

REVIEW ARTICLE

SLAVOPHILIA: THE INCITEMENT TO RUSSIAN
SEXUAL DISCOURSE

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Jane T. Costlow, Stephanie Sandler, Judith Vowles, eds. *Sexuality and the Body in Russian Culture*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993. 357 pp., \$45.00 (cloth).

Laura Engelstein. *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992. 480 pp., \$39.95 (cloth).

Igor Kon and James Riordan, eds. *Sex and Russian Society*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993. viii + 168 pp., \$29.95/\$10.95.

SPID-Info: Ezhemesiachnaia nauchno-populiarnaia gazeta. Moscow: 1991–1993, May 1994–June 1995.

After decades of studied silence and official Puritanism on sexual matters, the last several years have seen a veritable orgy of sexual discourse in and about Russia. On a scale surpassing both the libertinism of the *fin-de-siècle* "boulevard" and the eroticized ideological battlefields of the Russian Civil War and NEP, Russian culture in all its manifestations would appear to have become thoroughly and overtly sexualized. One imagines that this process has spread beyond the control of any moral guardian; neither the scissors of the censor nor the ax of Tolstoy's Father Sergius would prove adequate to the task at hand, for it is no longer clear where one should begin cutting, or what would be left after the offending words and organs have been excised. Certainly, sexual expression is most evident in the "low-brow" media: in the popular or "gutter" press, represented most notably by *SPID-Info*, Russia's best-selling newspaper; in the proliferation of pornography; and in the erotic imagery of television, radio, and newspaper advertising, where scantily-clad women moan the names of the latest indispensable consumer gadget. Sexuality has also become an object of study for the professional writers, scholars, and artists who, in the wake of the totalitarian monopoly on expression, now shape Russian public discourse: sex manuals, both imported and domestic, sell on every street corner; newspaper pundits either decry the collapse of morals or praise the end of sexual hypocrisy; and writers such as Valeriia Narbikova and Viktor Erofeev put overt sexual situations in works printed by "highbrow" literary journals and publishing houses.

Finally, one must not forget the cultural critics in both Russia and the West who examine these phenomena. The first post-*zastoi* decade has seen an impressive constellation of scholarly works on sexuality and gender in Russia: cultural historians have examined the social construction of sexuality from the middle ages (Eve Levin, *Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox Slavs, 900–1700* [Ithaca 1989]) to the *fin-de-siècle* (Engelstein) to the Soviet period (Mark Popovskii, *Tretii lishnii: on, ona i sovetskii rezhim* [London, 1985]), while literary

scholars such as Helena Goscilo, Olga Matich, Eric Naiman, and Mikhail Zolotonosov have looked at the interplay between sex and ideology during NEP and the renewed “physiologism” of recent Russian fiction. Two collections of articles on sex in Russian culture have appeared in the United States in recent years (Costlow, et. al.; Kon and Riordan), one in Switzerland (Leonid Heller, *Amour et érotisme dans la littérature russe du XXe siècle* [Berne, 1992]), and a special issue of *Literaturnoe obozrenie* on “erotica” in Russian literature was published in 1992 (I. D. Prokhorova, S. Iu. Mazur, G. B. Zyкова, eds., *Erotika v russkoi literature: Ot Barkova do nashikh dnei. Literaturnoe obozrenie. Spetsial’nyi vypusk*. [Moscow, 1992]). One could dismiss the simultaneous rise in both scholarly and non-scholarly discourse on sexuality as mere coincidence, a happy accident of Western critical fashion and Eastern post-totalitarian experimentation, but the juxtaposition of scholarly and popular examples of such discourse reveals a shared belief in the capacity of sex to signify, a belief that sex can speak of more than just itself. This common faith suggests that the expansion of both scholarly and non-scholarly Russian sexual discourse can be explained in terms of the very theorist whose applicability to the Russian context has been the subject of some debate in recent scholarship: Michel Foucault.

