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Elena Gapova's recently published collection of essays, entitled *Classes of Nations: A Feminist Critique of Nation-Building*, is an engaging attempt to bring together a variety of practical inquiries and theoretical reflections, thematically associated with the post-Soviet geographical area (specifically Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine) and enunciated from a feminist perspective.

The essays in the volume offer a large historical panorama, extending from the controversies of the initial postrevolutionary years to the most important political debates and scandals animating the Russian-speaking world in the twenty-first century. With a palpable sense of historical continuity, Gapova analyzes the direct political consequences of the differences in treatment of the “woman question” in Soviet and Western (non-Soviet) Belarus at the end of the nineteenth century, while keeping in mind the later, post-Soviet reformulations of this question, such as the role of gender in the national narratives of the post-Soviet states or the symbolism of sexualized bodies in both pro-Putin authoritarian rhetoric and the anti-Putin liberal forms of political resistance (e.g., the analysis of the Pussy Riot scandal).

The essays, engaging with archival and literary materials, offer a valuable historical resource and will be of major interest for historians and historical anthropologists of the region—considering, for instance, a unique account of the life and death of Poluta Bodunova, a forgotten Belorussian socialist-revolutionary, or a reflection on the “affective politics” of suffering Soviet subjects, as described by Nobel-prize-winning author Svetlana Alexievich. Yet, despite the heterogeneity of Gapova's research themes, my review will focus on the analytical matrix, underlying the author's theoretical outline, that she uses to explore the post-Soviet present.

Before starting this exercise, one thing is important to mention—and it sets Gapova's work advantageously apart from a range of post-Soviet scholars: her work in general is based on a thoughtful reflection about her personal encounters (which in critical humanities and specifically in anthropology is often referred to as “positionality” [England 1994; Rose 1997]) within the field of Soviet and post-Soviet gender that she is studying. Gapova describes her initial perspective as that of a “well-educated Soviet wom[a]n,” one whose first intellectual steps were realized within the Soviet academy during the so-called “pre-gender times,” yet she was among those who in the 1990s enthusiastically engaged with the completely new spectrum of interpretations associated with this new analytical tool, and that also happened to be

liberating at a personal level. “Gender” was thus a kind of a magic word, a symbol of Western-oriented development for post-Soviet academia, a word associated with greater academic and therefore social mobility, intellectual freedom, and a range of liberal values—in other words, the promise of the new era.

The first line that Gapova follows through several essays is thus intrinsically connected to the author’s own position. Retrospectively, she reflects upon the role of “gender”—in quotation marks, because perceived not as an analytical category but as an *imported object*, bearing an agency powerful enough to condition the creation of a whole field of academic feminist thought in the post-Soviet region. Gapova asks, to what extent is this field, referring to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988), conditioned by the categories invented in a different intellectual tradition and in a different sociopolitical context and in different times? Clearly, she thinks this conditionality is extensive. She further asks, how did this fact, alongside the embeddedness of the new knowledge in the transformative historical and economic processes in the region, influence the genesis of the field in general?

The second line of inquiry, which, as is apparent from the title, happens to be central for the author, concerns the roles of “class” and “nation” in a process of nation-building in post-Soviet successor states. To be more precise, Gapova is particularly attentive to the role played by intellectuals in this process (the majority of her ethnographic examples deal with highly-educated Soviet groups) and seeks to elucidate how those people who were on the forefront of the promotion of democratic ideas in the 1980s ended up contributing to the dramatically unequal redistribution of capital in the new states in the 1990s. During the first years of the post-Soviet transformations, Gapova alleges, national intellectual elites tended to produce and/or spread uncritically pronationalist discourses (discourses that in many cases reaffirmed traditional gender roles). Very often such discourses served as a “noble lie,” disguising the rapid social restratification—even if in this cruel game the intellectuals were most likely to find themselves on the loser’s side.

