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))) Introduction: Feeling Blue?

The founder of Russian “sexology” and the author of many controversial publications on homosexuality, Igor Kon, entitled his 2008 autobiography *Eighty Years of Solitude*.¹ In this book, he expressed his deep feeling of intellectual isolation because of his commitment to the study of sexuality, a topic that was silenced in the USSR. Indeed, there were no conferences or workshops to attend, no colleagues to engage with in fruitful conversations. On the contrary, in Soviet times, Kon expected his work to be repressed and carefully monitored everything he wrote in order not to express something subject to criminal law or other sanctions. According to Kon, the situation hardly changed in the 1990s: “It seemed that the Soviet situation definitely disappeared and turned to the irrelevant past. However, every day our current society reminds me more of that country where I lived sixty years of my life.”²

Kon wrote these words long before Russia became a worldwide symbol of the political repression of homosexuality in 2013, when the notorious law against “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations”³ was enacted on the federal level. The repression of sexualities outside of a narrow set of heteronormative practices has since become official policy. It has included governmental propaganda of animosity toward lesbians and gay men, the legitimization of gay bashers

across the country,⁴ a clamping down on freedom of association,⁵ and the censorship of any media that does not represent homosexuality in a negative way.⁶ All these events contribute to the sense of loneliness and solitude that a contemporary Russian scholar of queer sexuality feels because the state makes our studies unspeakable and unimaginable. Yet, as a queer scholar in Russia, I feel exactly the opposite.

Rather queerly, the same year that the law against homosexual propaganda was passed turned out to be a high point of my career. First, together with colleagues from the St. Petersburg LGBT organization *Vykhod* we organized the Second International Interdisciplinary Conference “On the Crossroads: Methodology, Theory and Practice of LGBT and Queer Studies.”⁷ Second, journalists became interested in my research. I have been approached by reporters from the UK, Germany, Finland, Sweden, and even Russia to comment on the current situation with LGBT rights and politics.⁸ Finally, in 2013, the faculty of the European University at St. Petersburg approved my course on queer theory; in the spring semester of 2014, I taught the first queer studies class in Russia to a dozen motivated master’s students. This situation prevents me from speaking of loneliness, though my feelings are ambivalent. On the one hand, it is official in Russia that talking about gays is bad. On the other hand, these same legal prohibitions have also generated a lot of attention to research on homosexuality and created the possibility of a vibrant academic discussion.

In what follows, I will try to describe the field of lesbian, gay, and queer scholarship, which simultaneously is queer activism given the political climate in Russia. I will do so in order to locate my own position there: a position that is characterized by both a feeling of loneliness, as expressed by Professor Kon many years ago, and a feeling of promise that troubles the dark scene I see from my university’s window. After all, rainbows appear after rainclouds.

))) We Have Always Been Queer

In Russia, the terrains of contestation are quite different from what they are in the United States. As John D’Emilio argued, speaking of university scholars and our attitudes to gay and lesbian lives, “Having been granted the extraordinary privilege of thinking critically as a way of life, we should be astute enough to recognize when a group of people is being systematically mistreated.”⁹ This privileged position is supposed to bring university faculty to recognize the importance of sustaining a welcoming environment to those who feel oppressed. This is not what the Russian academy looks like. On the contrary, researchers of Russian social science believe that university professors assume the role of the

intellectual police and provide scholarly justifications for the repressive initiatives of the government.¹⁰

