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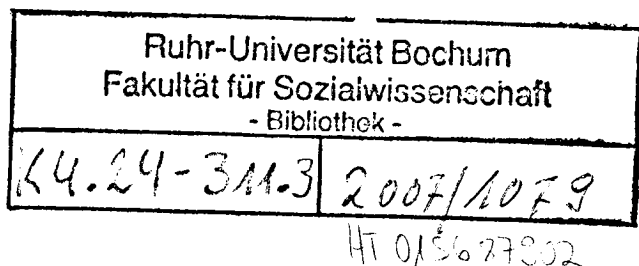
A Canon of Our Own?

Kanonkritik und Kanonbildung in den
Gender Studies

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Gender and Women's Studies in Contemporary Russia¹

Reconsideration of the gender order in transformation became the subject of gender/women's/feminist studies in Russia since the 1990s. In our paper we focus on the institutional history of gender and women's studies in Russia, then we concentrate on the contextual differences in the approach to gender issues. Thirdly, we describe the theoretical and methodological frames in Russian gender studies. Finally, we will try to give a summary of the model of gender studies in Russia.

The institutional story of *Gender Studies* in Russia

Women's and gender studies in Russia developed in diverse forms, shaping the new field of research at the beginning of the 1990s. It is generally accepted that the first article dealing with gender issues was published in the journal *Kommunist* in 1989 (Zaharova, Rimashevskaya, Posadskaya – "How we solve the women's question"). In 1990, the first Gender Studies center was established in Moscow, at the Institute of Social and Economic Problems of the Population at the Academy of Sciences. In the course of ongoing reforms, educational and research centers and programs focused on gender issues were opened in such large Russian cities, as Moscow, St. Petersburg Samara, Tver', Omsk, Novosibirsk, Ul'ianovsk, Saratov, etc. They were likewise created in new and old universities, promoted by summer schools and intensive short-term courses. Financial support for new educational and research programs has come mainly from international research foundations and less from the state budget.

Research and teaching in the domain are both interdisciplinary and specific in such disciplines as history, philosophy, psychology, sociology,

¹ Editors note: This paper is based on Temkina, Anna / Zdravomyslova, Elena (2003): *Gender Studies in Post-Soviet Society: Western Frames and Cultural Differences*. In: *Studies in East European Thought* 55. 51–61.

anthropology, and philology. Observers consider sociology to be the one most prone to gender studies development. Political science and international relations on the other hand, are much more resistant towards the gender approach (Sperling 1999, Racioppi & O'Sullivan 1997, Konstantinova 1996, Voronina 2001).

The organizational and discursive novelty of gender/women's studies in Russia and their connections with the agenda of women's NGOs make us conceptualize them as generating fields which open new discourses and voice the experiences that had been publicly silenced before, but which also have institutional and methodological problems. They provide the space where one could speak publicly on formerly tacit issues, such as discrimination, violence, abortion, reproduction, and sexuality. Focusing on the above mentioned research subjects, researchers appeared to be sensitive to the insights of qualitative methodology.

At the beginning of the 1990s, two research branches dealing with women's issues emerged: gender studies connected with *grass-root feminist organizations* and *feminology* (rooted in the political movement 'Women of Russia' which originated from the Soviet nomenclatura). The former focused on gender inequality; they began to acknowledge the gender approach as a methodological tool. Researchers focused on women's experience in terms of gender asymmetry, imbalance, hierarchy, domination and discrimination. The 'standpoint' of women became the epistemological ground for the analysis of women's position in a society (not always articulated). Self-naming of such research and educational units include the terms 'gender' or feminism.

The second branch is one intensively supported by the political movement "Women of Russia", which follows a social "protectionist" ideology. Its adherents avoided the concepts of patriarchy, the terms of gendered inequality and feminist frames. Instead, they focus on women's roles in society. Sex-role theory is at the center of feminology. This branch reveals definite continuity with the Soviet tradition of demography, psychology and family sociology.