One might expect that it would be Freud, not Foucault, who would be at the center of controversy, especially considering that the brief Soviet flirtation with “freidizm” ended in decades-long official hostility toward psychoanalysis (see Aleksandr Etkind, *Eros nevozmozhno: Istoriia psikhoanaliza v Rossii* [St. Petersburg, 1993], 213–258; reviewed by Eliot Borenstein in *SEEJ* 39:3). Yet the Russian cultural context does not in itself present a serious challenge to Freudian theory. Certainly, James Rice has demonstrated that “Russian material” had a far greater impact on Freud’s thought than was previously recognized, while Aleksandr Etkind speculates that the pre-revolutionary Russian family unit, so dependent on grandmothers and nannies, might lead to a particularly Russian “babushka” complex (see James Rice, *Freud’s Russia* [New Brunswick, 1993], 67–87, reviewed by Brett Cooke in *SEEJ* 38:4; and Etkind, 113–114). But for Freudian theory to “work” it must transcend history; if it is applicable to Europe, it will also be applicable to Russia. Not so for Foucault, whose “archaeological” analysis of institutions long taken for granted depends on the premise that power (and therefore knowledge) constitutes itself differently at different historical moments. Foucault’s challenge to the “repressive hypothesis” (the belief that “the history of sexuality must be seen first of all as the chronicle of increasing repression”) makes no claims to apply to all places at all times (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* [New York, 1990], 5). Therefore it cannot be assumed that Foucault must be relevant to Russia.

Yet Foucault’s ideas figure prominently in some of the more notable Western studies of sexuality in Russian culture. In the introduction to their 1993 collection *Sexuality and the Body in Russian Culture*, the editors take Foucault as their point of departure, asserting that “sexuality” and “the body” are “discursively constituted and changing entities that people have imagined and lived with in various ways throughout Russian history” (Costlow et. al., 1; reviewed by William Nickell in *SEEJ* 39:3). The editors of this volume do not treat Foucault uncritically, mentioning in passing Foucault’s lack of attention to gender (3). If the question of Foucault’s relevance is never raised, one suspects that this is because the editors use Foucault’s ideas as a critical stance rather than an analytical apparatus; the conference that yielded these essays was motivated by “Foucault’s implicit principle—that sexuality would be both symptomatic of and constructed by a culture” (2). Foucault’s inherent skepticism about all modes of sexual discourse (with the possible exception of his own) allows Costlow, Sandler, and Vowles to give a thoughtful, dispassionate analysis of both Nikolai Berdiaev’s model of “the triumph of morality and sublimation over the temptations of the flesh” and Simon Karlinsky’s “narrative” of sexual liberation. Karlinsky’s history, which “moves between prohibition . . . and celebration” runs counter to Foucault’s “repressive hypothesis”; for his part, Karlinsky has made no secret of his hostility to Foucault (Costlow et. al., 10–11; Simon

Karlinsky, "Liberating the Sexes: The Freedoms that Vanished with the October Revolution," *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 [June 1993], 4).

The current vogue for Foucault's thought in the West, in conjunction with the recent publication of a translated volume of his works in Russia, suggests that the question of Foucault's relevance to Russia will not disappear any time soon. Witness the controversy surrounding Laura Engelstein's remarkable study of *fin-de-siècle* Russian sexuality, whose Foucauldian framework is hardly doctrinaire. Engelstein uses Foucault as her "starting point," although she notes that Foucault's theories cannot be applied to Russia without some alteration. Unlike in the West, sexual discourse in Russia could not be considered solely the product of "professional discipline" (Engelstein, 3-4). Foucault's analysis presupposes the existence of a bourgeois order, in which professionals create public discourse without any impediment from autocratic authorities. The role of the "professions" is crucial, since, according to Foucault, Western medical professionals contributed to the creation of a society that

put into operation an entire machinery for producing true discourses concerning [sex]. Not only did it speak of sex and compel everyone to do so; it also set out to formulate the uniform truth of sex. As if it suspected sex of harboring a fundamental secret. (Foucault, 69)

