

Kirill Polkov

*Queering images of Russia
in Sweden: discursive
hegemony and counter-
hegemonic articulations
1991–2019*

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Kirill Polkov's dissertation presents a comprehensive analysis of the representation of Russian non-normative sexuality and queer subjectivity in Swedish discourses between 1991 and 2019. It draws upon various media sources from hegemonic and non-hegemonic cultural contexts, including 466 articles from the five largest Swedish daily newspapers, but also examples of popular music and DIY culture, such as locally and non-professionally organized parties.

Applying semiotic, textual, and visual discourse analysis with a queer sensibility, Polkov demonstrates that the image of Russia and "the Swedish self-image" are, in fact, co-constructed around issues of non-normative sexuality. The affective economies of Swedish discourses on Russia construct Russia as a temporal, spatial, and affective *Other* to LGBT rights, which in turn facilitates the formation of ideas about Swedish *sexual exceptionalism*.

By situating both Russian and Swedish LGBT politics within a historical context,

Polkov makes evident that the narratives surrounding the progress of Sweden, and the backwardness of Russia, are shaped by amnesia and oversimplifications. Swedish discourses do for example tend to omit the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the continued social norms around acceptable and unacceptable forms of sex and sexuality, and to negate the persisting discrimination against Muslim and Black individuals.

Situating the analysis within the epistemology of the sexual East/West divide, the thesis arrives at the intriguing conclusion that Swedish sexual exceptionalism diverges from the discourses of other Western nations in that it does not glorify individual martyrdom of gay victims of Russian homophobia. Anglophone discourses, for instance, have tended to focus almost exclusively on young, white, male victims of Russian anti-queer violence – portraying them as heroic symbols of Western values standing against Russian backwardness. This emphasis often overlooked the context behind their singular visibility and neglected the other queer lives, who, though less visible, face oppression through structural and more subtle forms of violence. In contrast, Swedish discourses did not take such a narrow focus.

Moreover, Polkov shows how Swedish hegemonic discourses are constructed around the same limited number of elements

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as Russian ones: family, community, nation, and the future. The big difference is, however, that the Russian hegemonic discourse employs these elements to perpetuate *heteronormativity*, while the Swedish counterpart support *homonormativity* and equate cases of violence – for example attacks of gay pride parades or homophobic physical violence against individuals and gay couples – with the innate and unchangeable homophobia of the Russian population. Thus, they construct the subject position of the Russian homophobe as the main danger to LGBT people and co-construct a *Swedish responsibility* for the protection of Russian queers. This confirms the Swedish national self-image as a beacon of progress and invests the nation with a special mission within LGBT development narratives to “save Russia”.

Polkov utilizes Sara Ahmed’s theory, developed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), to explain the affective qualities and meanings of Swedish and Russian LGBT discourses. Concerning the latter, he makes the important point that the desire not to be visible is not simply an individual desire of Russian LGBT people not to be “out and proud” but an expression of a political emotion that emerged in the specific geopolitical context of Russia. To further challenge the ideas of Swedish LGBT progress and of Russian backwardness, the dissertation analyses artistic works that represent Russian LGBT people in ways that offer alternative subject positions for Russian LGBT people, as well as alternative modes of recognition.

Based on Judith Butler’s reasoning in *Undoing Gender* (2004) that “othering” can be understood as a form of recognition,

Polkov analyses the aesthetic of the “non-provocative” in visual artist Karlsson Rixon’s work with Russian lesbian communities as a successful queer strategy that moves between visibility and invisibility, between lesbian representation and heterosexual passing, thereby creating a queer subject position, and queer community in the face of the hostile state. He situates this strategy by way of Alexei Yurchak’s writing in *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (2006). Yurchak coined the Soviet concept of “simultaneously”, which was developed to signify the relationship between Soviet citizens and the state as being both inside and outside of the official ideological structures. Simultaneously allows people to spatially and temporally live in and outside of state control and homophobia, reproducing the hegemonic discourse (on heteronormativity) publicly but subverting it by giving it new meanings, engaging with cultural, intellectual contents of a faraway (queer) elsewhere.

Polkov further connects visual representations situated between queer invisibility and visibility by referring to Heather Love’s seminal study *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007). He analyses “backward” feelings such as ambivalence, withdrawal, and alertness to the possibility of danger and contrasts them with Swedish hegemonic progress narratives that focus on love and pride. Thus, he contests the simplistic affective economy of Western visibility politics and emphasizes the complexity of Russian LGBT experiences.

The thesis contributes to the scientific fields of Gender Studies, Slavic and Media

Studies, as well as debates about queer visibility and recognition, nation-building, Western homonationalism, and Swedish national exceptionalism. It broadens the corpus of literature on Swedish homonationalism, which previously concentrated primarily on forms of Muslim and African Othering. One particularly interesting aspect of the thesis is how it applies post- or decolonial theory to Western LGBT rights and, more precisely, to Swedish discourses and their imagination of Russia. It positions Russia, by referring to Madina Tlostanova and others, as influenced by Western (neo)colonialism and as a colonial agent itself. While this localization is commendable, the full implications of this “Janus-faced” or dual colonized/colonizer status of Russia seem to remain unaddressed in the thesis.

Although the thesis carefully analyses how newspapers, pop music, art and DIY culture position Russia as the colonized, it mostly loses sight of how the same media outlets address, affirm or contradict Russian colonial imperialism. This issue becomes particularly problematic within the discussions of the racialization of white/Slavic Russians. Addressing the specific racialization of Russians in Sweden with Anka Parvulescu’s concept of “not-quite-white” obviates Russian imperialist white supremacy. This application risks overlooking

the fact that white Christian Orthodoxy is progressively assuming a central role in the conceptualization of Russianness at the national and international levels, and how this influences the perception and self-perception of Russian immigrants in Western Europe.

Polkov’s last chapter on counter-hegemonic DIY culture gestures towards a critical discussion of how Western discourses on Russia perpetuate or challenge Russian imperialism that negates the cultural sovereignty of non-Russian post-Soviet nations, cultures, and minorities. He examines the counter-cultural practice of engaging with ethnic markers of difference drawn from the colonized peripheries of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, such as elements of Ukrainian folklore or traditional Kazakh dress. Although the potential and intricacy of such cultural practices, and how they might effectively address Russian imperialist violence, leave room for a more rigorous analysis, this final chapter successfully points toward how these practices foster hybrid spaces of post-Soviet solidarity.

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