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Political Subjectivity: a useful category for comparative analysis

I.

In a recent guest lecture I gave to Russian graduate students at Herzen State Pedagogical University in St. Petersburg Russia on “Shto takoe Amerikanskii feminizm” (what is American feminism), an overwhelming majority of the students associated feminism with “the west.” This association was represented with either the blanket statement, “feminism happens in the west,” (read: not in Russia) or with individuals who symbolize western ideas (e.g., Margaret Thatcher and Simone de Beauvoir). Comment was also given to various Russian women who had made public statements declaring that they indeed are not feminists and do not want to be associated with it. One of the most notable was Irina Khakamada, a state deputy speaker and one of the handful of women to have acquired a visible role in postcommunist Russian politics.¹

The students, and broader Russian culture as I have experienced it, disavow feminism because it is foreign, not their own. This is in contrast to the various backlashes to feminism in western countries which are based on political/ideological principles. For example, Americans disagree with feminism (that is, with whatever it is that they understand feminism to be) not because it is an imported idea but because they are uncomfortable with the changes feminism

¹ Vita Bekker. “Chauvinism stands in way of female electoral candidates,” *St. Petersburg Times*, December 17, 1999.

may bring to society. The irony here is that the resistance to feminism that I have observed in Russia is often less about the basic principles of feminism (equality between the sexes, for example) but about the term or label itself. Furthermore, nowhere in the mix of student responses was their mention of the plethora of examples from the Russian context of feminists or thinkers who promoted social justice and equality.

In many ways these associations with feminism complement the discussions in academic and activists circles regarding the importation of such terms/ideas as *gender* and *feminism* into the postcommunist (and larger non-western) context.² Activists in postcommunist contexts often consciously ask not to be called feminists or they simply do not use such language to describe who they are and what they do.³ Western scholars are also tentative to use such terms to ensure

² Amrita Basu (ed). *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1995; Ellen Berry (ed). *Post-Communism and the Body Politic*. New York: New York University Press, 1995; Myra Marx Ferree et al. "The Russian Women's Movement: Activists Strategies and Identities." *Women and Politics*, Vol. 20(3), 1999; Jane F. Berthusen Gottlick. "From the Ground Up: Women's Organizations and Democratization in Russia." In, Jill M. Bystydzienski and Joti Sekhon (eds). *Democratization and Women's Grassroots Movements*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999; Kumari Jayawardenu. *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. New Dehli: Kali for women, 1986; Valentine Moghadam. *Democratic Reform and the Position of Women in Transitional Economies*. New York: Claredon Press, 1993; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Toress (eds). *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991; Helen Icken Safa. "Women's Social Movements in Latin America." *Gender & Society*, Vol. 4 No3, 1990; Valerie Sperling. "Gender Politics and the state during Russia's transition period." In, Vicky Randall and Georgiana Waylan. *Gender, Politics and the State*. New York: Routledge, 1998; Valerie Sperling, Myra Marx Ferree and Barbara Risman. "Constructing Global Feminism: Transnational Advocacy Networks and Russian Women's Activism." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society*, Vol. 26 Issue 4, 2001; and Vappu Tyyska. "Western Feminism? Problems of Categorizing Women's Movements in Cross National Research." In, Alena Heitlinger (ed). *Émigré Feminism: Transnational Perspectives*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. In Russian see: I.L. Aristarkhova. *Zhenshchina ne Sushchestvuet*. Syktyvar: Syktyvarskii Universitet, 1999; Sergei Ushakin. "'Gender' (Naprotkat): noleznaia kategoriia dlia naychnoi kar'ery." In, Marianna Mouravieva (ed). *Gendernaia Istoriiia Pro et Contra*. Sankt-Peterburg: Rossiiskii Gosudarstvenyi Pedagogicheskii Universitet im A. I. Gerzena, 2000; Sergei Ushakin. "Pol kak ideologicheskii produkt." *Chelovek*, No. 2, 1997; and Olga Voronina. "Sotsiokul'turnyi determinanty razvitiia gendernoi teorii v Rossii i na Zapade." *Obshchestvennyi nauk i sovremennost'*, No. 4, 2000.

