



The Philosophy of Sex and Gender in Russia

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ABSTRACT: This presentation focuses on the main philosophical approaches toward analyzing the notions of "sex" and "gender" in Russia since the nineteenth century. I analyze the conceptions and ideas which were developed by Aleksey Khomyakov, Nicolai Chernyshevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Fedor Dostoevsky, Vladimir Solovyov and some other philosophers. Then, I discuss the concept of emancipation of women within the framework of Marxist-Leninist theory, which played a role in the state's "women's philosophy" in the Soviet period, and within the existing modern viewpoints. My methodology is based on concepts and guidelines developed in feminist philosophy. One of the goals, as put forward by feminist philosophy, is to discover the gender determinateness of the metatheoretical foundations of science and traditional Western humanitarianism and of philosophy. This problem can be quite successfully solved on the basis of Western philosophic studies. Russian philosophy, however, has not so far become a subject of feminist analysis either in Russia or in the West. Therefore, my research in this field could be considered rather novel.

This presentation focuses on the main philosophical approaches toward analyzing the notions of "sex" and "gender" in Russia. First of all, I mean the last century's philosophy of sex and the theology of gender, the concept of emancipation of women within the framework of the Marxist-Leninist theory of women's emancipation, which played the role of state "women's philosophy" in the Soviet period, and the existing modern viewpoints.

My methodology is based on concepts and guidelines, developed in the feminist philosophy and presented *inter alia* in the works of Genevieve Lloyd, Susan Bordo, Sandra Harding, Jane Flax and many others.

One of the goals, as put forward by the feminist philosophy, is to find out gender determinateness of the metatheoretical fundamentals of science and traditional Western humanitarianism, and first and foremost, that of philosophy. This problem can be quite successfully solved on the basis of Western philosophic studies (see works of the above authors).

The Russian philosophy, however, has not so far become a subject of feminist analysis either in Russia or in the West. Therefore, my research in this field could be considered rather novel.

But before analyzing the subject I would like to clarify the language and the terms I am going to use. The problem is that in order to adequately express the meaning of the concepts-in-question it would not be quite correct to use the word "sex", when we talk about anatomical and biological peculiarities of men and women, or "gender", when we talk about social and/or cultural issues or the symbolics of the masculine and the feminine. In the Russian philosophy of the last century, the term "sex" in some concepts meant both the biological nature of males and females and Eros and love, while in some - what today we would term "gender". I truly understand that the term "theology of sex" does sound somewhat odd in the English language. Nevertheless, I believe that it most adequately denotes the meaning implied in this theory.

The subject of sex was being widely discussed by Russian philosophers since as early as the middle of the nineteenth century. Alexis Khomyakov's Slavophile concept of sex, Nikolai Chernyshevsky's rationalistic philosophy of sex, and the religious philosophy of sex would appear most interesting to us.

The traditional Russian philosophy used to develop under strong influence of the orthodox church. Yet, since the middle of the 19th century the separation between the "westernists" and the "Slavophiles" has become clearly distinct. The first emphasized a need for social change in Russia (particularly, secularization of society and development of legal institutions). The latter insisted on the inherent "originality of Russia", demanding that any pursuit of the "Western" way of development would be disastrous to the country. The "westernists" supported the women's emancipation concept, presenting political and legal reasons (quite unpopular in that time in Russia). The Slavophiles strongly objected, appealing to the original Russian virtues such as religion and the patriarchal family.

For example, to Alexis Khomyakov, one of the leaders of the Slavophile movement (1804-1860), the division of mankind by sex was merely an historical fact and a will of God. He considered the family a divine and God-approved union of sexes aimed at neutralizing sexual antagonisms, with the "woman's heart" ennobling the "man's mind". Khomyakov's high appraisal of women notwithstanding, he interpreted emancipation as the right of women to lechery to a degree equal to that of men, which would result in grave degradation of society. Debating with George Sand, he assessed emancipation of women as a factor leading to the "war of sexes". Only children and families, Khomyakov insists, are the sacred protection to "save womens' weakness from the violent energy of men's supremacy".
(1)

It seems obvious that Khomyakov's views are quite traditional: sex is interpreted merely in the biological sense, while sexual differentiation, antagonism, and subordination of women is viewed as a "natural" and "divine" reality.