However, social science in Russia is not an easily identifiable field that could be reduced to simply one camp of police-professors. Sociologist Mikhail Sokolov identified a clear-cut division of the field of Russian sociology into camps, which he named after Chicago districts from his favorite sociological writings¹¹: East Side and West Side. East Side and West Side are oppositional groups of institutions. East Side sociology is bound by a positivist prejudice, the generation of local knowledge at the expense of international collaboration, and a desire to serve the state authority by their research. The West Side is dedicated to critical attitudes and theories, publishes in international journals, and is generally skeptical of the Russian government's initiatives and even legitimacy.¹² The inhabitants of the East Side are professors from St. Petersburg State University, the Russian Academy of Science, and other smaller institutions. Those on the West Side teach in the European University at St. Petersburg, the Higher School of Economics, and the Centre for Independent Social Research.¹³ Moreover, according to Sokolov's quantitative analysis, support for same-sex marriage would locate scholars on the West Side, whereas denial of this legal mechanism to same-sex couples would increase the probability of "living" in the East Side of Russian social science.¹⁴

I live in the West Side of Russian social science. I started my academic career in the Centre for Independent Social Research, and I am still a proud member of this team of scholars. At the same time, I now mostly work at the Department of Political Science and Sociology of the European University at St. Petersburg, where I teach queer theory. No doubt, it would be surprising to see this course included in the curricula of the St. Petersburg State University. Yet shouldn't queer theory come as a sort of "surprise" to established forms of knowledge? As David Halperin suggested in the early 2000s, "queer theory" gained recognition in U.S. academia and was subsequently appropriated by academic institutions. The radical potential of queer theory to "surprise" was lost on the way to becoming a respected discipline.¹⁵ Of course, this observation makes sense only if one relates it to the particular position of the speaker who expresses it. For example, a somewhat different perspective from a "normal" (i.e., middle-ranked) university is given in Jen Bacon's account, which shows that the curriculum is still a contested terrain for queer theory: although lesbian and gay issues are welcomed, some faculty resist queer theory for its critical potential to threaten identity categories.¹⁶ Having this relationality in mind, I want to trouble my own exceptionalism as one of the few queer scholars in this country and show that my position and the more general environment of social sciences in Russia are not exactly what they seem.

In his influential book *Cruising Utopia*, José Muñoz suggested that queerness necessarily belongs to the future; it “is not yet here,” so “[w]e have never been queer,” and “queerness exists for us as an ideality.”¹⁷ In Russia, this U.S. future is our queer past and present. During her fieldwork in Moscow in 1990s, Laurie Essig observed a myriad of ways sexual otherness expresses itself in Russia. She identified it as queerness or queer subjectivity, a performance that produces fluid desires and practices rather than rigid identities. The concept of queer as opposed to identitarian notions of lesbian women and gay men led her to describe sexualities in Russia as “a system of signs that speak in both recognizable and unrecognizable tongues.”¹⁸ The representations of queer in Russia continue to be various, so my further narration will focus on those that belong to the field of academia and manifest themselves not only in recognizable forms, but also secretly subvert Russian institutions of higher education.

))) Queer Assemblage

Topics related to sexuality—and especially homosexuality—have penetrated Russian universities through the work of so-called “gender centers,” a variety of research and education programs and institutions that have been organized across Russia since the 1990s. There is one in St. Petersburg State University¹⁹ and another one in Moscow State University,²⁰ for example. Some of these university bureaucratic formations are distinguished and recognized as important intellectual hubs, including in studies related to sexualities outside of heteronormativity: they include the “Gender Centers” in Ivanovo,²¹ Samara,²² and Perm,²³ the Center for Social Policy and Gender Studies in Saratov,²⁴ *Region* in Ul’yanovsk,²⁵ and finally, the Gender Studies program in the European University at St. Petersburg.²⁶ Except for the latter, they all belonged to state universities and offered research and education that featured “queer” as an academic concept or as an important “secret” signifier of speaking on once prohibited topics.

Nadia Nartova, a graduate of European University and a queer scholar herself, neatly documented this field in her 2007 article in *The Journal of Lesbian Studies*. She suggested that “queer” has become a legitimate umbrella term “for nominating and studying anything.”²⁷ However, from my point of view, the effect of the conceptual transplantation of queer into Russian academics might be considered a fruitful beginning of the professionalization and normalization—in Halperin’s terms—of queer theory. Breaking the silence that surrounds queer bodies in Russia is not good per se, but elaborating vocabulary and vocalization of these bodies within research and education is an inevitable part of both these processes. Hence, Essig’s sense of queer as an unrecognizable set of practices

in the 1990s found a way of articulation in state universities in gender studies centers across Russia.