³ An interesting projection of this appears in a recent article by Marianna Mouravieva when she argues that the rise of gender history in the west was a response to the "one-sided feminist interpretation of history and [that] it was

as little conceptual imperialism as possible in their work. Yet, what troubles me, and to what I will speak to in this working paper, is the all too convenient dual disassociation of feminism with Russia. On the one hand, many Russians see feminism as an unwanted foreign menace (as one student replied, “feminism is something we do not need”). And, on the other hand, from outside of Russia, some view feminism and/or women’s activism as relatively weak in comparison to western notions and experiences with feminism.⁴ The consequences of this dual disassociation are serious: paradoxically, western feminism (in the guise of monetary support and academic discourses) gains its homogenizing effect; progressive/feminist Russian historical figures and discourses linger in the shadows; and finally, the important process of translating and wrestling with cultural differences loses out.

The focus of the following pages will be primarily on one aspect of this dual dissociation—that is the western gaze on the Russian context. In the spirit of Chandra Mohanty and Beth Holmgren’s respective calls for western scholars to undertake the process of “homework,” I want to address the liberal baggage often dragged along when investigating social change and more specifically women’s activism in Russia. The core argument is this: western women’s movements (and other social movements) have supported/developed a notion of

never associated with it.” Interestingly enough, Mouravieva’s article is an exegesis on why gender history should be incorporated more into Russian higher education (exposes sexist hierarchies created by the ontological separation of private and public spheres, for example), yet she implicitly argues that neither Russian nor western historians of gender should tie themselves too closely to feminism. In the American context this would be difficult given that in many ways feminism preceded the development of academic gender history.

⁴ Carol Nechemias. “The Prospects for a Soviet Women’s Movement: Opportunities and Obstacles.” In, Judith Sedatis and Jim Butterfield (eds). *Perestroika from Below: Social Movements in the Soviet Union*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1991; Melanie Tatur. “Why is there no women’s movement in Eastern Europe?” In, P.G. Lewis (ed). *Democracy and Civil Society in Eastern Europe: Selected Papers from the fourth world Congress for Soviet and East European Studies*. London: Macmillan, 1992;

feminism epistemologically rooted in identity politics.⁵ The central critique I have of using an identity politics notion of feminism centers on what I see as an emphasis on gender consciousness as the organizing principle of social activism. As an alternative I suggest that the more neutral category of political subjectivity may be more productive for cross-cultural research and getting at the nuances of how contextual notions of feminism and gender influence one another. The liberal context through which western feminism emerged facilitated an identity centered political subjectivity. In the next section I will unpack this argument. When looking at non-western contexts, I suggest that we must disabuse ourselves of an essential connection between gender consciousness (i.e., identity) and feminism. The context through which Russian discourses regarding sexual difference and feminism emerged facilitated a different political subjectivity. The final section of the paper will sketch some of those differences using the concept of political subjectivity.

II.

One area in which this identity politics notion of feminism is visible is in how some scholars of social movements understand the development of such movements. Early theoretical perspectives on social movements understood collective action as the product of a particular group's isolation or alienation from the mainstream of political power. It was believed that

⁵ For the purposes of this paper I will be using my knowledge of and experience with the American context to speak for a "western" experience. While there are problems with assuming the interchangeable character of "western" and "American" experiences I see the generalizations I will make about liberalism as applicable to both contexts. This is certainly the case here as I will be drawing on two classic philosophers of liberal thought, John Locke and Karl Marx, to help explain the baggage associated with feminism in the American context.

