

# **Apolitical Politics - International Gay Rights at the Sochi 2014 Olympics**

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## Abstract

The 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi have been dubbed the “gay Olympics” due to the wide debate over gay rights that surrounded the event. By exploring the channels of political expression used during a proclaimed non-political event such as the Olympics, certain dominant contemporary conceptions of the separation between public and private can be brought to light. Russia’s adoption of increasingly illiberal social policies will be put within the wider context of the country’s relationship to the West. With global hierarchies in mind, the potential of gay rights to pose resistance will be explored from the perspective of neoliberal governmentality.

*Keywords: governmentality, resistance, post-colonial*

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# Introduction

Branding Sochi as the “Gay Olympics” *The Atlantic* suggested that the event may be “the most geopolitically charged Games since the Soviet-boycotted 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles”.<sup>1</sup> Although the premise may be somewhat exaggerated, the enthusiasm has merit. On the backdrop of Russia’s recent “gay propaganda” law, the issue of gay rights has colored a number of decisions surrounding the preparations for the Olympic games. LGBT activists around the world grasped at the opportunity to bring their cause to light, organizing protests and calling for boycotts.<sup>2</sup> Olympic sponsors such as AT&T and Google issued direct and indirect statements of support.<sup>3</sup> Accentuating the importance of “diversity”, U.S. President Barack Obama chose to send a “strong message” by including three openly gay athletes in the Olympic delegation while not attending himself.<sup>4</sup> Both French President Francois Hollande and Germany’s President Joachim Gauck also pointedly skipped the games.<sup>5</sup> In the meantime, Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to assure the international community that gay visitors of Sochi had nothing to worry about as long as they left “the children alone”.<sup>6</sup> Despite the proclaimed apolitical nature of the Olympics, Sochi 2014 was characterized by overt and covert politicization and active debate. As with the Beijing Summer Olympics of 2008, the 2014 Olympics provided an opportunity to criticize

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<sup>1</sup> Friedman, Uri. “How Sochi Became the Gay Olympics”, *The Atlantic*, Jan 28, 2014. Web <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/01/how-sochi-became-the-gay-olympics/283398/> (accessed May 4, 2014)

<sup>2</sup> Henningsen, Patrick. “Strange Color Revolution: More ‘Gay Protests’ at Russia’s Sochi Olympics”. Global Research, Feb 13, 2014 <http://www.globalresearch.ca/strange-color-revolution-more-gay-protests-at-russias-sochi-olympics/5368595> (accessed May 2, 2014)

<sup>3</sup> Socarides, Richard. “Gay Rights at Sochi, Round One”, *The New Yorker*, Feb 10, 2014 <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/currency/2014/02/gay-rights-at-sochi-round-one.html> (accessed May 4, 2014)

<sup>4</sup> Boren, Cindy. “Obama names openly gay athletes to Sochi Olympic delegation”. *The Washington Post*, Dec 18, 2013. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/early-lead/wp/2013/12/18/obama-names-openly-gay-athletes-to-sochi-olympic-delegation/> (accessed May 2, 2014)

<sup>5</sup> Morgenstein, Mark. “French President Francois Hollande to skip Sochi Olympics”. *CNN*, Dec 15, 2013 Web <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/12/15/world/europe/france-sochi-olympics/> (accessed May 2, 2014 )

<sup>6</sup> Walker, Shaun. “Vladimir Putin: gay people at Winter Olympics must ‘leave children alone’”. *The Guardian*, Jan 17, 2014 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/17/vladimir-putin-gay-winter-olympics-children> (accessed May 2, 2014)

the non-Western host country in many respects, ranging from corruption to security.<sup>7</sup> Yet, a notable addition was the discourse on gay rights, which may prove indicative of a greater divide between East and West that goes beyond both international gay rights and Olympic politics.

As a regular international event, the Olympics are a particularly rich environment for exploring the status quo political climate and the current dynamics of national identity construction. As one of the oldest modern international institutions, the Olympic Games have been the stage for the expression of numerous political concerns ever since their initial revival in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some notable examples include the Soviet boycott of the 1952 Summer Olympics and the Black Power Salute by two medal winners at the 1968 Summer Olympics. In a more recent example, Iranian judo champion created controversy by avoiding competing against an Israeli in the 2004 Athens Olympics, for which he was pointedly awarded a prize by the Iranian government.<sup>8</sup> Such events demonstrate how the Olympics can provide a platform for the expression of political views. More importantly, this also hints at the importance of the very format of the games in limiting the manner in which these views can be expressed. Groups, states and individuals search for more indirect channels to communicating their messages, relying heavily on symbolic gestures rather than direct statements.