Another part of this field is more elusive. It consists of individuals that are not affiliated with institutions that explicitly consider queer theory. They are rank-and-file lecturers and professors of Russian universities who give classes on “Introduction to Sociology” or “Contemporary Theories of Social Psychology,” always paying attention to queer themes in their lectures. Teaching and using queer theory in their research and education activities is more of a hobby, an occasional interest that manifests itself in a few publications or lectures. One location served as a gathering point for them and a way of introducing their work to each other. It was the 2013 conference (mentioned above) that featured scholars from the Far East, Siberia, the Urals, Southern regions, the two Russian capital cities, and many other places. In isolation, without the exchange of ideas, some of these scholars had to “reinvent the wheel” of queer theory, but when they came together at the conference, despite the dangers, it ignited queer sparks across the country’s large territory.

The field in which queer theory grows is in fact a surprise. Contrary to expected divisions into East Side and West Side, the Russian university queer “city” is less gentrified than one would imagine. It provides space for competing currents, though navigation across its streets and avenues is largely informed by indifference to the topic on the part of universities’ administration. Yet this queer terrain is chaotic and would hardly be recognizable as queer studies in many Western countries. Consider, for example, a comparison of my own course in queer theory to the queer work being done by my colleagues around Russia. My course on queer theory is mostly based on critical insights of philosophers and social scientists from outside Russia, such as Judith Butler, Monique Wittig, Eve Sedgwick, Lisa Duggan, Jasbir Puar, and Jack Halberstam. I concentrate students’ attention on power relations rather than on sexuality by offering a detailed overview of Michel Foucault’s works. We do discuss issues related to identity politics in the United States and more generally to citizenship and human rights for “LGBTQ” persons, though I also try to provide a critical examination of the systems of domination that they seem to sustain. A huge part of the course is dedicated to our local issues—research in queer Russia from Laurie Essig, Dan Healey, Igor Kon, Nadia Nartova, Elena Omel’chenko, myself, and others. I believe this vision of queer theory helps students to grasp its difference from lesbian and gay studies, understand post-structuralist thinking and techniques of academic critique in general, as well as the methodologies for analyzing power relations through subversion, utopian imagination, and deconstruction.

I think this version of queer theory makes my class recognizable as queer theory outside of Russia, whereas inside it this content would hardly be understandable

by the majority of local queer scholars. What is referred to as “queer” (*kvir*) in the Russian academy is usually a chaotic compilation of psychological theories of “sexual orientation,” liberal political claims for rights recognition, and a mixture of terms from 1960s French philosophy. This certainly is not relevant for all scholars in the field, but is widespread. Consider this example from two philosophers of gender:

The postmodern gender philosophy poses an agenda that problematizes the identity of homosexuals and lesbians. “Queer-identity” is proposed as a relevant terminology that reflects deeper understanding of female homosexuality. . . . Same-sex relations happen between men (homosexuality) and between women (lesbianism). Among homosexuals and lesbians, there is a division of sex-roles. In a homosexual couple, one man voluntarily performs feminist [*sic!*] functions constantly or temporarily: his behavior is expressive, communicative, and cooperative. The other man, the former man’s partner, has masculine functions: his behavior is instrumental, active, and competitive. But homosexuals do not have multiple personality—this is an integrated personality who sincerely loves a person of his own sex.²⁸

This philosophical work seriously challenges common references to vice, perverts, and deviations attributed to queers in many Russian academic publications,²⁹ although it does so with poor theoretical footing and the accidental reproduction of the heterosexual binary. However, these scholars are queer in the sense that they both subvert the idea of science and openly engage in political debate against oppression of the unprivileged, even without sufficient vocabulary to express their political position. In other words, it is not that I feel loneliness because of a lack of queer scholarship in Russia, it is that I feel we hardly have higher education at all, and that is why I appreciate these tiny attempts of thinking queer, contesting the existing order, and relating differently. I think it can be called a “queer assemblage”³⁰ of a Russian kind that strangely reshapes academia within the available means.