social strain and isolation placed groups in a “state of mind” that provoked them to act.⁶ Later theories criticized this perspective for viewing collective action as a kind of pathology rather than a “rational” response to dire circumstances. More recent theories attempt to move beyond a pathological view towards a political view of why social movements emerge. That is, rather than regard the dissonance groups experience and collective action taken based on those feelings pejoratively, scholars want to legitimate collective action as a viable political response to a social political context.⁷ According to Doug McAdam, one scholar who has contributed to this critique,

By claiming that the motive force behind movement participation is supplied by the disturbing effect of particular “states of mind,” classical theorists are arguing that the proximate cause of social insurgency is psychological rather than a political phenomenon. Social movements are seen as collective attempts to manage or resolve the psychological tensions produced by system strain. In contrast, “ordinary,” or institutionalized politics is generally interpreted as rational group-action in pursuit of a substantive political goal.⁸

In an effort to move beyond a pathological view of social movements, McAdam and others developed more structural explanatory devices, such as resource mobilization and political opportunity structures, for managing the political, as he argues, reasons for collective action.⁹

Yet, in an effort of disengage from the pejorative effects of pathological views (i.e., only those crazy un-adjusted folks rally in the streets), a newly formed divide is created between “structure”

⁶ Neil J. Smelser. *Theory of Collective Behavior*. New York: Free Press, 1963.

⁷ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward. *Poor People’s Movements: Why they Succeed, Why they Fail*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

⁸ Doug McAdam. *Political Processes and the Development of Black Insurgency*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, p16.

⁹ Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald. *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: political opportunities, mobilization structures, and cultural framings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996; Francesca Polletta and James M. Jasper. “Collective Identity and Social Movements.” *Annual Review of Sociology*, Annual 2001;

and “agency.” In the quote above McAdam draws the distinction between psychological and political phenomena essentially suggesting that they are opposed to one another. As a result, the consciousness related issues that were addressed, even if problematically, in the earlier theories get trumped by the safer (and more quantifiable) categories of opportunities and resources. The question of how individuals or groups come to understand themselves as activists is not addressed as thoroughly as the other variables identified in mobilization and political opportunity structure (POS) theories.

Just to clarify, mobilization and POS are important analytical tools. And, in fact, they do much to explain the emerging activities of postcommunist civic groups.¹⁰ However, they do not engage the multiple and varied ways in which activism differs culturally or why certain movements (or non-movements) vary from one another. There is some recognition of the importance of such issues (what we are calling consciousness here for better or worse) in the discussion of cognitive liberation and what is generally called framing (framing processes). Cognitive liberation refers to the realization of oppression as a structural phenomenon. That is, personal experiences come to be understood as the result of systematic processes rather than random or individualized. The key here is that in order for a group to act collectively they must understand themselves as a collective, a group who consciously shares the oppression that they experience. McAdam argues that “before collective protest can get under way, people must

¹⁰ Valerie Sperling, Myra Marx Ferree and Barbara Risman. “Constructing Global Feminism: Transnational Advocacy Networks and Russian Women’s Activism.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society*, Vol. 26 Issue 4, 2001; Elena Zdravomyslova. “Opportunities and framing in the transition to democracy: the case of Russia.” In, McAdam, McCarthy and Zald (eds), 1996.

collectively define their situation as unjust and subject to change through group action.”¹¹

Framing processes refer to the “conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action.”¹²

The question of framing asks important questions, such as how groups project their concerns and ideas. Yet, in order to project such ideas groups must have some understanding of themselves and what they are doing.

It seems to me that neither cognitive liberation or framing processes get at the issue of consciousness that I am concerned with. Cognitive liberation comes closest as it addresses the issue of why groups/individuals take action. However, there is an overemphasis on structure that can be problematic. For example, if we assume that if a society’s structure is patriarchal then all women will eventually come to the liberated position of a feminist activist. What cognitive liberation does not achieve, in part because it is not a central variable for social movement analysis and thus under-theorized, are the multiple contextual ways in which individuals and groups create political social voices (and how the context creates them as well). At the same time, framing only really speaks to how groups project themselves given an already produced consciousness. That is, a group may decide how to present their image but that effort requires a sense of what it means to be part of that group or activism.