The apolitical official philosophy of the IOC occupies a delicate middle ground, drawing criticism for identifying as “a force for world peace and egalitarianism when it suits Olympic industry purposes, while presenting itself as a mere bystander at other times”.<sup>9</sup> Hosting the Games is considered a great honor for a country and plays into the international

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<sup>7</sup> Chowdhury, Safiah. “Why did the Sochi Olympics draw so much criticism?”. *Aljazeera*, Feb 22, 2014 <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/02/why-did-sochi-olympics-draw-so-2014221101422651375.html> (accessed May 4, 2014)

<sup>8</sup> Whitlock, Craig. “Judoka Praised by Iranian Government”, *Washington Post*, Aug 17, 2004 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A6582-2004Aug16.html> (accessed May 6, 2014)

<sup>9</sup> Lenskyj, Helen Jefferson. *Sexual Diversity and the Sochi 2014 Olympics: No More Rainbows*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2014, 43



climate. Much skepticism was directed at Putin being granted the Winter Games for reasons of human rights violations in the country and concerns about corruption. Yet, the head of the Coordination Committee avoided this politicized conversation, admitting that “I don’t recall an Olympics without corruption”.<sup>10</sup> The interplay between what is considered apolitical and what is expelled to the world of politics is particularly relevant with the global spread of neoliberalism and the challenge it poses to the nation state. The various philosophies and cultural models accompanying capitalist transformation place an emphasis on the importance of maintaining the sanctity of the private sphere. Paradoxically this phenomenon has been theorized as leaving nothing about human life private or free of politics. As “citizenship is measured increasingly by the capacity to transact and consume”, anthropologists Comaroff and Comaroff claim, “the personal is the only politics there is”.<sup>11</sup> The channels available for political discourse within the framework of an event such as the Olympics promise to expose the manner in which the political and the non-political intersect.

LGBT rights are a relatively new addition to the international discourse on human rights. As with feminist projects before them, gay rights occupy a difficult position within the universalism/particularism debate underlying human rights promotion. Contemporary concepts of homosexuality are embedded within the genealogy of Western societal development and do not always find an easy fit in other contexts. Additionally, on the backdrop of colonial history, identities associated with the West can inspire deeply-seated cultural power struggles that go beyond human rights. The ambiguous role that concepts of “culture” and “tradition” play in the case of international gay activism have been explored at length in the Arab world. Official reports often refer to “culture as barrier to progress”.<sup>12</sup> Thereby, “culture” is invoked as an essentialist concept that constructs an unchanging,

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<sup>10</sup> Lensy, 44

<sup>11</sup> Comaroff, Jean & Comaroff John L. “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming”. In *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*. Ed. Comaroff, Jean & Comaroff John L. Duke University Press, Durham & London, 15

<sup>12</sup> Merry, Sally Eagle. “Human Rights Law and the Demonization of Culture”, *Polar: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 26, 1 (2003), 11

coherent Other, which, in turn, supports imperialist relations.<sup>13</sup> From this culture argument follows the objectification of local practices *as* “culture”.<sup>14</sup> Populations become defined as uniform and “to be acted on from above”.<sup>15</sup> As these Western orientalist dichotomies are imported and politicized, they support not only the disappearance of local diversity but also emergence of new, anti-Western nationalisms.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the conservatism and defensive authoritarianism associated with non-Western regions is often a by-product of the introduction of Western thought. Criticism has been raised against the manner in which gay rights activism can, in fact, create a heterosexual world “fixed by a Western binary,” which “invents” homosexuality as an identity.<sup>17</sup> Such processes have shown to polarize political environments as a result of “the sociopolitical identification of [homosexual] practices with the Western identity of gayness”.<sup>18</sup> This places homosexuality on the political agenda, pushing the drive for empowerment by sexual minorities to become lost under the pressure of contested national identities.

The post-Soviet space remains somewhat under-theorized in terms of local understandings of gay rights and further research in this field promises to bring to light new issues. Eastern Europe has had a closer connection to Western intellectual traditions and, therefore, can be expected to make more use of Western concepts and binaries. Therefore, the manner in which the gay rights discourse defines itself and resonates with the population may reveal subtle differences of assumptions and world views that are specific for the region. The Russian case is particularly interesting, considering that Putin’s “managerial democracy” has been characterized as technocratic and seemingly non-ideological.<sup>19</sup> Within this context, the

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<sup>13</sup> Merry, 17

<sup>14</sup> Wright, Susan, “The Politicization of ‘Culture’”, *Anthropology Today*, 14, 1 (Feb 1998), 14

<sup>15</sup> Wright, 12

<sup>16</sup> Merry, 22

<sup>17</sup> Massad, Joseph Andoni. “Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World”, *Public Culture*, 14, 2 (Spring 2002), 384

<sup>18</sup> Massad, 382

<sup>19</sup> Prozorov, Sergei. “Russian postcommunism and the end of history”. *Studies in East European Thought*, 60, 3 (Sept 2008), 211

emergence of gay rights as a point of conflict with the West raises questions about international discourses of power and differentiation that are neither religious nor ideological in the conventional sense. For this, it is important to carefully examine the meanings ascribed to sexuality, difference, individuality and ethics on both the western side and in the debate within Russia.

Homosexuality was decriminalized in Russia during the reforms of the 1990s as a result of wide mobilization of sexual minorities and subcultures. Nevertheless, gendered social norms and emerging conservative tendencies among the population have led to a reconsideration of these efforts. The most notable development in this regard was the passing of a law in June 2013 penalizing “gay propaganda” to minors. Opinion polls demonstrate that the majority of the Russian population opposes the normalization of homosexuality and supports the law.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, additional issues related to the manner in which sexuality is acceptably expressed add to the difficulty of promoting LGBT rights in Russia. For example, the western LGBT cultural staple of publicly “coming out” acquires different connotations in a post-Soviet context where the public sphere is generally viewed with mistrust.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, sexual minorities in Russia have shown a tendency to conflate their cause with a wider set of issues promoting democracy. Local gay activists, while more numerous and visible in recent years, have sparked a polarized public debate colored not only by religious/conservative opposition but also by fear of western “conspiracy”.<sup>22</sup> Thus, homosexuality has become framed as something foreign. This taps into Russia’s long historical relationship with “the West” as an abstract Other.