In the mid 1990s the divide between gender studies and feminology (women's studies) became less rigid; both researchers and institutions became more closely connected with each other. Gender studies became less radical, and they now constitute the umbrella for different kinds of research. On the other hand, feminologists adopted the ideas of a gender approach and started to discuss the issues of inequality and gender imbalance in society. We will try to explain how this transformation was connected with contextual differences and theoretical development of the field in Russia. Successive

cohorts of "post"-feminists in the "West" came to gender studies through the texts rather than through their involvement in feminist political practices (Stanley and Wise 2000). Feminist texts became important for Russian gender studies and helped to raise gender sensitivity of the researchers with reference to their own societies; they started to be critical of cultural patriarchy and discrimination patterns in post-Soviet transformation. They formulated the agenda for research: how do the newly established market and democratic institutions influence the gender order – are they detrimental for gender equality or do they encourage it? Consciousness-raising and the understanding that there are specific women's issues and problems were also important, as well as the researchers' own individual experiences.

We should not forget that gender studies in general was a new field in Russia (though there was a tradition of sex-role research as well as the studies on women's role in history). The very category "gender" is still novel to the Russian scholarly vocabulary. The new research field had to prove its validity and to develop strategies that would help it to gain credit in the scholarly community. Conferences and publications grew rapidly in number, starting in the late nineties; a number of journals published special issues devoted to gender studies; handbooks, readers, textbooks, as well as collections of translations were edited during this period. Summer schools were run regularly and all these activities were basically supported by international foundations.

We identify two complimentary strategies in the institutionalization of gender studies: autonomization and integration. The first consists of creating specific networks, editing specialized journals, organizing thematic gender conferences, and establishing autonomous education programs (such as intensive courses and topical summer schools which easily overcome the limits of the mainstream curricula). A new powerful resource for this strategy is the internet (mailing lists, conferences and distance education programs). We want to emphasize that the Russian-speaking gender research community includes the networks of scholars from almost all the NIS countries as the issues of post-Soviet gender transformation need cross-cultural analysis. Another feature of the network is its multidisciplinary structure. We can identify gender studies centers that make up core structures for these strategies. They are: Moscow Center for Gender Studies, Gender Program of the Open University of Belarus, Central Asian Gender Studies network, Kharkov Gender Studies centre, Educational program of Gender Studies in the EUSPb, Gender centres of Tver and Samara Universities. Internet networks have been widely used since the late 1990s for the distribution of

'gender' information (local and international). This is information about conferences, courses on gender issues, grants, fellowships, job positions, thesis defenses in the field, academic and mass-media publications (sometimes the articles are attached), different calls for articles, and information about internet resources. Pro-feminist and anti-feminist texts circulate in the network, provoking different discussions. Considering this new phenomenon in the communication of knowledge, we have to pay particular attention to the dimension of power in regard to internet networks. We consider the internet to be a powerful technical means providing access to information, which is especially important for those localities where there is information deficit. Though the networks are open to the public, their users mostly belong to the gender research communities. This strategy helps to consolidate a community, but provokes the effect of ghettoization and marginalization of the research field in the academia. At the same time, gender networks overcome national boundaries. Thus, for example, one network is being coordinated by a moderator from Kharkov (Ukraine), while the nucleus of another is the Central Asian gender research community, and the third is run by a researcher in the USA. International communication of researchers conducting gender studies is very important from an institutional perspective. Institutional "transnationalism" or border crossing in gender studies has particular meaning in the Russian context. We can name several aspects of this trend. First, Russian researchers intensively cooperate with the gender studies units on post-Soviet territory (mostly NIS countries), as well as with the researchers interested in the post-Soviet transformation studies. Second, they participate in transnational regional networks which have become a new resource for the gender studies community. In fall 2006, for example, the gender program of the EUSPb (which we coordinate) is supposed to host Norfa's (Nordic Academy for Advanced studies) "PhD training in the Nordic Regions of Europe" with the subject of *transnational feminism*. Russian researchers are widely engaged in teaching and research in the other post-Soviet states. In some sense they become mediators of the feminist knowledge transfer into national contexts of such countries as Kazakhstan, Kirgyzia, Uzbekistan. Distant education is also rapidly developing. Gender studies often functions as a "generating field" for new technologies transmitting knowledge, modern resources, as well new theoretical and methodological approaches that are able to mobilize the support of a community. (This was the case in the Belarusian European Humanitarian University, which was closed by Lukashenko in 2004, and in the gender studies program at the Central European University in Budapest). However, one has to admit

that the threat of exclusion of gender studies has increased under the strategy of autonomization. New technologies are of major importance for the institutional transnationalism.