This assumption of the always already presence of consciousness facilitates an identity politics understanding of women’s movements. In terms of the Marxist traditions woven into the predominant views of social movements we can see that consciousness has a similar teleological

¹¹ McAdam 1982, p. 51.

quality. Achieving class-consciousness and shedding the cloak of false consciousness is the product of a grand almost cosmic plan that exceeds the specificities of context.¹³ That is, once the proper economic/social conditions arise society's herd-consciousness will be taken over by proletarian class-consciousness. While Marx emphasizes the importance of context and consciousness, in effect these variables or components of social change ironically exist in teleological rather than material ways. Similarly, the idea of cognitive liberation recognizes the importance of consciousness and context but does not distinguish between the specificity of how it emerges and that it exists. In this way, the experience of feminism/women's movements in the west often slips into the convenient ideal model for comparison. However, as I will discuss momentarily, the context of identity politics that exists "in the west" and through which feminism emerged, is not the same through which women's activism emerges in other geographical and historical places.

III.

Without leaving the American context we can easily see the problems that identity politics presents. From the inception of the women's movement in the United States the question of who/what is the subject of feminism has riddled many. With the assortment of other differences that can contradict, overlap and blend with gender (class, race/ethnicity, sexuality,

¹² McAdam, McCarthy and Zald (eds), 1996, p.6.

¹³ "Nor will we explain to them that it is only possible to achieve real liberation in the real world and by employing real means, that slavery cannot be abolished without the steam-engine and the mule and the spinning-jenny, serfdom cannot be abolished without improved agriculture, and that, in general, people cannot be liberated as long as they are unable to obtain food and drink, housing and clothing in adequate quality and quantity. *Liberation is a historical and not a mental act, and it is brought about by historical conditions*, the development of industry, commerce, agriculture, the conditions of intercourse." Karl Marx. Translated and edited by Robert Tucker. *The Marx-Engels Reader, second edition*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978. p.169

education, national origin, disability, age...), it is no surprise that realizing some kind of gender consciousness for a social movement against oppression is complex. As bell hooks has articulated many times, America's women's movement has been predominantly a struggle of white upper-class women for white upper-class women. hooks points out that "woman," as a category, is not natural such that all women necessarily feel the drive to join together against sexist oppression.¹⁴ In effect, by ignoring the differences among women, the system of sexist oppression is not fully addressed head on. She explains that women of color did not (and still do not) join the ranks of feminism because they did not see their own oppression as the effect of male domination but as the result of their racial social status. Her analysis concludes that:

Many feminist radicals now know that neither a feminism that focuses on woman as an autonomous human being worthy of personal freedom nor one that focuses on the attainment of equality of opportunity with men can rid society of sexism and male domination. Feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression. Therefore, it is necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion and material desires. Defined this way, it is unlikely that women would join feminist movement simply because we are biologically the same.¹⁵

While hooks is assessing the pitfalls of American feminism, her argument is also applicable to the problems I am suggesting exist in theories of social movements and hence our understandings of women's activism in non-western contexts. The flaws of identity politics, as hooks discusses them, effectively limit the success of feminism to dismantle systems of

¹⁴ And indeed some argue that the very notion of sexual differences (i.e., the psychological, biological and now genetic distinctions we give to male and female) is a historical product. See, Donna Haraway. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991; Denise Riley. *Am I that Name? Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988; and Joan W. Scott. *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York: Columbia University, 1988.

oppression.¹⁶ Similarly, the flaws of identity politics also limit the depth of our understanding sexual politics and social change in comparative contexts.