Post-Soviet Russia has experienced a revival of pre-revolutionary philosophies of the country’s relationship with Western civilization. The theories vary, range from optimistic

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<sup>20</sup> Reilly, Kelly. “Russia’s anti-gay laws in line with public’s views on homosexuality”. *Pew Research Center*, Aug 5, 2013 <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/08/05/russias-anti-gay-laws-in-line-with-publics-views-on-homosexuality/> (accessed May 6, 2014)

<sup>21</sup> Lenskyj, 9

<sup>22</sup> Lenskyi, 41

embracement of Western modes of life and ideologies to the rejection of all things Western as morally corrupt. An interesting middle ground is the spectrum of “special path” theories, which construct “European-ness” as something Russian but also carry a critical look at the values embodied by the West. Putin’s “neo-revisionist” foreign policy presents an example of such an approach, whereby Russian actions are intended “not to repudiate the existing order but to make it more inclusive and universal”.<sup>23</sup> Much emphasis is placed on sovereignty within Russia’s sought-after role as “co-shaper of the international order”.<sup>24</sup> Thus, Russia’s ambitions are not necessarily anti-Western, but the position is critical and aimed at adjusting certain basic international relationships. By stressing sovereignty and difference vis-à-vis the West, Putin is attempting to adjust the discourse of globalization and neoliberalism rather than challenge it.

The Russian narratives surrounding the Olympics were often focused on various concerns of sovereignty, ranging from patriotic to securitizing.<sup>25</sup> Russia needing to share sovereignty with the institution of the IOC provided a framework within which a new global structure involving Russia could be negotiated. Putin institutionalized “rule by and through exceptions” by “abrogating certain laws before and during the Olympics”,<sup>26</sup> one example of many being his assurance that international visitors of Sochi need not worry about falling victim to the “gay propaganda” law, which is equivalent with the president choosing to implement the law arbitrarily. This free exercise of sovereignty, arguably, works not only towards maintaining a state of exception but also challenges the unquestionability of law and order and, consequently, the international status quo. The manner in which the idea of gay rights figures in this process is quite interesting. When defending Russia’s “gay propaganda” law at the state of the nation address, Putin accused the West of propagating a “genderless and

<sup>23</sup> Sakwa, Richard, „The problem of ‘the international’ in Russian identity formation“. *International Politics*, 49, 4 (2012), 453

<sup>24</sup> Sakwa, 456

<sup>25</sup> Gronskaya, Natalia & Makarychev, Andrey, “The 2014 Sochi Olympics and ‘Sovereign Power’,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, 61, 1, (Jan–Feb 2014), 43.

<sup>26</sup> Gronskay et al., 42

impotent liberalism” that erases the difference between “good and evil”.<sup>27</sup> A significant parallel is visible here between Putin’s frequent defense of sovereignty and his defense of difference between gender roles. Interestingly enough, the issue of gay rights also came into use when defining Western influence during the early stages of the conflict in Kiev. When Kiev was considering signing an agreement with the EU in the winter of 2013, billboards were placed around town warning citizens that closer relations to the EU would entail the legalization of gay marriage.<sup>28</sup>

In this regard, the choice of gay rights violations in Russia as a prominent point of international criticism is indicative of a somewhat different international conflict. By focusing on the events leading up to and during the Sochi Olympics, this research will attempt to explore the negotiation of East-West identities through the language of human rights, and gay rights specifically. The implicit conceptual framework employed by Western activists and politicians when criticizing Russian treatment of homosexuality will be compared with the Russian reaction. Mostly, focus will remain on officially issued statements and quotes by representative actors of the main positions, be they politicians or activists. Considering the indirect manner in which political messages are expressed at the Olympics, official sources are not likely present a complete picture. Alongside the official rhetoric, attention will be paid to aesthetic decisions and unofficial activity. For the purpose of capturing the discourse surrounding the event, the primary sources will consist primarily of news coverage in the Western and Russian media. News coverage frames stories within particular discourses aimed at a pre-defined audience. Thus, the more successfully communicated, culturally attuned messages are more likely to make it to the news and enforce the discourse. Additionally, the mutual accusations about the distortion of truth by journalists on both sides of the debate offer

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<sup>27</sup> Whitmore, Brian. “Vladimir Putin, Conservative Icon”. *The Atlantic*, Dec 20, 2013  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/12/vladimir-putin-conservative-icon/282572/> (accessed May 7, 2014)

<sup>28</sup> Whitmore, *The Atlantic*

plentiful data not only on the discourse itself, but also on the discourse of the discourse itself. Keeping in mind the fluidity of identities, the constant negotiation of truth a meta level is particularly telling. Consequently, these concepts will be related to the wider challenges of national identity construction in a globalizing world. The use of a non-political discursive platform for the negotiation of political world views will be explored as illustrative of neoliberalism and post-socialism as a global condition.