))) Police Academy

The situation I described should be updated with new circumstances that have arisen from the recent moral panic around homosexuality in Russia in the context of the 2012 election campaign. Since then state institutions have appropriated homosexuality to define it in their own terms. Thus, the “propaganda of homosexuality” bill framed homosexuality as a menace to the whole nation brought from the outside and that threatened to ruin Russian national sexual traditions. Homosexuality was marked as foreign, belonging to a hostile outside

world, simultaneously with a number of other legal initiatives that followed the same nationalistic logic. Most important, the anti-homosexual propaganda law was quickly followed by the passage of the “foreign agents law,” which obliged all NGOs working with the help of international foundations to register as “foreign agents” and prepare for a massive bureaucratic review.³¹

The propaganda law enacted and legitimized conservative activists, who violently reshaped Russian queer academia with the use of both bills. By organizing public campaigns against “propaganda” in the universities, they forced many queer scholars to leave their workplaces, and in some cases their country. One of the most noticeable cases involves a scholar with 30 years of research and education experience, Dmitry Isaev, who was forced to leave his chair at St. Petersburg State Medical Pediatric University by a Christian Orthodox organization.³² Similar cases occurred in Perm, Saratov, Khabarovsk, and several other cities. The day before the conference we organized with St. Petersburg LGBT activists in 2013, my name appeared on a list of eight “University professors who promote sodomy,”³³ prepared by a homophobic organization.

As for the institutions I mentioned earlier, most of them were shut down within a year. Gender Centers in Samara³⁴ and Saratov³⁵ were proclaimed “foreign agents” and consequently the procedure to liquidate them began. The Ivanovo center was denied space by the university administration.³⁶ The Center for Independent Social Research is also a “foreign agent”³⁷ and is now in search for an adequate strategy of how to survive in the new political climate. During my visit to Perm for a workshop on post-Soviet sexuality, organized by the Perm State University Gender Center together with The Centre for Comparative History and Political Science, we were subjected to a smear campaign. Perhaps even more dangerous, three teenagers tried to infiltrate the audience in order to claim later that they had been victims of homosexual propaganda. The main effect of such moves is terror that penetrates scholars and universities administration and results in self-censorship. For example, my offer to write and publish a textbook on queer theory for Russian students was denied by the European University Press.

Not only are many scholars and centers under attack after the anti-homosexual propaganda bill became law, but many of the East Side “police” scholars published articles on how exactly the law helps to protect Russia from vicious invasions. For example, Anatoly Dyachenko and Margarita Pozdnyakova argued that the ban of “homosexual propaganda” was necessary because “otherwise rights that sexual minorities claim will also be claimed by skinheads, fascists, neo-Nazi, drug addicts, prostitutes and other sorts of marginal people.”³⁸ My work was closely examined by Nadezhda Tarusina from Yaroslavl’ State University. She did not particularly appreciate the legal conception of marriage that I offered in one of my earlier publications³⁹: she called it a “‘fifth column’ in the sphere

of marriage” that penetrates it to destroy it.⁴⁰ Despite the impolite language she used in her academic article, I think she got the idea correctly: my offer to open marriage registration to all those who decide to share property rights irrespective of their sex and who they sleep with would eventually destroy marriage as we know it.⁴¹

I think these events are, somewhat paradoxically, not what they seem. Some of the effects of the propaganda law have been harmful to particular individuals. However, in general they opened up an official and very public discussion of homosexuality. The anti-propaganda law perversely queered the public sphere, including academia. Secrecy and silence wither away in order to make way for political debates on homosexuality. Before queer scholars had to find subtle tactics to avoid trouble or teach queer theory secretly or in just a handful of elite institutions. The Russian government created Russian queer studies: by prohibiting, it generated the phenomena it sought to prohibit.⁴²