What I would like to suggest is that the limits of identity politics that feminists such as hooks and Butler speak of, are simultaneously pertinent critiques of the kind of western gaze/analysis frequently imposed on non-western contexts. Liberal feminists assumed a kind of essential gender consciousness in early feminist movements, believing that all women, regardless of the other varied and complicated aspects of their lives, experienced life only or primarily through the variable of gender. Thus, consciousness raising was (and to some degree still is) a major component to feminist activism: speaking about one's oppression in order to see the structural character of sexism, racism, homophobia and classism builds empowerment. While this may be an appropriate and at times powerful tool, consciousness raising spins the assumption `a la Marx that once the herd-consciousness is shed, true gender consciousness emerges.¹⁷ This kind of assumption raises the specter of false-consciousness which is a concept riddled with many problems.

¹⁵ bell hooks. *Feminist Theory: from margin to center*. Boston: South End Press, 1984. p.24

¹⁶ Other feminists have made similar arguments. Judith Butler smartly argues, "My suggestion is that the presumed universality and unity of the subject of feminism is effectively undermined by the constraint of the representational discourse in which it functions. Indeed, the premature insistence on a stable subject of feminism, understood as a seamless category of women, inevitably generates multiple refusals to accept the category. These domains of exclusion reveal the coercive and regulatory consequences of that construction, even when the construction has been elaborated for emancipatory purposes. Indeed, the fragmentation within feminism and the paradoxical opposition to feminism from 'women' who feminism claims to represent suggest the necessary limits of identity politics." Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. p.4

¹⁷ There are many reasons why consciousness raising is still a necessary and powerful tool, particularly when in relation to domestic violence, rape and hate crimes. See, bell hooks. *Feminism is For Everybody*. Cambridge: South End Press, 2000.

Political subjectivity may be a less problematic tool than the variable of consciousness. By political subjectivity I mean the political, cultural and historical context in which voices and/or categories emerge. As such, before we dismiss identity politics altogether, what I would like to argue is that regardless of the drawbacks to identity politics, it was a central component of the context through which feminism emerged in America. Liberal feminists were in part responding to a political context that at once tried to see all citizens as individuals while at the same time categorized women as a distinct group (e.g., in not giving women certain rights, such as property, voting, etc). Furthermore, a philosophically liberal context that generally equated individuality with identity influenced the way in which feminism emerged and more specifically how women and other disenfranchised groups came to see themselves as well as how they created their political voices.

The liberal political context, generally speaking of course, translates the call for freedom as the creation of a distinct identity. Embodying the bluntest aspects of individualism found in liberalism, John Locke's words echo throughout the history of American political development. He states that, "Though the earth and all inferior creatures be common to all men, yet every man has property in his own person; this nobody has the right to but himself."¹⁸ If an ideal of individual rights operates in a society (such as that presented by the Declaration of Independence) where not all people are considered individuals (for example, 3/5th a person as in

¹⁸ John Locke. *The Second Treatise of Government*. New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1952. p.17

the case of slaves), those excluded from that ideal will eventually form their political subjectivity around the development of their claim to individuality.¹⁹

Another component of the philosophical liberal context through which feminism emerged in the United States is the material as well as cultural distinction between private and public spheres. According to Locke, the private sphere consists of the hearth and is ontologically separate from the public or political sphere. This distinction is embodied in the essential differences between paternal and political authority—each has its own character in its own jurisdiction. The role of the father in the family, as the ruler, does not have an equivalent in the public realm. Men cannot rule as absolute kings in the commonwealth as a father should in his home. This analytical separation is explained in the following excerpt:

But these two powers, political and paternal, are so perfectly distinct and separate, are built upon so different foundations, and given to so much different ends, that every subject that is a father has as much a paternal power over his children as the prince has over his, and every prince that has parents owes them as much filial duty and obedience as the meanest of his subject do theirs, and cannot therefore contain any part of degree of that kind of dominion which a prince or magistrate has over his subjects.²⁰

With the demarcation between public and private spheres, society also divides issues into what are deemed political and private topics, with political issues those which have voice in society. It

¹⁹ W.E.B. DuBois speaks to this quite eloquently when he argues that black Americans must construct an authentic Black identity that is not filtered through the white imagination of “the Negro.” “After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, a gifted and second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength along keeps it from being torn asunder.” W.E.B. DuBois. *The Souls of Black Folks*. New York: Gramercy Books, 1994. p.5. And it is in part this dualness that facilitates the movements and desires to create a separate Black American identity.