## Chapter 1. Russia and the West

Russia's ever-recurring presence in the Western discourse as diplomatically „awkward“<sup>29</sup>, “unreasonable in a reasonable way”<sup>30</sup> and “living in a different world”<sup>31</sup> hints at the country's particularly difficult relationship with Europe that goes beyond realpolitik. Such at times patronizing depictions of a Russia as “not living up to the norm”<sup>32</sup> raise the question of how Russia has come to be so harshly judged against Western standards. Despite numerous attempts aimed at asserting Russian great power status on the international stage - ranging from Peter the Great's reforms to the Cold War to Putin's presidency - the country's identity remains deeply coupled to developments in the West. This relationship is part of a long historical debate within Russian intellectual and political circles and can be found at the center of most branches of Russian political philosophy, be these of the liberal, Eurasianist, socialist or romantic-nationalist type.<sup>33</sup> Russia has adopted political models over the centuries that reflect its continuous self-definition against the West. Although often inspired by intellectual developments in Western societies, Russian political history proves to be simultaneously at odds with current international trends. As Iver Neumann summarizes, “The Russian state spent the eighteenth century copying contemporary European models, the nineteenth century representing the Europe of the *anciens régimes*, which the rest of Europe had abandoned, and the twentieth century representing a European socialist model which most of the rest of Europe never chose to implement”.<sup>34</sup> While such a mapping of Russian history may appear to capture simply an anachronistic attempt at catching up with events at the

<sup>29</sup> Neumann, Iver B., “Russia as a great power, 1815-2007”. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 11 (2008), 139

<sup>30</sup> “Russia: Mr. Putin's forked tongue,” *The Guardian*, Editorial, Dec. 19, 2013 <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/19/russia-putin-forked-tongue> (accessed May 6, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> Paterson, Tony. “Ukraine crisis: Angry Angela Merkel questions whether Putin is 'in touch with reality'”. *Telegraph*, March 3, 2014 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/ukraine/10673235/Ukraine-crisis-Angry-Angela-Merkel-questions-whether-Putin-is-in-touch-with-reality.html> (accessed May 25, 2014)

<sup>32</sup> Neumann 2008, 139

<sup>33</sup> Neumann, Iver B. *Russia and the Idea of Europe: a study in identity and international relations*, Routledge, New York, 1996, 194

<sup>34</sup> Neumann 1996, 1

hegemonic center, a more interesting element is the simultaneous presence of resistance to the West that accompanies Russian politics. This is a resistance that is based not only on an external constitutive Other, but also finds an internal Other, either in the form of a morally corrupt Western colonizer or a barbaric simpleton that is unable to modernize. Russia re-emerges as a mad man, an “out-of-place Tatar dressed as a Frenchman”<sup>35</sup> or, in the words of Catherine the Great herself, as “the raven in the fable, which adorned itself with the feathers of the peacock”.<sup>36</sup> The themes of pretense and transformation prop up both in outsider reports and among the Russians themselves. The ambiguity, unresolved, appears to have entered the Russian consciousness as a point of identification. Similar to the popular image of Peter the Great, Russian national identity cannot seem to settle on one end of the binary (being neither Asiatic or European, neither holy nor modern) and must somehow remain an undefined, distinctly Russian were-creature.<sup>37</sup>

### ***1.1. Russia as the Newcomer to the European Order***

For a better understanding of Russia’s role as Europe’s constitutive Other, it is useful to contemplate the nature of the European political order. What characterizes the organization of European states and what role would an newcomer take on? Consequently, which type of political understandings would hinder an outsider from attaining inclusion within such an order? Russia’s diplomatic “awkwardness”, which according to scholars such as Iver Neumann and Vincent Pouliot persists to this day, is the result of clashing understandings of the “rules of the game” between Russia and European powers<sup>38</sup>. Russian definition of international relations through the need to emerge “on top” can be traced back to the political

<sup>35</sup> Tlostanova, Madina, “Postsocialist ≠ postcolonial? On post-Soviet imaginary and global coloniality” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 48, 2 (2012), 135

<sup>36</sup> Neumann 1996, 12

<sup>37</sup> Riasanovsky, Nicholas V. *The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1985, 213

<sup>38</sup> Neumann, Iver B. & Pouliot, “Untimely Russia: Hysteresis in Russian-Western Relations over the Past Millennium”. *Security Studies*, 20,1 (2011), 105-137



rationalities Rus' inherited from its experience under the Tatar-Mongol Yoke.<sup>39</sup> According to this historical analysis, "Moskovy was emerging from a suzerain system, and the narrative sociability that kicked in once the question of entering a new suzerain system emerged, was to avoid a subaltern position".<sup>40</sup> Russia's consequent prioritization of centralized decision making and secrecy supported clashes of habitus with Western diplomats that were difficult to reconcile.<sup>41</sup>

Russian incompatibility with Western political models takes on more specific forms in the wake of Enlightenment and consequent flourishing of quantitative modernity. Neumann states that the European view "held that Asian mode of production was static, suspended in time. One will also recall that Western modernity tended to think of having a history not only as having writing, but more specifically as having a state".<sup>42</sup> This is an important point that he develops further in a different study on the role of governance as conceptualized by Michel Foucault.<sup>43</sup> The "rationality of government changed in Europe following the emergence of a (new type of) society from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward", which accentuated the "imperative that the state should always ask how it may rule less"<sup>44</sup>. Thus, the lack of a good "police state" and of "normality" was interpreted as a sign of retarded development.<sup>45</sup> Considering the increasing interdependence of European states, the participation of a deviant regime type would appear particularly threatening to the functioning of the order of states. Thus, the rise of governmentality altered not only the nature of sovereign power, but also cemented international hierarchies and redefined the role of peripheral states.