Simon Karlinsky took Engelstein to task for being a "self-professed disciple of Michel Foucault" (4), but at least one of the participants of a recent forum in *Slavic Review* was inclined to see Engelstein as, in Reginald Zelnick's words, "*contra* Foucault." Zelnick writes:

what [Engelstein's book] shows is not how modern professional medical discourse about sex became a successful mode of exercising power over the bodies of others, but how it failed even to sustain and nourish its practitioners under the conditions that prevailed in Russia. (Irina Paperno, ed., "Symposium," *Slavic Review* 53.1 [Spring 1994], 203)

Engelstein can be understood to be "Foucauldian" only in the sense in which Foucault could be considered, like Marx or Freud, an "initiator of discursive practices": one can operate within a Foucauldian framework while taking issue with various aspects of his thought. Both Rudy Kosha ("Foucault and Social History: Comments on 'Combined Underdevelopment,'" *American Historical Review* [98.2], 354-363) and Eric Naiman suggest that Foucault might well be applicable if allowances are made for the Russian context. According to Naiman, it is "writers dabbling in medicine, criminology, and the law" who played a critical role in shaping Russian sexual discourse (Paperno, 210). Naiman asserts that it is a mistake to assume "that the actors in Foucault's drama must necessarily have belonged to the same professions in Russia as they did in France" (Paperno, 208).

Nor should one assume that this "drama" could be staged in Russia at the same time as in Western Europe. Whether or not Foucault's critique of the "repressive hypothesis" fits pre-revolutionary Russia, it may well be relevant to the situation today, for it is only now that sexologists, sociologists, psychologists, and journalists are enjoining the populace to enter into a dialogue on sexuality. Perhaps the paradigmatic moment was the now-infamous (and only semi-serious) declaration during a late-eighties media event that "U nas seksa net!," an apparently paradoxical declaration when one considers that Soviet women continued to give birth to children without recourse to Huxleyesque scientific procedures. Obviously, physical sexual activity was not the issue here. Here I would translate *seks* as either "sexuality" or "sexual discourse," that is, sex as subject matter rather than activity. One usually imagines that frank discussions of sexuality are meant to titillate, resulting in arousal and even sexual activity; yet the issue here is what Foucault calls the "incitement to discourse": the drive to produce more and more discourse about sex, rather than sex itself. When examined in this light, a sexual (rather than verbal) response to sexual discourse constitutes a short-circuit of

desire; sexual discourse exists in order that we talk about sex, but not necessarily that we actually engage in sex; the two activities can (and do) exist quite independently of each other.

One might argue that the public denial of *seks* effectively called *seks* into being; the word, once uttered, became infectious. The comparison between sexual discourse and sexually transmitted disease is not made lightly, for it was the public acknowledgment of sex as a medical problem that facilitated the spread of sex as discourse. A revealing case (in every sense of the word) is the newspaper *SPID-Info*, which had the highest subscription rate of all periodicals for 1994. Founded in 1989, *SPID-Info* was initially purported to have essentially "prophylactic" goals: to enlighten the public about sexual issues, and to prevent the spread of venereal diseases in general and AIDS in particular. Homilies on sexual hygiene and protracted discussions of fatal diseases, however, do not sell newspapers; from the very beginning, *SPID-Info* carried numerous stories about porn stars, prostitutes, and the sex lives of historical figures. The newspaper still does contain detailed information for those with sexual questions; indeed, if Russian men and women have taken some of the paper's more questionable contraceptive advice to heart, who knows how many blessed events may have occurred by now.