²⁰ John Locke. *Second Treatise on Government*. New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1952. p.40

is also this feature of the American context that helped to give form to feminist political subjectivity in the 19th century suffrage movements and the 20th century radical feminist movements. The public/private divide contributed to how women understood themselves as a distinct group by organizing the way in which they challenged sexism. One argument given by the suffragists was that because women were the protectors of the private sphere, and hence were in some ways morally superior to men, they should be granted the right to vote in order to “clean-up” politics.²¹ Here women used the gendered power granted them as morally different from men to show the necessary connection between public and private (without the intention of dismantling that separation). Later, radical feminists struggled to break-down the partition between public and private issues by demanding legalizing abortion and the criminalization of marital rape.²²

To summarize then, in addition to the political structures that influenced the emergence of modern feminism in the United States (i.e., the political construction of sexual difference), the cultural discourses of individuality and public/private spheres also had an impact. Indeed, this is still true if one considers that a central organizing tension in American/western feminism is between fighting against the oppression that women experience as “women” and, struggling to

²¹ Regarding the gendered contours of the public/private divide and how it related to politics see, Linda Kerber. *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980; and Gretchen Ritter. “Gender and Citizenship after the 19th Amendment.” *Polity*, Spring 2000 v.32.

²² Alice Echols. *Daring to be bad: radical feminism in America, 1967-1975*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989; and Robin Morgan. *Sisterhood is Powerful: an anthology of writings from the women’s liberation movement*. New York: Random House, 1970.

exceed the boundaries of gender that encompass that fight.²³ In addition, the separation between public and private spheres is a contentious demarcation that continues to be fought over in the Supreme Court.²⁴ While the criticisms of identity politics allow us to see the imperfections of using that register to understand activism/feminism, it is also important to see identity politics as a component of the context through which western feminism emerged. In this way, when comparing activism and social change in non-western contexts, it may be easier to disabuse ourselves of the essential connection between feminism, women's activism and identity politics.

IV.

What are some of the ways in which an identity-centered view of feminism does not fit in the Russian context? To begin this discussion I would like to give more texture to the concept of political subjectivity in the context of the development of Russian discourses concerning sexual difference and inequality. While this will only be a sketch of what indeed is a much larger conversation, it is important to flesh out some of the ways in which, having done a bit of homework on the baggage of western feminism, political subjectivity may negotiate the nuances of cultural difference that standard views of gender consciousness do not.

The rise in criticism of the patriarchal structure of Russian society emerged within a larger critique of political patriarchy and absolutism. This was the case in the 19th century

²³ It seems as though this dilemma pertains to most social groups organizing their activism around an identity/category. As Steven Epstein describes, "How do you protest a socially imposed categorization, except by organizing around that category? Just as blacks cannot fight the arbitrariness of racial classification without organizing as blacks, so gays could not advocate the overthrow of the sexual order without making their gayness the very basis of their claims." Steven Epstein. "Gay politics, ethnic identity: the limits of social constructionism." *Socialist Review* Volume 17, 1987.