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<sup>39</sup> "Entry into international society reconceptualised: the case of Russia". *Review of International Studies*, 37 (Aug 2011), 463-484

<sup>40</sup> Neumann 2011, 482

<sup>41</sup> Neuman & Poilot 2011, 121

<sup>42</sup> Neumann 2011, 468

<sup>43</sup> Neumann, Iver B. "Russia as a great power, 1815-2007". *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 11 (2008), 5

<sup>44</sup> Neumann 2008, 5

<sup>45</sup> Neumann 2008, 8

Iver Neumann points out that “European international society was, from the very start, dependent on having internal and external Others in relation to which it could self-define”.<sup>46</sup> Russia’s social structures triggered associations of a totalitarian past European powers had struggled to leave behind. As a proper Other, Russia embodied models that were both familiar and different to the European eye. By attempting to use the language of Western statehood, Russia only enforced the perception of the region as underdeveloped, somewhere behind on a developmental path defined by Western modernization. Neumann continues to observe that “one factor that perpetuates the inner ‘circle/outer circle’ or core and outer tier quality of international society is indeed the existence of newcomers. That said, in principle there is no guarantee that a newcomer will *ever* leave the outer circle”.<sup>47</sup> This implies that Russia’s marginal position in relation to Europe is inherent in the nature of a Euro-centric international system, supported by an interwoven matrix of power relations and mechanisms of self-definition.

### ***1.2. The Subaltern Empire***

Richard Sakwa argues that Russia’s seemingly awkward actions are in fact a reflection of “different modes of integration into the international system, which is itself deeply contradictory”.<sup>48</sup> While structurally, elements of the Cold War order persist and continue to exclude Russia, on other levels Russia is fully admitted as major international player on par with Western powers. This confusing state of affairs continues to position Russia both close enough to the center to allow claims of participation, but also leaves the area marginalized as an actor to whom the rules never fully apply. Russia’s reliance on Western liberal language when pushing an anti-Western agenda, remains, in many ways, consistent with the country’s self-colonizing history of trying to “out-west the west” and by claiming to represent the “true

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<sup>46</sup> Neumann 2011,456

<sup>47</sup> Neumann 2011, 471

<sup>48</sup> Sakwa, Richard, „The problem of ‚the international‘ in Russian identity formation“. *International Politics*, 49, 4 (2012),450

Europe”.<sup>49</sup> The Western language of liberalism developed within a different geopolitical space, often at the cost of Russian exclusion. By adopting western norms and values, Russian elites create a rift between the history of the Russian people and the institutions aimed at governing these people. Indeed, what may appear at first as a quest to emancipate the concept of democracy and universalism from Western determination is in fact a re-enforcement of this domination. Sakwa concludes that Russia’s foreign policy is not so much revisionist as much as a form of “neo-revisionism”, characterized by the intent “not to repudiate the existing order but to make it more inclusive and universal”.<sup>50</sup> Thereby Russia is intent on becoming a “co-shaper of the international order”.<sup>51</sup> Making the international order truly inclusive would entail changing some of the principles that define it, which includes challenging the assumptions of liberal universalism and the type of political actor that it privileges. Nevertheless, it appears that being “recognized first and foremost by the West...would be enough to satisfy Russia’s geopolitical ambitions”.<sup>52</sup> And so, the situation becomes less promising when the potential new co-shaper is already embedded within the existing discourse and can only work towards re-enforcing the values that have brought about its subjugation.

Recent scholarly attempts to apply post-colonial theory to post-Soviet realities have been able to shed light on the manner in which such discursive power networks function. Although post-coloniality is more intuitively applicable to the colonies of the USSR as opposed to its center of power, exploring Russian politics from this angle reveals a new dimension to the reproduction of post-colonial power relations. Russia’s historical development between the European center of “civilization” and the “orientalized periphery” create a contradictory process whereby it is “both an object of colonization and a colonizing

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<sup>49</sup> Tlostanova 2012,135

<sup>50</sup> Sakwa, 453

<sup>51</sup> Sakwa, 456

<sup>52</sup> Morozov 2013, 23

subject.<sup>53</sup> Interestingly enough, the concept of being colonized was developed overtly among Russia's intellectual elites and implicated in political movements. Both the Slavophiles and, later, the Eurasianists, whose representatives were well educated and from high ranking families, developed extensive theories lamenting the supposed "internal colonialization" of Russia by Western ideas.<sup>54</sup> It can be argued that the Eurasianists' critique of Western "disciplinary knowledge" pre-empted some of the corner-stones of post-colonial and orientalist scholarship.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, calling for transnational mobilization of the colonized, Russian turn of the century intellectuals positioned themselves both as members of a subaltern group and, sporting imperialist tendencies, as liberators for all of the oppressed. In the same vein, the Bolshevik revolutionaries utilized strong statements calling for liberation from the West in their visions of Russia's future.<sup>56</sup> Russia, thus, has a long history not only of self-colonizing, but in proclaiming legitimacy in its actions as a colonized territory. Within the Russian context, "empire" becomes a "context-setting category" whereby "oppressed anti-imperial rebels can act as colonizers, and the imperial administration can perform as nation-builders for minority groups".<sup>57</sup>

