and the “routinization” of this skills allows women to live relatively non-contradictory lives, avoiding discrimination and suppression, as well as to support the independence and the unity of the lesbian sphere in the society.

Therefore, we can conclude that the lesbian sphere belongs to the unofficial public sphere that is independent, complete and self-sufficient. The stability of its borderlines is kept through the absence of external public representation and problematization in public discussions. Entering the lesbian sphere, learning its internal rules (for example, representation of homosexuality) and its detachment from other spheres through non-representation of lesbianism in external social interactions allow women not only to satisfy their lesbian needs but also to live a non-contradictory life.

Thus, the representation of heterosexuality and homosexuality by lesbian women in post-Soviet Russia shows not the floating subjectivity, but a specific form of social space reorganization, which does not prevent them from defining themselves as purely lesbians and conduct a lesbian lifestyle.

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<sup>13</sup> Before moving to St. Petersburg the informant lived in Moscow.

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