The secular rationalistic philosophy of sex is presented in the works of the philosopher and socialist Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828-1889). To Chernyshevsky, the natural reality of division of people into women and men is the "damnation" of the human being and a prerequisite for identifying the history of humankind as a history of injustice. He believed that domination of the strong man over the weak woman is the source of all other forms of subordination, suppression and exploitation in the society. Denying to perceive the family as a religious (spiritual) sacrament, Chernyshevsky considers it a method of suppressing the woman's personality. That is why he believes it necessary "to drastically change the relationship between the sexes, and the entire social order as well". (2) A variant of such transformation of society, based on a combination of ideas of French utopian socialists and the "healthy egoism" philosophy of the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, is offered in Chernyshevsky's novel "What should be done." Describing a program of socialist transformation of society, Chernyshevsky reflects in much detail on various aspects of emancipation of women, most important of which, he thinks, are the economic

independence of women and their deliverance from family suppression. Despite the positive pathos of Cheryshevsky's philosophy, it failed to play any significant role in the development of the theory of gender in Russia, though some of his ideas were far ahead of his time. In my opinion, Chernyshevsky's concept could never become successful because of its utopism, persistent moralization, and a schematized approach toward finding solutions to sex antagonism problems. The author did not see the real "drama" of sex antagonism. In the end, his theory suggested that "some day in the world there will be neither men nor women, just "people". And then the people will be happy". (3) Today we can presume that Chernyshevsky implied overcoming the existing gender roles and stereotypes rather than "biological abolishment of the sex". In those days, however, such Chernyshevsky's ideas were treated as utmosty extravagant.

A second issue we think important to be discussed is the Russian religious "philosophy of sex" (the "theology of sex" and "philosophy of love" were developing within the framework of the said philosophy). To the Russian religious "philosophy of sex" belong thinkers with quite different points of view. Among them are philosophers Vladimir Solovyov and Vasiliy Rozanov, writers Leo Tolstoy and Fedor Dostoevsky.

Leo Tolstoy's "metaphysics of sex" considers sex in relation to his criticism of civilization. He believes it is a distortion of the divine truth and human nature. Sensuality is regarded by Leo Tolstoy as a metaphysical reason for the perversion of the world. He interpretes sensuality as a whim and revenge of the enslaved woman. In his judgement, the woman is enslaved because "... people want and use her as a means of getting pleasure". (4)

That is why the woman takes vengeance on people by chaining them in a web of sensuality. Thus, "sexual, carnal love" hampers to achieve the goal of human history, which is to create a unity of people in "benevolence, love, and kindness". In other words, Tolstoy interpretes sex (sexual love) as a sign of imperfection of humankind. In his opinion, the objective of human life is to overcome sex, while eradication of sexual love through chastity would manifest the triumph of overwhelming human harmony and love.

As we can see, in Tolstoy's philosophy such notions as "sex", "sensuality", "sexual relations", "moral perversion", "evil", and "the woman" stay in one row and are practically identical. In this sense, his idea of overcoming evil through "overcoming sex" reads as an idea of "overcoming the woman". Sex (evil), being identical with the woman, makes the woman an evil as well; and, vice versa, identifying the woman with sex makes sensuality an evil, too. "Millions of people, generations of slaves die of hard labor they suffer at factories only to have women's feebleness permitted", writes Tolstoy in his novel "The Kreutzer Sonata". "Women... hold in captivity of slavery and hard labor nine tenths of humankind". (5) I understand that count Tolstoy was more interested in the "morality" and destiny of humankind rather than in political and legal implications. But I can not help mentioning that in that time millions of women were already working at factories as slaves. I wonder if it was to their own whim.

It is obvious that Tolstoy refers the notion of sex only to women (not "people") and interpretes it not merely in the biological sense but rather as an (a)moral notion. That is why his philosophy of sex has a distinct scent of misogyny.