Despite the fact that Russia has never actually been colonized by the West, its normative dependence on the West has implications for political subjectivity that display parallels to power relations observed in the post-colonial condition. The contradictory combination of imperialist activity and anti-hegemonic rhetoric that characterizes Russian foreign policy can be viewed as exemplary of the country's status as a self-colonizing "subaltern empire".<sup>58</sup> The Russian case is indicative of how "subjection within global

<sup>53</sup> Morozov, Viatcheslav, "Subaltern Empire? Towards a Postcolonial Approach to Russian Foreign Policy," *Problems of Post-Communism*, 60, 6 (Nov-Dec. 2013), 25

<sup>54</sup> Gerasimov, Ilya, Glebov, Sergey & Mogilner, Marina, "The Postimperial Meets the Postcolonial: Russian Historical Experience and the Postcolonial Moment," *Ab Imperio*, 2, (2013), 104

<sup>55</sup> Gerasimov et al., 107

<sup>56</sup> Gerasimov et al., 119

<sup>57</sup> Gerasimov et al., 133

<sup>58</sup> Morozov 2013, 17

capitalism is a thoroughly double-sided and self-active process”,<sup>59</sup> whereby the agency of the disenfranchised and marginalized is a major player in the maintenance of existing power structures.

Viatcheslav Morozov has pointed out how Russian foreign policy, despite its insistence on liberation from Western influence, paradoxically, does not offer a viable alternative to liberal universalism and insists on framing its “demands in the Western language of democracy”.<sup>60</sup> Russia’s accentuation of the importance of protecting sovereignty in the face of universalist neoliberal expansion, he argues, is “symptomatic” of current discursive structures rather than a sign of a “coherent ideology”.<sup>61</sup> Thus, any potential for resistance to the dominant order falls flat, as it would appear that Russian foreign policy is aimed at a shift in power relations without a development of a new value system to legitimize the changes. By being neither the type of actor that the current international value system empowers, nor posing a direct challenge to these values, Russian neo-revisionist attempt at establishing a multi-polar world appears contradictory. Its activity does not promise to insert a previously ignored voice into the discourse or to liberate certain ideas for creative use, which makes a shift in power relations difficult to legitimize. Although Russian foreign policy narratives present the country as a spokesman other excluded powers, it does not present a workable definition of the type of international actor that is being excluded in the first place. What do the objects of Western imperialism lack that has led to their exclusion except the power to assert themselves? By stressing the importance of attaining power for powers sake, Russian actions indirectly re-enforce the legitimacy of those actors who already possess a privileged position within the international system.

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<sup>59</sup> Morozov 2013, 17

<sup>60</sup> Morozov 2013, 18

<sup>61</sup> Morozov 2008, 157

### ***1.3. The Post-Socialist Condition***

What is particularly interesting about Russia's relationship with the West is the use of the same accusations on both sides of the debate, whereby the same words appear to carry different meanings. This indicates that both belong to the same discourse and are negotiating issues relevant not only to Russia's international role, but to the future of the global order. As Morozov has observed, "sovereignty and democracy stand out as two most prominent keywords in this controversy, with both sides insisting on their understanding of these notions as being self-evident and universal, and dismissing the other's vision as ideological and distorted".<sup>62</sup> Thus, the insistence on the lack of ideology acquires an ideological dimension both internationally and as reflected in Russian discourse. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's depiction of western thought as "black and white", as opposed to Russian ability to act according to "common sense"<sup>63</sup> contrasts strongly with Western accusations of Russia as being conservative and modernist, reliving a twisted Soviet past. The post-socialist condition and the rise of global capitalism have a fundamental issue in common, namely a popular disenchantment with ideology. The prefix "post", does not signify, necessarily, the replacement of ideology with something new. Instead, it points towards a paradoxical conflict between something that was and the reality of its absence. Thus, the insistence on the death of ideology is in itself somewhat suspicious and requires careful examination.

The technocratic "managerial democracy" that Putin is intent on representing raises questions about the new life of ideology in a supposedly post-ideological age. Although arguments have been made for the global relevance of the post-socialist experience, scholars have identified a particular brand of post-modern nihilism and apolitical identity politics that have characterized Russian social life since the late 1980s. Perestroika failed to mobilize the population to actively participate in the restructuring of the Soviet order. Instead, one saw an

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<sup>62</sup> Morozov 2008, 152