Integration is the strategy for inclusion within the broader educational and research curricula of sociology, history, psychology, and other conventionally defined disciplines. Acceptance by the mainstream is its purpose, the participation in professional conferences and publications in the main academic journals are regular activities. This strategy is basically individual. It leads to the legitimization of the field but makes gender studies looser and less definite. We claim that this strategy is less articulate and thus less effective. The mutual institutional barriers are difficult to overcome (Zdravomyslova Temkina 2001, Kletsina 2002). An important institutional effect is the dependence from Western support in the first case (autonomization) and the lack of resources in the second (integration). Western support is negatively evaluated in society as the way of promotion of external ideas and institutions alien to the domestic context.

Russian social and cultural context and gender order

It is necessary to specify the social and cultural context in which Russian gender studies come into being and develop. The dilemma of universalism – particularism, described by researchers of transnational feminism (Lykke 2004), is also topical for Russia. The Russian “particular” context is here described in terms of the specific gender symbolism of post-Soviet society, which implies the cultural climate of the so-called “solved women’s question” in Soviet period, the imposed etacritic gender contract of the “waged working mother”, a strong position of women in society, the discursive recognition of the so-called “redundant women’s power” and “crisis of masculinity” symbolic frames, articulated gender polarization and nostalgia for the civilized traditional role division. In general, this cultural spirit could be called misrecognised androcentrism which focuses on the lack of power for men and exaggerates the empowerment of women as by-products of the Soviet gender policy. Let’s consider in more detail the main issues constituting the background of post-Soviet gender symbolism.

The official declaration of the solution of the woman’s question and Soviet emancipation claimed that gender equality was achieved in the USSR (universal suffrage and equal economic and social participation, strong state control of reproductive behavior as well as stronger social

support of the mother's role compared to that of the father). Results of the state-run emancipation (state feminism) often are interpreted as a "double burden" and excessive responsibility for women. The majority of Russian citizens have not considered women's status in Russian society to be discriminatory if compared to that of men. Even when deprivation of women is recognized, it is connected not with the gendered inequality and economic dependence from men, but mostly with the problems of balancing of two roles ("working mother role balance") and the lack of social policy support.

Imposed "working mother" contract made women resourceful and even powerful agents of the Soviet everyday life. Their symbolic strength is the effect of their economic independence, state support of motherhood, competence in social organization of everyday life due to the traditional role division in the household. Issues of *women's power* circulate in contemporary public discourse. Women are represented as "stervy", powerful women; their main strategies are described as manipulation using sexual appeal, and the resources of control imbedded in caring practices.

Late Soviet critical discourse problematized Soviet gender contracts, considering men to be a "weaker sex" than women in biological, psychological and demographical sense (Zdravomyslova Temkina 2001). The Soviet emancipation of women was looked upon negatively as the "feminization of men" and the "masculinization of women". This negative evaluation is shared by men and women (Zdravomyslova Temkina 2002) and became the standpoint of those scholars in gender studies who stress the differences of women's position in the Soviet society in comparison to that of the Western European and American women.

The reaction to the state emancipation and its effects on the post-Soviet discourse was a discursive reinforcement of gender traditionalism, which created cultural and methodological difficulties in the development of the gender studies. This context is interpreted as publicly dominating essentialism (biological determinism), the "naturalization" of gender roles, and the victimization of women. In the discourse of media, two main images of women are presented. One depicts women as victims of economic and political changes, suffering as working mothers that do not gain sufficient social support. Another image is that of self-centered sexualized femininity as an active agent of consumption.

The post-communist transformation has resulted in the growth of women's economic dependence on men and the family; at the same time it has given rise to new possibilities, for instance access to new working places

and new types of careers. New women's subjectivity became articulated in mass-media and everyday discourses as an aspect of general processes of individualization. However, women's economic independence is quite often evaluated as a necessary evil required by the demands of supporting family and children.