))) Conclusion

In this short article, I was in search of myself and for the particular position I occupy within the field of Russian social science by teaching queer theory. I suggested that the particular place queer theory inhabits in academia is relational. Russian social science is divided into two camps: a global one and a local one. However, queer scholars are located in both, even if the East Siders are queer scholars in ways that would never be recognized outside of Russia. Perhaps that is why they are so diverse in their articulation of queerness.

Queer theory is particularly important for Russia, where identity politics and identity paradigms in social science make little sense, whereas ways of exploring practices and the fluidness of sexualities and relations provide a better understanding of the situation in which we find ourselves. Moreover, power plays a crucial role in conditioning our desires, though the workings of power may be confused if one looks at them with straight eyes. The Russian government created the grounds for getting rid of homosexuality in universities by prohibiting queer articulations and marking them as foreign. This entailed a variety of personal troubles for researchers and professors across Russia, as well as the collapse of many institutions in the field of gender and sexuality studies. On the other hand, this same situation provoked an immense debate, the effects of which will only become clear in the future.

Queer scholarship in Russia is an assemblage of paradigmatically dissimilar studies and academic practices. It is characterized by a political desire to protect relations that are exposed to the uneven application of state power and coercion.

It is activism and science at the same time, but even more, it is love in the form of scholarship. This does not make me feel lonely as my senior colleague Kon once said of his life; rather, being a queer scholar in Russia makes me feel the power of queer theory in a highly contested landscape.

NOTES

1. Igor S. Kon, *80 let odinochestva* [80 Years of Solitude] (Moscow, Russia: Vremja, 2008).
2. *Ibid.*, 9.
3. Federal'nyj zakon Rossijskoj Federacii ot 29 ijunja 2013 g. N 135-FZ g. "O vnesenii izmenenij v stat'ju 5 Federal'nogo zakona 'O zashhite detej ot informacii, prichin-jajushhej vred ih zdorov'ju i razvitiju' i otdel'nye zakonodatel'nye akty Rossijskoj Federacii v celjah zashhity detej ot informacii, propagandirujushhej otricanie tradic-ionnyh semejnyh cennostej" [Federal Law of the Russian Federation dated June 29, 2013, no. 135-FZ "On modification of article 5 of the federal law 'On protection of children from information harmful for their wellbeing and development' and other normative acts of the Russian Federation for the purposes of protection of children from information that promotes negation of traditional family values"].
4. Laurie Essig, "Serdtsha geev nado zaryvat' v zemluy': razmyshleniya ob okhote na gomoseksualov v Rossii" ["Bury their hearts": some thoughts on the specter of homosexuality haunting in Russia], *Na pereputye: metodologija, teorija i praktika LGBT i kvir-issledovanij: sbornik statej* [On the crossroads: methodology, theory and practice of LGBT and queer studies], ed. A. Kondakov (St. Petersburg, Russia: Centre for Independent Social Research, 2014), 3, 10.
5. Ruslan Shulga, "Vozmozhnye strategii LGBT-dvizheniya v Rossii v uslovykh represivnoy politiki vlastej" [Possible strategies for the LGBT movement in Russia under a repressive official policy regime], in *Na pereputye: metodologija, teorija i praktika LGBT i kvir-issledovanij: sbornik statej* [On the crossroads: methodology, theory and practice of LGBT and queer studies], ed. Alexander Kondakov (St. Petersburg, Russia: Centre for Independent Social Research, 2014), 119.
6. My current research confirms that over 60 cases were decided by courts with the use of "propaganda law." Almost all these cases involved media sources that were fined for publications or broadcasting about homosexuality.
7. "On the Crossroads: Methodology, theory and practice of LGBT and Queer Studies," Centre for Independent Social Research, accessed September 10, 2015, <http://cistr.ru/en/events/queer-crossroads>.
8. Some references may include: Alexander Kondakov, "Do Russians give a damn about homosexuality?" *Open Democracy*, June 20, 2013, accessed September 10, 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/alexander-kondakov/do-russians-give-damn-about-homosexuality>; "Gejagt, getreten, gedemütigt: Schwulenhass in Putin-Land," *Der Spiegel*, February 23, 2015, accessed September 10, 2015,