<sup>63</sup> Morozov 2008, 154

“exodus of society from the ritualized public sphere”.<sup>64</sup> In his analysis of the ethics of post-Soviet social life, Sergei Prozorov points towards a complete disengagement of the public from the system of Soviet ideology as the latter had become ritualized to the point of absurdity and hence rendered meaningless. The following “lingering of the political” of the 1990s was characterized as “a time of radical openness”, whereby political narratives became interchangeable, equally possible and, consequently equally impossible to commit to.<sup>65</sup> According to Prozorov’s analysis, Putin’s narrative of pure power and stability is aimed at protecting the “immanence of postcommunist ‘profane life’ outside the political order” from the devastating effect of post-modern, post-history politics.<sup>66</sup> The private life of the post-Soviet individual has become, within this model, not merely distinguished from the political but severed from all manner of politics entirely. In accordance to Russia’s self-colonizing tendency of imitation of the hegemonic discourse, the Russian state is in fact governing “less” as prescribed by the neoliberal order. The depoliticized state is not prescriptive and works towards maintaining the nihilistic status quo, which includes the “bureaucratic suppression” of voices that challenge this nihilism by having a political identity, no matter what the content.<sup>67</sup> Post-Soviet Russian society may not consist of free subjects as proposed by a neoliberal governmentality, but the population remains securely protected from politics nevertheless.

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<sup>64</sup> Prozorov, Sergei. *The Ethics of Postcommunism: History and Social Praxis in Russia*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2009, 131

<sup>65</sup> Prozorov, Sergei “Russian postcommunism and the end of history”. *Studies in East European Thought*, 60, 3 (Sept 2008), 215

<sup>66</sup> Prozorov 2008, 225

<sup>67</sup> Prozorov 2008, 224

## Chapter 2. Resistance in the Post-Ideological Age

### 2.1. Neoliberal Governmentality

When studying the reasons for the vilification of the political in international discourse, it is useful to employ Foucault's theory of governmentality. Although Foucault developed his analysis of quantitative modernity in the context of Western culture and the rise of individualism, identifying the manner in which neoliberal governmentality is exported remains useful, both in cases where such projects are successful and where governmentality encounters conceptual obstacles. The prioritization of a retreat from the political into the area of the private is particularly noteworthy, since this process carries with it the naturalization of particular ideas as "beyond" politics and therefore belonging to "common sense" and the "natural".

Governmentality relates to a changing perception of the role of the state in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe. A model of society centered around the rule of the sovereign, embodied in the form of law and discipline, became difficult to uphold as population numbers increased and economic activity became more complex and industrialized. As the tasks of the state widened, non-governmental actors began to take over many of these responsibilities. A culture of indirect governance, a "conduct of conduct" ensured that, on the individual level, members of society would discipline themselves to act more efficiently within the greater mechanism of society as a whole. The logic of capitalism is particularly indicative for these developments and figures strongly as part of the basis that inspires modern individuals towards self-discipline. Market mentality extended to political activity in that individuals learned to formulate their interests and organize accordingly. Liberal theory called for the protection of individual freedom within a designated private sphere governed by free-market relations and separated from the "public sphere" of politics.<sup>68</sup> Thus, governmentality is

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<sup>68</sup> Rose, Nikolas S. and Miller, Peter, "Political Power beyond the State: Problematics of Government", *The British Journal of Sociology*, 43, 2 (1992), 177



characterized by the ability “to structure the possible field of action of others’ in ways congruent with the disciplinary injunctions of juridical power yet not fully dependent upon its direct intervention”.<sup>69</sup>

Although the non-political realm, or “civil society” was to be guarded as “a natural realm of freedoms and activities outside the legitimate sphere of politics”,<sup>70</sup> politics was given the task of protecting this sphere from its own influence. Thus, a type of “immunitary” logic defined the role of the state. “Natural” individual freedom was to be protected - through unnatural intervention of the state - against its own potential for perversion, i.e. failure to act according to defined rational principles.<sup>71</sup> The influence of the state, acting indirectly through governmentality and biopower, extends into the private sphere by defining what is “rational” and who could be considered a free individual and a worthy citizen. Biopower, by treating the population as a measurable entity, fulfills the function of transcending the public-private divide and allows for the seemingly independent private sphere to remain under the firm control of established norms. In order to maintain the distinction between political and private, biopolitics performs the function of translation and problematization of social reality. By monitoring, categorizing and ordering the population in a rationalist, scientific manner, reality could be made “thinkable in such a way that is amenable to political deliberations”.<sup>72</sup> The state hardly disappears within this process. Neumann and Sending have argued that “different types of non-state actors are often funded, actively encouraged and supported by states both to mobilize political constituencies, to confer legitimacy to policy-processes, to implement policies, and to monitor and evaluate them”.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Vraști, Wanda (2013). “Universal but not truly ‘global’: governmentality, economic liberalism, and the international”. *Review of International Studies*, 39 (2013), 4

<sup>70</sup> Rose et al., 177

<sup>71</sup> Prozorov, Sergei. “The Biopolitics of Stalinism: Ideas and Bodies in Soviet Governmentality” PSA World Congress, Madrid, (July 8-12, 2012) [http://paperroom.ipsa.org/papers/paper\\_10571.pdf](http://paperroom.ipsa.org/papers/paper_10571.pdf), 11

<sup>72</sup> Rose et al., 179

<sup>73</sup> Neumann, Iver & Sending, Ole (2006). "Governance to Governmentality: Analyzing NGOs, States, and Power," *International Studies Quarterly* 50(2006), 652

## 2.2. *The Death of the Political*

Chantal Mouffe, lamenting the supposed death of the political sphere, criticizes the essentialist underpinnings of universalism as blind to the “the constitutive role of antagonism in social life”.<sup>74</sup> The prioritization of individualism has the side-effect of dismissing mass movements as “irrational” or “pathological” and hence illegitimate in their claims.<sup>75</sup> This perspective is particularly conducive to social exclusion, particularly because the “category of the enemy” does not disappear, but becomes displaced.<sup>76</sup> Within an active political sphere, antagonism would permit confrontation between conflicting groups. In the absence of this political sphere, the category of the “enemy” becomes embedded within the existing power-relations and functions as an implicit constituent of the dominant group’s identity and not as an equal actor.