There is a small number of researchers that share another interpretation of the Soviet gender system, emphasizing the patriarchal features of the state socialist society with recourse to the universal feminist category of "patriarchy". This type of patriarchy is described as the male dominated system of bureaucratic institutions, the militarization of society, the segregation in the occupational structure, the employment of women in unpaid domestic work, and the neglect of the female body. This concept provides a perspective from which the male and the state are seen as patriarchs who impose their oppressive paternal power on women. The term *revival of patriarchy* is applied to the description of the emerging gender order (Posadskaya 1993).

The reforms of glasnost evoked a discussion on the position of women in Russian society. We see this discursive development as an indicator of the developing self-consciousness of Russian women, which is an extremely important condition for the further feminist-oriented discussion. The discursive "adding of women" is obvious in public whether one likes it or not. We see an emergence of interest in specific women's issues. Women return into the discourse in all varieties of their roles and experiences. Mainly, however, this "discursive adding of women" is not of feminist orientation. Women return to the Russian public mainly in their so-called traditional roles – as mothers, wives, babushkas, lovers, friends that is the helpers of "true men". They also return into discourse as victims of violence and as social invalids that need state support and male protection again and again. On the other side they return as agents of their own – the majority of self-help organizations, voluntary associations and professional organizations are constituted of women. Individualization and growth of women's subjectivity as well as other non-traditionalist trends of gender order become articulate in the educated urban class in younger age cohorts. But in general, gender studies develop in a cultural context which is unfriendly to feminist ideology as it is represented in public Russian discourse (for example Nikonov 2005). Further difficulties are connected to the search for appropriate theoretical frames of gender research.

Theoretical development of the field

In order to understand the trajectory of the gender studies development in contemporary Russia, we have to take into account the discursive logic of the history of ideas and effects of contemporary 'transfer' of different traditions of western social theory into Russian discourse. The ideas of feminism and gender studies circulate outside their original context and gain new meanings. Gender studies in Russia run the risk of being marginalized in relation to both Western discourses and Russian mainstream social science. For many, the field remains an "exotic ghetto": ideological, too Westernized, too dependent from Western financial support, not relevant to the Russian context. It is seen as outstripping social change and threatening the existing gender and social order.

The debate on the "translation" and "heuristic capacities of the Western theories in the Russian context" is part of the discussion on the status of gender studies in the Russian social science. Gender studies in Russia rely on a wide variety of Western theories and concepts, and the questions whether these are universal and in which way they should be applied are among the most crucial in Russian gender studies. Gender studies is an issue in the discourse on intellectual globalization and Western colonization (Oushakin 2000). The question is: should national specificity and Russian "gender cause" be emphasized or rather universal trends of modern or post-modern gender transformation? This "domestic vs. international" dichotomy has become a subject of gender studies in Russia. Scholars express their relation to Western feminist theory within their concrete research and intellectual practices.

When looking at theoretical genealogy of gender studies in the West, we inevitably realize that this field of research has developed as a political and theoretical critique of both the existing gender order and mainstream social theory. If such a discursive logic can be seen as certain regularity of history of ideas, we should conclude that post-Soviet discursive context is not conducive to the gender studies blossoming.

One of the difficulties is connected to the general discursive space of social sciences in Russia, which has developed rapidly in the last decades, uniting fragments of Soviet sociological theorizing with classical (that is "Western") and post-classical ones. "Western theory" entered as the "authority" which should help to legitimize the field of gender studies. Simultaneously, the "translation" (in a broad sense of the word) of temporally different traditions of Western social theory into Russian

discourse took place. And instead of the historical logic of social science development in the original context, we witnessed "pluralism," "eclectics," or "fragmentation of theory" in Russia. It became possible to criticize mainstream theorizing, but the feminist/gender studies' research community tended to be separated from the mainstream because of their outstripping character, and to develop in a closed social space, without having a broader influence on the academic discourse in Russia.