But here the very meaning of the word SPID in the newspaper's title has undergone a transformation that would startle even Susan Sontag: since the newspaper now contains far less information about AIDS than it does about nymphomania and tantric sex, one can only conclude that the word "SPID" has become little more than an advertisement of sexual subject matter. In 1994, the editorial board decided to make the newspaper's name doubly exotic: in a rather dubious rhetorical sleight of hand, they explained that the newspaper's goal is to provide information as rapidly as possible; now the masthead uses Latin letters, spelling not "спид" but "SPEED." Where "спид" is a contagion best avoided by abstinence (hence the already old joke, "Kak zashchishchat'sia ot SPID-a?—Spi odin"), "SPEED" insists on the necessity of its own transmission: " 'SPEED-INFO'-eto tselyi mir dlia dvoikh!" (*SPID-Info*, 9 [1993], 2) Having freed itself from the less appetizing connotations of immunodeficiency, *SPID-Info* is not only a veritable encyclopedia of sexual life; it is a monthly advertisement for sex *as* life. *SPID-Info* is a promotional brochure for a brave new, polymorphously perverse world, in which sexuality always insists on its place in any given aspect of culture or everyday life. The best of *SPID-Info*'s headlines and rubrics playfully suggest that life can be defined only in terms of sex: for months the newspaper has been printing articles under the heading "Coito ergo sum" ("I copulate, therefore I am").

Publications such as *SPID-Info* and its tamer rival *Chastnaia zhizn'* constantly trumpet the virtues of the "private" ("chastnoe") and "intimate" ("intimnoe"), yet one can argue that the constant exploration of this once-taboo realm constitutes an all-out assault on privacy by bringing the private realm into public discourse. *SPID-Info* features a marvelously entertaining rubric entitled "Semeinaia konsul'tatsiia," in which fictional patients confess their most personal problems to Professor Konstantin Tumanovsky. Each column is accompanied by a picture in which "Tumanovsky" is seen talking to "real" people, whose eyes are blacked out to protect their identities, while the photo's perspective suggests that the reader is sitting with them in the office, watching unnoticed from the side. As in Russian newspaper interviews, all extraneous conversation is edited out of these "sessions," resulting in a telescoping of the sexual plot to the point of absurdity. Dispensing with any therapeutic foreplay, Tumanovsky often pronounces a complex, Freudian diagnosis after a mere two or three questions. Tumanovsky's "consultations" epitomize both the professionalization of sexual discourse and the paradoxical conflation of the public and the private. His fictional patients, whose problems are general enough to be relevant to the largest number of readers, are reassured about confidentiality while millions of Russians eagerly await his next word. Time after time we see a concerned wife drag her reluctant husband into the sexologist's office, finally convincing him

to let the doctor (and the readership) into their sex life. Here, perhaps, is the true post-Soviet "primal scene": the Russian bedroom exposes its secrets to the concerned professional.

SPID-Info exists not to provoke sexual desire, but to provoke the verbalization of desire. The readers of *SPID-Info* have learned their lesson well. Even more indicative than the practical-minded "consultation" is the "letters" section of *SPID-Info*; here people (mostly women) send in letters about their own sexual experiences, more often than not unhappy ones. They can expect no reply and no advice; instead, they simply feel the urge to talk. Newspapers like *SPID-Info*, by their very existence, suggest to the reader the possibility of turning one's own sexuality into discourse, of joining the mass readership in a well-regulated, professionalized form of textual intercourse.

Such a totalizing sexual vision has, of course, met with varying degrees of resistance. One man's utopia is another's apocalypse, and the numerous critiques of sexual "excess" seem to suggest that from scatology to eschatology is only a small step. Yet the implicit faith in what might be called "liberation sexology" is shared by certain Western cultural critics as well. Igor Kon's and James Riordan's 1993 collection *Sex and Russian Society* contains an introduction by Riordan that places the entire book in a decidedly activist frame. Having painted a grim picture of the Soviet sexual front, Riordan proceeds to enumerate the horrible consequences of Russian Puritanism: the "tragic" state of sexual minorities, the "torrent" of pornography, and the rise of domestic violence. The final two subheadings of his introduction take a more upbeat turn: "Glimmers of Hope for the Future" and "An Appeal for Help." In the latter, he laments that "progress is slow, particularly in a climate of sexual ignorance and intolerance" (11), but nonetheless provides a list of ways in which the West can help lead Russia to the sexual promised land. In his earnest support of the erotic radiant future, Riordan is at times guilty of purveying a kind of "Sexualist Realism." Consider, for example, his discussion of sexuality in film:

. . . it is clear that the proliferation of images of sexual violence against women is hardly likely to further the cause of women's liberation or equality; nor is it likely to nurture a new morality and self-respect among both genders. (9)

Riordan is doing his cause more harm than good, for his well-meaning concern that the problematic materials will not "further the cause of women's liberation" or "nurture a new morality" has a distinctly Soviet moralistic ring to it.