A completely different perception of the problem of sex can be seen in Fedor Dostoevsky's irrationalistic "metaphysics of sex". In Dostoevsky's world, there is always struggle between Christ and Satan, which is interpreted as man's temptation, a bisection of man into the woman-embodied "ideal of Madonna" and the "ideal of Sodom". In Dostoevsky's novels, all thoughts, feelings, and actions of his characters are guided by passionate love, the mysticity of mutual attraction of sexes. The irrationalist Dostoevsky, unlike the moralist Tolstoy, does not give in his novels any ready-made answers to problems of sex. However,

he is more definite in his historiosophy, combining the idea of the Russian orthodox Messiahship with the "metaphysics of sex". To him, Russia of the future wears an aspect of Wife (Mother Earth), as if giving birth to Christ for a second time and delivering Him and the world from the Monster (Satan).

Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900), one of Russia's most prominent philosophers, could not stay indifferent to Tolstoy's and Dostoevsky's theories. He does not agree with Tolstoy's "impersonal neuter divineness" and, on the contrary, supports Dostoevsky's idea of the preciousness of sexual love. In response to Tolstoy's novel "The Kreutzer Sonata", Solovyov writes the work entitled "The Meaning of Love", in which he puts forward the fundamental principles of his theology of sex. He names sexual love the highest and absolute value in human life. According to Solovyov, only that kind of love can bring about the creation of the "true person", because the "true person in completeness of his ideal personality...can not be either only a man or only a woman but a higher unity of both" . (6) To Solovyov, a complete person is an integrity of the masculine and feminine principles, whereas the first one (masculine) is the "subject cognizing and active", i.e. a man *per se*, and the second one (feminine) serves as an "object cognized and passive". (7) We can see that, in spite of the high estimation of sexual love, Solovyov's theology of sex reproduces the traditional patriarchy's logic of binary opposites of the masculine and the feminine.

On the other hand, Solovyov rather untraditionally uses the gender symbolics in his theological and ontological theories. To Solovyov, God is, undoubtedly, The Father, HE, his masculine beginning (which is quite traditional). But the "soul of the world", as was in medieval mysticism, is associated by him with images of Eternal Femininity, Wisdom, Sophia. Clearly, associating the feminine beginning with wisdom is very untraditional. According to Solovyov, the goal of history is to achieve perfection through a unity of mankind and God, which can only be reached through divine matrimonial mystery. He distinguishes three elements of such mystery: the "benevolent nature" (the feminine beginning), the Man-God (the masculine beginning), and the "soul of the world" (Eternal Wisdom - Sophia). (8) In Russia Solovyov has traditionally been regarded as a philosopher who glorifies femininity. But it seems obvious, however, that in Solovyov's theology and ontology the masculine beginning (God) is of primary importance, while the feminine beginning (be it called Wisdom or the soul of the world) is secondary and complementary.

Solovyov's theology of sex has to a large extent influenced the ideas of such Russian religious philosophers as Nikolai Berdyayev (1874-1948), Vasily Rozanov (1856-1919), and Paul Florensky (1882-1943). To them, God is not without a "sexual" tinge, either.

For example, Berdyayev believed that erotic energy is not only a source of creative activity, but a source of religion as well. He insisted that a "true religion, mystical life", related to sexual polarity, "is always orgiastic", and that "sexual polarity is the main law of life and, maybe, the basis of the world". (9)

Paul Florensky, Serguei Bulgakov (1871-1944), and Ivan Ilyin (1882-1954) also perceived God through the prism of love, not love-Eros but love-"caritas", i.e. compassion, charity, mercy. Unusual, however, is their definition of God, when they use qualities traditionally associated with the feminine beginning.