Current Russian discourse is open to the new discursive flow, but one of the main problems of such a "translation" is the following: what happens to ideas, concepts and theories when they transcend their original context, transfer to a different one and circulate out of the context they had originated from? A possible answer could refer to the universality of the modernization process on the one hand, and to Russia's delayed modernization on the other. The purpose of Russian gender studies has been explained as the inclusion of a formerly excluded gendered group – women – as the object and subject of research (Barchunova 2000). Researchers implicitly or explicitly compare Russian gender order with the so called "Western" gender order. They compare gender patterns in Russia with those that are labeled *traditional* (housewife and breadwinner) and *egalitarian* in the West (waged working woman, caring father). Relying on universal theoretical and methodological instruments, they emphasize differences within the frame of universality. Researchers in this group have become sensitive to limits of adaptation of "Western" middle level categories in the Russian context.

Another frame of reference and analysis is associated with Russia's cultural uniqueness. Modernization theory is considered inappropriate for the analysis of such an exceptional and incompatible entity; Russia's specificity is so profound that it makes the theory useless in application. Accordingly, researchers prefer the logic of Russia's specific development; this means that scholars search for the cultural roots of gender relations in Russian and Soviet history. They are more radically critical of the universalist interpretation of feminist methodology.

We consider the discursive dichotomy between Russia and the West to be important for the development of Russian gender studies. This issue is implicitly present in the contemporary debate, though in the initial phase of the gender studies development it was articulated more than it is today. It is possible to identify several critical points which might promote such a debate. "Western-oriented" research has turned a critical eye to the following issues. First, it is critical of Western concepts as expressions of a

cultural and epistemological imperialism that imposes interpretations and assessment of the Russian gender order (Oushakin 1999, 2002). Looking at it from this perspective, writers challenge non-critical recourse to Western concepts and frames, criticize poor translations of feminist texts into Russian, are engaged in the debate about terms, and even query whether it is necessary to know English in order to conduct "proper" gender studies (Barchunova 2000). According to these authors, reliance on Western standards had restricted the social effects of gender research and limited its critical function in social science (Barchunova 2000).

Another critical point concerns the interpretation of the concept "gender" in Russian discourse. A majority of Russian scholars is criticized for their essentialist standpoint and for neglecting the question of power in the conceptualization of gender. An account of Russian gender relations should be based on analytical categories typical of Western discourse, though their contents have to be reformulated and re-interpreted in concrete cultural and political contexts. Thus, for example, the role of *housewife*, which is viewed as traditional in the Western context, can sometimes be interpreted as a step forward and as a liberation from the impositions of the Soviet state gender order in the Russian context. The model of the housewife is legitimized by reference to the notion of a better life typical of the old Western middle class and the upper strata of pre-Soviet and post-Soviet Russian society. In the Russian context, housewifery was never the normative role-model grounded in women's mass experience, just as the discursive project of the man as the sole breadwinner in the family did not exist. The housewife's role features in this discourse in two ways. On the one hand, women in the middle and upper classes are presented in identical terms. On the other hand, there is the project of a desirable future for women workers with few qualifications and mothers obliged to work. The role of the housewife ties in with the growing significance of the private sphere and the household, with the need to actively manage one's private sphere in post-Soviet market conditions. Woman as mother and manager of domestic life is a model image unattainable for most women and families. However, for a certain section of Russia's entrepreneurial class, the female role of the housewife is turning into a marker of social status. Motherhood and nurturing remain basic attributes of the hegemonic discourse of femininity. This discourse is also supported by religious ideology, which is increasingly being put forward in the post-Soviet public sphere. The pattern of the *waged working woman*, which is seen as part of the liberation project

in the Western feminist context, has an ambiguous meaning in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia as we discussed it above.

Theoretical difficulties in gender studies are connected with the search for appropriate theoretical frames of gender research. We differentiate between two main theoretical approaches in Russian gender/women's studies. *Women's studies (feminology)*, which developed under the influence of sex-role theory, concentrated on the women's position in society and its deficits. This framework is based on the essentialist – liberal paradigm, tending to be much more politically moderate in comparison with women's studies in the West. Russian Women studies had certain continuity with Soviet research in family sociology and demography, focused on social positions and social problems of women. This research investigates sex-roles and their conflicts in Soviet society; they refer to gender as a social-demographic category (Gurko 1998).