Far from refuting this paradox—which is still oppressively experienced by intellectuals in the post-Soviet region—in my opinion Gapova’s latter affirmation might be too vast a generalization. Yet it tackles a set of important questions too rarely raised in the field of post-Soviet studies and not so easily answerable using the framework of the sociology/anthropology of intellectuals, at least as it is developed in global academia. Today, after 25 years of post-Soviet transformative processes, can one speak about post-Soviet intellectuals as a class in itself? If so, how can one define its position in the general class hierarchy? If not, to which class can this group be referred? Or alternatively: in which sociohistorical contexts do intellectuals tend to act as a class? And ultimately: is class a relevant category to theorize the role of intellectuals in the post-Soviet context?

Whereas Gapova’s answer to the last question is unequivocally affirmative, her vision of the first one seems to vary greatly depending on her case studies.

The classical sociology of intellectuals has adopted three fundamentally distinct approaches to its definition: the “new class” theorists, which may include Pierre Bourdieu, treated intellectuals as having interests that distinguish them from other

groups in society—as potentially a class-in-themselves. By contrast, the Gramscian and Foucauldian tradition treated intellectuals as primarily class bound, that is, as representatives of their group of origin. Karl Mannheim, Edward Shils, and Randall Collins saw intellectuals as relatively class-less and therefore able to transcend their group of origin to pursue their “ideals” (Kurzman and Owens 2002).

At first glance, Gapova’s modeling of the role of intellectuals in the recent process of class formation and nation-building seems closer to the one outlined by left-wing thinkers at the beginning of the twentieth century. The reason she gives for why intellectuals enthusiastically embraced nationalist discourse is their profound “social anxiety”—in the context of the loss of privileges provided to well-educated groups in the USSR, they tended to ally with a more prestigious class: namely, the nascent post-Soviet bourgeoisie. To put it very roughly, in this context they acted once again as “capital’s lackeys,” to use a well-known formulation of Vladimir Lenin.

In the essay entitled “National Knowledge and International Acknowledgement: A Fight for Symbolic Markets in Post-Soviet Academia,” Gapova provides a much more elaborate model of the functioning of the Russian intellectual sphere. Its main motor is the imperative to elaborate new capitalization strategies in order to compensate for the deficiency of symbolic capital under new social conditions. The structure sheds light on an obvious paradox of the post-Soviet academic sphere. It is, Gapova argues, built on a dichotomy between the persistence of well-established Soviet foundations under new national academic institutions, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the urge for legitimation of post-Soviet (specifically Russian) knowledge production within the larger framework of global/Western academia. In this context, the older or more conservative cohort can rely on existing Soviet academic infrastructure—including faculties, journals, committees, and so forth—or can create new alliances with power at the national level; the younger or more progressive intellectuals can test out new forms of capitalization, placing their bets on a globalizing academic profession and the unquestioned prestige associated with any form of international career “back home.”

This well-articulated rupture Gapova defines in terms of a “class struggle” (in quotation marks in the essay), which, if we follow the lines of the new class theory, appears to be more of an intraclass struggle for preeminence, or mere “competition within the field” as Bourdieu (2016) would put it. And yet, according to Gapova, this two-fold structure prevents the formation of an “autonomous class” of intellectuals and experts in the post-Soviet region, lowering their social status.

This vision of the intellectuals, who aspire but fail to affirm their class autonomy, seems to contradict the understanding of their role in the Pussy Riot controversy as described by Gapova. In her essay “Class-y Pussy Riots,” Gapova adopts the category of the so-called urban “creative middle class” (favorable to liberal values), as opposed to the “deprived masses” of the Russian provinces (who express allegiance to traditional values); the scandal around Pussy Riot’s incarceration was thus revelatory of a deep polarization between the two classes, which Gapova explains using Nancy Fraser’s antagonistic paradigms of (group and identity) recognition and economic redistribution (Fraser and Honneth 2003).