²⁴ Take for example the issue of sodomy and various state supreme court decisions on a citizen's right to privacy.

against the Tsar and again in the 1980's against the Soviet state apparatus. Discourses regarding sexual difference and inequality were interwoven with larger social-political critiques. The primary register in which such discussions occurred was (and is) through what is called the "woman question." Beginning in the 19th century, the woman question encompasses debates regarding woman's proper role in the newly constructed society.²⁵ Within this question is an explicit critique of inequality, ranging from the necessity to educate women in the 19th century to full female employment in the 20th century. In 1862 M.L. Mikhailov wrote a series of articles on the woman question marking the first serious public discussion on the topic in Russia.²⁶ His primary concern was the education of women but as it related to the larger perceived problem of civilizing Russia (i.e., developing Russia beyond Tsarist feudalism). The intelligentsia at the turn of the 20th century saw the woman question as an integral part of society's larger ills.²⁷ For example, according to one scholar of 19th century legal reform in Russia, the advancement of women's rights regarding property and divorce were perceived as positive byproducts (or the Trojan mare) of the legal displacement of unlimited patriarchal authority by a legal system based on civil rights.²⁸ This was also the case during the Soviet period when women were seen as key participants in the advancement of socialism as workers and mothers. Indeed, it was Stalin who

²⁵ I.I. Iukina (redactor). *Zhenskie i Gendernye Issledovaniia*. Sankt Peterburg: Nevskogo Insituta Iazyka i Kul'tura, 2000; and G.A. Tishkin. *Zhenskii Vopros v Rossii, 50-60 gody xix v.* Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Leningradskogo Universiteta, 1984.

²⁶ For a collection of writings on the woman and sexual question as they developed in Europe see, Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (eds). *Sexology Uncensored: the documents of sexual science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

²⁷ Richard Stites. *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism 1860-1930*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978. p.46

²⁸ William G. Wagner. "The Trojan Mare: Women's Rights and Civil Rights in Late Imperial Russia," in, Olga Crisp and Linda Edmondson (eds). *Civil Rights in Imperial Russia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.

championed the equality women enjoyed in the Soviet Union in comparison to those in capitalist societies.

One effect or characteristic of having the discussion of sexual difference and equality emerge through the woman question is that the woman question was never meant to be a gender question. In contrast to the category “woman” pursued by feminists in the American context in order to make claims for equality which they believed to be already granted them as individuals by the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, the category “woman” created by the woman question was used as a register for the larger struggle for social-political change. There was no identity to rally around since the subject of the woman question was really about the structure of society and not the individual rights of women. The push for equality between the sexes emerged from a larger desire to change the political structure of society. In other words, the woman question concentrated on issues relating to women’s special/separate role in society and did not evolve into or engage issues of gender which encompasses a fundamental critique of essential sexual differences. Indeed, the woman question has done more to re-inscribe notions of natural sexual difference than break them down.

This reification of natural sexual difference is evident in the legal arena where a majority of the laws pertaining to equality and discrimination extend rights insofar as women are understood as needing protection, primarily as mothers.²⁹ Or, take for example a recent statement made by President Putin (which is fairly typical). In a public address asking women to enter the political profession, which of course is sorely needed given that only 10% of Russia’s

politicians are female, he argued that government needs them because they are gentler and more able to reach a compromise.³⁰ Despite the fact that Putin was addressing an issue of equality (equal representation), his point shows how sexual equality is tied to notions of essential sexual difference—government needs women not because it would be a move toward gender parity but because women’s special qualities are lacking there.

Another characteristic of the woman question is that while discussions regarding women’s rights began on an intellectual/professional level, they were immediately taken-up by the state after the revolution and in effect taken out of popular discourse. As such, according to Elena Zdravomyslova, the kind of feminism that existed in the Soviet Union was what she calls state feminism.³¹ In other words, government intervention into the daily public and private lives of the citizenry. Rather than a demand from the bottom-up, full female employment and sexual equality were additional quotas dictated from the top-down and demanded fulfillment. Regardless of whether or not equality was indeed obtained, although most believe it was not even after Stalin closed the topic in the 1950’s, the discussion was maintained on a state level which meant that criticism was interpreted as slander.³² “In the USSR, the communist party’s position that socialism had already accomplished the emancipation of women made autonomous

²⁹ S.V. Polubinskaia. “Gendernye problemi ugovornoro zakonodatel’stvo,” in: L.N. Zavadskaya, *Gendernaia Ekspertiza Rossiiskovo Zakonodatel’stov*. Moskva: BEK. p.175-210.