Gender studies affiliated with feminist theory are connected to the cognitive practice of feminist movement. The epistemological basis of this theory is connected with Western social theory and feminist analysis. Researchers turn to the different traditions of feminism that is the liberal, radical, and psychoanalytical tradition, theories of differences, as well as constructivist and post-modern feminism. The contextual roots of Russian gender studies can be seen in the comparison of the Russian gender contracts and constructions with those developed in other cultural and political contexts. This approach tends to problematize the category of "Women" as a universal category and to focus on cultural, social and political differences between different categories of women. A structural constructivist approach seems to be gaining a respectable position among Russian researchers of gender. This theoretical framework offers the opportunity to overcome an essentialist approach and to analyze the specific context of the formation of gender order in Russia.

The theoretical debates on the appropriate frameworks in gender and women's studies are still on. In the mid 90s two trends in theoretical orientations became more closely connected to each other. The term "gender" became legitimate within social sciences, implying, however, a diversity of meanings. Both feminist and non-feminist researchers use the term. It became an umbrella concept for a variety of interpretations of the social organization of sexual differences. It is used as a synonym for "women" or denotes the hierarchy between men and women, relations between the sexes, as well as complimentary roles of men and women. Initially, the terms "gender" and "gender studies" indicated demarcations from the

Soviet tradition of sex-role research or sociology of family; later on, the use of the term *gender* became more vague. The mainstream academic community more easily accepts an interpretation of gender which does not include the power dimension and is still used in the investigation of complementary sex/gender roles.

In doing gender studies we follow *constructivist* (West and Zimmerman 1991) and *structural-constructivist* (Lorber 1994, Connell 1987, 2002) approaches, which focus on everyday life level, structural opportunities and barriers for the individual and collective strategies. Within this framework, a socio-political context can be taken into account, as well as cultural differences. The constructionist framework dictates methodological preferences. Qualitative methodology and the biographical method as research strategies become our deliberate choice, because of their strength in voicing experiences, tracking the temporality of social and psychological changes, connecting the social and the individual, reconsidering the past, and constructing of the future.

Sociologists widely refer to Connell's approach, which combines the levels of gender structures and levels of gender practices. Gender order, gender regimes as well as gender contracts are considered to be "the useful categories" of gender analysis. The differentiation of power, cathexis, labour, and symbolic structures are also considered to be heuristic categories for empirical analysis. We applied them to the analysis of family structures, and to research on sexuality, ethnic communities, etc. Within the field of gender studies, scholars focus on the structures of everyday life and the construction of gendered identity the in media discourse, in life-stories, in a variety of institutions, as well as on the construction of social problems (abortions, violence).

Another field of interest in Russian gender studies concerns the so-called "women's agenda", formulated by the Russian women's movement. Researchers search for solutions to social problems, such as the exclusion of women from the public sphere, unemployment throughout the post-communist transformation, protective legislation, women's reproductive rights, the risky involvement of women in small businesses and shadow economy. Issues relevant for research include, for example, disabled women, violence against women, sexual harassment, minority rights and discrimination. Most of these questions are articulated under the influence of the Western view on gender problems. Much empirical research has been carried out to analyze such problems. Terms such as *feminization of poverty, gender disbalance in labour force and in politics,*

hegemony of *gender polarization* discourse are used to describe the Russian gender order. The structures of gender hierarchies are looked upon as preconditions for the development of specific discourses of "crisis of masculinity" and "women's power".

Concluding comment

If we address the question of the conference "What is a canon for gender studies in Russia" we will find it difficult to answer. However, we can claim that Russian gender studies is a new, politically engaged branch, informed by feminist discourse (however, mainly Western), still marginal to the mainstream and exclusive. Its main perspective is on gender differences and evolving hierarchies, as well as the traps of Russian gender neo-traditionalism and its barriers for gender equality. The term *gender* became the umbrella of different sometimes opposite theoretical and political perspectives, and can be quite misleading. We see the prospects of gender studies in Russian academia in the transnational institutional development of the field.

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