So as we can see, the Russian philosophy had quite a peculiar approach toward perceiving and assessing the masculine versus feminine. First of all, in the Russian philosophy and theology of sex differentiation between the masculine and feminine beginnings is viewed from the standpoint of the metaphysical or spiritual and religious principles, while for Western philosophy such differentiation is more of the ontological or gnosiological character. Secondly, the Russian philosophy often puts different cultural and symbolic emphases: what in the European philosophy has traditionally been associated with the

masculine beginning (divine, spiritual, true) is associated in Russia and Russian culture - via the category of love - with the feminine beginning. So it may seem as if we could draw a conclusion that in Russia the feminine beginning was praised higher than the masculine one. However, if we recall that none of the above theories ever considered the feminine beginning equal to or independent of the masculine beginning (instead, those theories viewed it only as complementary) the patriarchal fundamentals of the Russian philosophy of sex appear quite obvious. That is why such liberals as V. Solovyov, N. Berdyayev, and V. Rozanov (as well as many others) viewed women's emancipation as an insignificant political slogan having nothing in common with the real metaphysics of sex. And finally, it should be noted that the apprehension of the feminine in the irrationalistic Russian philosophy is very abstract in its nature. It is an allegory rather than a category, a moral instruction rather than a concept.

However, it is owing to the allegorical and moral and ethical tone of the Russian philosophy of sex that it has contributed much to the perpetuation of patriarchal oriented views and the traditional structure of gender roles in Russia. Many of those ideas had sprouted through the decades of the Soviet regime to combine in a ridiculous manner with the Marxist emancipation concept, which for decades remained the official philosophy concerning women.

On the whole, this concept has been given due and detailed consideration in the Western feminist literature. The author of this presentation has also made her contribution to the issue. Now I would only like to briefly specify one aspect. To me, the Marxist concept of women's emancipation is a queer version of not philosophy, but a political (class) neopatriarchal ideology, instead. This ideology gives room only to a semblance of women playing the role of a subject of action. In fact, they only remain an object of class analysis and manipulation. According to the said ideology (outlined in the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, August Bebel, Vladimir Lenin, Alexandra Kollontai), the class is the basic category of social studies. Both the sex and the gender are considered insignificant, if not non-existent; the class is of the uppermost importance. Differentiation between the social roles of man and women is considered to be governed by the class structure of the society and the existing social antagonisms. According to Marxism, the situation can change, and women can obtain equality with men only after the victory of the socialist revolution. It is claimed that women do not have any interests of their own and separate from those of men other than the strife of classes. Therefore, they must act as men's "allies and helpers" in that class struggle of theirs.

Marxists and their followers believe that the idea of women (the feminine) "catching up" with men (the masculine) to gain equality is a socially positive part of their emancipation concept. From the feminist standpoint, however, under such "emancipation" and "equality" men continue to perform as the "norm", while women are still considered a deviation ("Others"), which admittedly could some day become the "norm", too.

Throughout the entire Soviet period philosophy was developing within the framework of Marxism-Leninism. True, though, that since the time of the "Khrushchev thaw" it became possible to study and relay Western philosophic concepts under disguise of their criticism. But unfortunately, feminism and gender issues never came into sight with domestic philosophers. This can be explained by the arrogance of the philosophers, who tended to avoid such "low-grade" subjects, and the hidden patriarchy of Russian mentality.

Little has changed in the post-Soviet period. Feminism and the gender approach are practically not included in the mainstream of philosophic studies. Only very few women-philosophers relay Western feminist theories (mainly of the post-modernist type) and propagate the gender approach. Not only "Philistines" (common people) but Russian

intellectuals as well consider feminism a curse word, and gender studies - a usual muddle of the civilization-satiated Western mind.

A few words in the end.

Although we used different approaches and terminology when overviewing the theories of sex (from religious and mystical to atheistic), those theories are in essence very similar. They define the "masculine beginning/masculine principle" as the dominating one, and the "feminine beginning/feminine principle" as complementary. Admittedly, the degree of women's complementariness can be very high, but never equal to or higher than the masculine status. Such an intellectual situation only reflects and develops the profound patriarchy of Russian mentality, which sees the world destined to be split into a system of binary opposites: good and evil, friend and foe, men and women.

Notes

(1) Khomyakov A., p. 262.

(2) Chernyshevsky N., vol.I, p. 401.

(3) Ibid., vol.XV, p. 152.

(4) Tolstoy L., p.129.

(5) Ibid., str. 17.

(6) Solovyov V. (1988), p.. 513.

(7) Solovyov V. (1911), p.363.

(8) Ibid., 335.

(9) Berdyayev N., p. 15-16.

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