³⁰ “It is in politics, which we need compromise and the ability to smooth things over, that we lack women’s traditional qualities most of all.” President Putin also reassured the audience that women would not be treated as “just one of the guys” if elected into government. “Women should have one unquestionable privilege—the right to be protected by men.” Alice Lagnado. *The Times* (London). April 6, 2002.

³¹ Audiotaped interview with author, St. Petersburg, Russia, December 8, 2002.

³² For a late Soviet, perestroika era, argument for the inequality of Soviet equality see, S.V. Polenina. *Trud, Sem’ia, byt sovetskoi zhenshiny*. Moskva: Iuridicheskaiia Literatura, 1990. p.7

criticism of gender relations an attack on the state.”³³ The flip-side of this is that women often interpreted discrimination or inequality as the result of government/state failures rather than stemming from culture or patriarchy.³⁴

Both of these aspects of the woman question, that it is grounded in notions of natural sexual differences and that it associated with state discourses, are contours to the context in which feminism and progressive voices have developed. In contemporary Russia, the woman question exists somewhat on the state level but has mostly been taken-up by non-governmental organizations as they try to fill the increasing gap of health and social services. In addition, a growing number of academics have engaged issues of gender—that is, they increasingly use the term gender as a way to analyze sexual difference and women in society.

The challenge, as I see it, has been balancing the western baggage associated with gender theory and the various native traditions of progressive thinking. As Sergie Iushakin has argued, the term gender more often than not in the post-Soviet context is used as a symbol of “advancement” rather than an analytical tool to break-down systems of oppression as they operate in that context.³⁵ This, I believe, is connected to the frequent disavowal of feminism in Russia. If feminism is foreign, that is, without a native tradition in Russia, then engaging it only

³³ Myra Marx Ferree, et al. “The Russian Women’s Movement: Activists’ Strategies and Identities.” *Women & Politics*, Vol. 20(3), 1999.

³⁴ Jill M. Bystydzienski and Joti Sekhon (eds). *Democratization and Women’s Grassroots Movements*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999; Gail Warshofsky Lapidus. *Women, Work, and Family in the Soviet Union*. Aremonk: M.E.Sharpe, 1982; Valentine Moghadam. *Democratic Reform and the Position of Women in Transitional Economies*. New York: Clarendon Press, 1996; and Olga A. Voronina. “Perspektivy prazvitiia gendernykh issledovaniia v Rossii.” *Obshchesvennye nauki i sovremennost’*, 2000, No.4.

³⁵ Sergei Ushakin. “ ‘Gender’ (Naprokat): noleznaia kategoriia dlia naychnoi kar’ery.” In, Marianna Mouravieva (ed). *Gendernaia Istoriia Pro et Contra*. Sankt-Peterburg: Rossiiskii Gosudarstvenyi Pedagogicheskii Universitet im A. I. Gerzena, 2000

requires transplanting it to the Russian context. Yet, transplanting it (in the guise of an identity-centered women's movement) will not necessarily allow one to wrestle with the nuances that distinguish Russia's experience with the development of sexual difference. Again, as Iushakin states, the term gender is the offspring of the specific movements and debates that occurred in a western context. By simply implanting that term, without engaging how it does and does not fit in the post-Soviet context, the power that gender has as an analytical tool is undermined.

I hope to further develop this concept of political subjectivity as a way to negotiate such traps to comparative work. The first step has been to consider the baggage that my operating terms carry, such as feminism and gender. The next step, and to which I am now researching with my dissertation, is a careful analysis of the development of discourses of sexual difference in Russia and the local traditions of social activism.