- <http://www.spiegel.de/video/jagd-auf-homosexuelle-in-russland-video-1329148.html>; “Bol’shinstvu net dela do geev i lesbiyanok’: intervyyu s issledovatelem LGBT Aleksandrom Kondakovym” [“A majority does not care about gays and lesbians”: Interview with LGBT researcher Alexander Kondakov], *FurFur*, November 27, 2014, accessed September 10, 2015, <http://www.furfur.me/furfur/changes/changes/178537-intervyyu-aleksandr-kondakov>.
9. John D’Emilio, “The Campus Environment for Gay and Lesbian Life,” *Academe* 76, no. 1 (1990): 18.
 10. Aleksandr F. Filippov, “Sovietskaya sotsiologiya kak politseiskaya nauka” [Soviet sociology as a police science], *Politicheskaya kontseptologiya* 3 (2014): 91–105.
 11. The beginning of twentieth-century urban sociology in Chicago with such names as Robert Park, Hebert Mead, Everett Hughes, Ernest Burgess, and Luis Wirth.
 12. Mikhail Sokolov, “Individual’nye traektorii i proiskhozhdenie ‘estestvennykh zon’ v peterbugskoy sotsiologii” [Individual trajectories and generation of “natural zones” in the petersburg sociology], *Zhurnal sotsiologii i sotsyal’noy antropologii* 3 (2010): 120.
 13. *Ibid.*, 117.
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 17. José E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.
 18. Laurie Essig, *Queer in Russia: A Story of Sex, Self, and the Other* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 83.
 19. “Gendernye issledovaniya” [Gender research], St. Petersburg University, Department of Sociology, accessed September 10, 2015, http://soc.spbu.ru/obrazovanie/teaching/mag/soc/soc_gi.
 20. “Tsentr gendernykh issledovaniy sredstv massovoy informatsii i kommunikatsii” [Center for gender research of mass media and mass information], Moscow University, Department of Journalism, accessed September 10, 2015, <http://www.journal.msu.ru/about/departments/16/105/?print=Y>.
 21. “Home Page,” Ivanovsky tsentr gendernykh issledovaniy, accessed September 10, 2015, <http://icgs.ru/>.
 22. Tsentr gendernykh issledovaniy [Samara gender studies center], *Ecosotsmen*, December 9, 2010, accessed September 10, 2015, <http://ecsocman.hse.ru/text/16078316/>.
 23. See the page for the Department of History and Political Science, “NITS ‘Gendernykh issledovaniy’” [Center for gender research], Perm State University, Department of History and Political Science, accessed September 10, 2015, http://www.history.psu.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=410&Itemid=116.

24. Tsentr sotsyal'noy politiki i gendernykh issledovaniy [Center of social policy and gender studies], *Wikipedia*, June 27, 2015, accessed September 10, 2015 <https://clck.ru/9aXVQ>.
25. See the Center's website, accessed September 10, 2015, <http://www.regioncentre.ru/>.
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29. See, for example, Elena Novoselova, "Odnopolyj 'brak'—tupikovaja vetv' jevoljucii sem'i i obshhestva" [Same-sex "marriage" is a dead end for the evolution of family and society], *Vestnik MGU* 18, no. 4 (2013): 85–103.
30. I borrow this concept from Jasbir K. Puar, "Queer Times, Queer Assemblages," *Social Text* 23, nos. 3–4 (Fall–Winter 2005): 121–39.
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42. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997).

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