The Western critical response to Russian sexual discourse inevitably becomes both a part of that very discourse (when read by Russians) and a part of a complex process that itself deserves examination. The revival of Russian public interest in Russian sexual discourse can be considered an attempt at self-knowledge; the impulse behind the Western interest in the phenomenon would presumably be different. Though his focus is more on the Russian side of the Russia-West relationship, Boris Groys's recent article "Russia and the West: the Quest for Russian National Identity" (*Studies in Soviet Thought*, 43 [1992], 185-198) offers one possible framework for examining the Western fascination with Russia in general, and, for my purposes, with Russian sexuality. Groys suggests that Slavophile philosophers interpreted Russia as "a space where Western discourse about the Other was to be realized or materialized" (197). The educated Russian elite began to look at Russia itself as the "Other," or as the "unconscious." Non-Westernized Russia then became that "pre-reflexive and extra-historical mode of existence" discussed by Schopenhauer and Hartmann. Presumably, Groys's analysis would also apply to Freudian psychology, since the Freudian concept of the Unconscious grew out of the philosophy of the previous century. Indeed, both James Rice's and Aleksandr Etkind's studies of the relationship between Freudian theory and Russian culture suggest that for Freud and his followers Russia was seen as the embodiment of the irrational and libidinal.

If Russia so easily plays the role of "Other" to the West, it is difficult to avoid seeing the Western critical relation to Russian sexual discourse as itself erotic. Indeed, the insularity of

Soviet society was inherently provocative, since there is nothing more erotic than that which is obscured from view. Journalistic accounts of Russian life, such as those of Hedrick Smith (*The Russians* [New York, 1984], 188–191, 239–242) and Martin Walker (*The Waking Giant: Gorbachev's Russia* [New York, 1988], 179–181), inevitably included discussions of the mysteries of the Russian sex life: how they managed to find the time and place for sex in a country where private space is an unimaginable luxury, and how the birth rate was kept so low in a country with little reliable birth control. The situation used to be exacerbated by the Soviet censors: what, after all can be more intriguing than that which we know has been hidden or excised? Censorship facilitates an extremely erotic, if not fetishistic, relation between the reader and the text. If something has been cut out, we want to restore it; if it has been veiled, we wish to dis-cover it. Here it is worth recalling that when Freud referred to the psychic mechanism that distorts unconscious truths before they attain conscious expression, he called it a “censor” after that “imperfect instrument of the tsarist regime, which impeded the penetration of alien Western ideas” (Etkind, 132).

When the foreign scholar turns his or her attention to the sexuality of another culture, either the foreign interest or the foreign subject matter can easily assume the air of the pathological. After all, why study the sexual practices or sexual discourse of a particular country unless one expects to find something radically different from what is considered the norm? This is perhaps one of the reasons that the Western approaches to Russian sexuality tend to be social constructionist, whereas the Russian ones rely more on a faith in “biology” or the “natural.” If sexuality is merely natural, merely biological, then there is little reason to pay so much attention to foreign sexual discourse: any discussion of Russian sexuality would have little to distinguish itself from an analysis of Western sexuality. The sociobiologist’s faith in the primacy of the biological leads him or her to treat evidence from other cultures as nothing more than illustrative data (as in David M. Buss’ recent study, *The Evolution of Desire* [New York, 1994]). When we study Russian sexuality, we implicitly assume that we will find something different, something exotic, something Other. It is no accident that Groys develops his thesis about the Russian self-perception as the embodiment of the “Other” or the “Unconscious” in the context of Slavophile, and not Westernizing, philosophy. Perhaps some day Russian critics specializing in American or European cultural history will look back at our current fascination with Russian sexual discourse as a particularly Western “perversion”: not Slavophilism, but Slavophilia.