In order to present her essay as a part of an ongoing debate among scholars of the post-Soviet, it may be interesting to convey here a comprehensive overview of the “Russian middle class” category and its critique, as recently articulated by Mischa Gabowitsch in his latest book *Protest in Putin’s Russia*. Relying on empirical work among participants in the anti-Putin protests of 2011–2012 by Alexander Bikbov (2012), Artemy Magun (2014), and Gabowitsch himself, he notes that “many ... felt pressured by media discourse to adopt the middle-class label, but admitted that they had at best a vague idea of what it might mean” (Gabowitsch 2016:27). Others, as Magun puts it, did accept the middle-class label, yet accompanied their self-identification with a disclaimer: “I belong to the middle class, but it does not exist” (Magun 2014, quoted in Gabowitsch 2016:29).

Whereas one could give a retort to this latter argument with the lapidary phrase of Roland Barthes—“bourgeoisie is a class that never calls itself by its name” (Barthes and Marty 1996:338)—the further elaboration provided by Gabowitsch later in his book is worth attention. “The middle-class thesis,” Gabowitsch argues, writing against it, “essentially fits into a discourse about almost hermetically distant ‘different Russias’ that the Kremlin took up with gusto in its portrayals of the protests” (2016:29). In other words, the Pussy Riot trial was less revelatory of an existing structural split in society around such an unexpected cocktail of values as feminism, punk rock, and Orthodoxy than it was “structure-forming” and thereby contributing to the production of a reality playing to the hands of Vladimir Putin’s administration (Gabowitsch 2016).

These multiple shifts in the understanding of the class-belonging of post-Soviet intellectuals—along with the extensive use of quotation marks surrounding the term “class” in Gapova’s writing—provide all the evidence to presuppose that perhaps theorizing about post-Soviet intellectuals as an ensemble does not fit into and thus does not elicit any of the classical class-centered definitions. It is probably time to move away from this matrix, as Gil Eyal (whose work on Eastern European intellectuals [Eyal, Szelényi, and Townsley 1998; Eyal 2003] Gapova cites more than once) and Larissa Buchholz claim in their recent article, exploring instead a plural model of “public interactions,” “intellectual markets,” and “fields,” or developing an alternative one, disentangling the complicated national and transnational trajectories of the post-Soviet “intelligentsia,” that by its very definition appears to be “rootless” (Eyal and Buchholz 2010).

In the last phrases of her foreword, Gapova links the spread of feminist ideas and the feminist movement in Russia with the formation of a so-called middle class, as was (arguably) the case in liberal democracies after the Second World War—overlooking, quite ironically in the context, the formative role of the cohort of intellectuals to which she belonged and also the knowledge they were producing, precisely while she and her cohort were transposing/translating it from foreign languages. It is also true, though, that Gapova never leaves unacknowledged the generational aspects of her work. To some extent, she belongs to the first generation of post-Soviet feminists, whereas I can categorize myself as belonging to the second. To put it differently, from my personal perspective, it is already an accomplished fact that the vast cultural production associated with the “gender turn” in post-Soviet humanities

was formative for a generation of academics but also for activists who acquired the Western and post-Soviet versions *simultaneously*, without differentiating the initial theme from its local variations. We are the ones, in other words, who never experienced “pre-gender times.”

On a final note, which also happens to be deeply personal, I would like to recall the first time I saw the word “gender.” Bored of staring at the poorly painted portrait of Taras Shevchenko (whose face, decorated with thick mustache, had, several years before, replaced the bold head of Lenin on the classroom wall), my best friend and I decided to stretch our hands and to explore the contents of the bookshelf that read “Newly published books.” From it, I extracted an unpretentious brownish volume entitled enigmatically *The Second Sex* that had just been published by Osnovy, a Kyiv-based Ukrainian-speaking publishing house. It was 1996, and I was then 12 and she 13—and already an “out” lesbian—as we would put it today. In the foreword that we read together, right after wolfing down Simone de Beauvoir’s classic while struggling with the sophisticated Ukrainian, intensified by a thick academic style, the term “gender” and “feminism,” then understood only partially, appeared several times. Starting from this first collective reading—that for me, a fluent French-speaker, nevertheless happened in Ukrainian—we already considered ourselves “feminists.” Or just feminists—without quotation marks.

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