The dismissal of antagonism as a viable form of social life leads to the exclusion of certain subjectivities over others. More importantly, collectives become alienated from the very legitimacy of cooperative action, namely the ability to define a common “life world” within which their action becomes meaningful.<sup>77</sup> By redefining freedom as apolitical, liberal discourse excludes alternative definitions of freedom, namely the freedom that can be found “in the unique intermediary space of politics”.<sup>78</sup> Hannah Arendt theorizes politics as the only possible realm of freedom, because it “arises between men, and so quite outside of man”.<sup>79</sup> Only through politics can a human transcend the limits placed on her through material necessities and individual drives. The products of collective action do not depend on the restrictions imposed by a solitary human life, in terms of life span, physicality and mental rigidity. The interpersonal space of politics is therefore capable of accommodating

<sup>74</sup> Mouffe, Chantal. *The Return of the Political*. Verso, London, 1993, 2

<sup>75</sup> Mouffe, 2

<sup>76</sup> Mouffe, 3

<sup>77</sup> Parekh, Serena. *Hannah Arendt and the Challenge of Modernity. A Phenomenology of Human Rights*. Routledge, New York, 2008, 12

<sup>78</sup> Arendt, Hannah, “Introduction into Politics”. In Ed. Jerome Kohn *The Promise of Politics*, Schocken Books, New York, 2005, 95

<sup>79</sup> Arendt, 95

“spontaneity” and “new beginnings”, which are neither rational nor the inevitable product of history but, in fact, “miracles”.<sup>80</sup> Thus, democracy disconnected from sovereignty is a Kafkaesque bureaucratic machine living on without any purpose besides the drive to reproduce its own existence. Democratic activity of subjects that are averse to politics predefines its own outcome. Without the uncertainty of politics, democracy cannot produce any new content based on the collective desires of the people it is intended to empower. As Morozov proposes, “the question remains whether by abandoning sovereignty we are not running the risk of abandoning democracy as well”.<sup>81</sup>

### ***2.3. The Issue of Sovereignty***

The global spread of liberalism, and its universalist philosophy, promises to empower previously subjugated groups and bring new voices to the sphere of international politics. Human rights positions empowerment against “machineries of culture, state, war, ethnic conflict, tribalism, patriarchy, and other mobilizations or instantiations of collective power against individuals”.<sup>82</sup> Thus, the process itself of negotiating the meaning of human life is disconnected from political engagement and collective existence. As Wendy Brown points out, by accentuating the importance of “becoming an individual” outside of politics, human rights create a shield of “negative liberty” that “constitutes a juridical limit on regimes without empowering individuals as political actors”.<sup>83</sup> David Chandler observes, that “[d]emocracy is often presented as a solution to the problems of the political sphere rather than as a process of determining and giving content to the “good life”.<sup>84</sup> Consequently, the human rights dogma creates a particular type of individual capable of claiming empowerment in the first place. This is a technocratic, problem-solving individual whose freedom is defined against a “public sphere” of “division and conflict” rather than “a vital constitutive sphere, in

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<sup>80</sup> Arendt, 113

<sup>81</sup> Morozov 2008, 158

<sup>82</sup> Brown, Wendy, “The Most We Can Hope For . . . : Human Rights and the Politics of Fatalism” *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103, 2/3, (Spring/Summer 2004), 453

<sup>83</sup> Brown, 456

<sup>84</sup> qtd. in Morozov 2008, 169

which social and political bonds are constituted and strengthened”.<sup>85</sup> International power hierarchies thus become naturalized in that previous colonial relations become replaced by liberal norms that prescribe actions for “all good members of the international community” while excluding those not deemed “civilized” enough for self-governance.<sup>86</sup>

Relating democratic governance to inevitable economic growth suggests “that national wealth is produced by rather than productive of civil liberties and constitutionalism”.<sup>87</sup> Economic success is thus presented as a natural reward for Western style governance rather than as a historically contingent development. Such a causal link places political models within a quantifiable hierarchy and bypasses “the deformations of colonialism and a global economy in which the wealth of core states is predicated in part on the poverty of the periphery”.<sup>88</sup> The predominance of such assumptions can be illustrated through the fact that, starting in the late 1990s, the World Bank’s has developed an increasingly pronounced human rights agenda. Proclaiming the belief that “‘creating the conditions for the attainment of human rights is a central and irreducible goal of development’, the Bank has developed numerous programs encouraging businesses towards “‘socially responsible’ behavior”, supporting free speech and researching “the linkage between human rights and development”.<sup>89</sup>

Hannah Arendt points to the fundamental relationship between rights and sovereignty. The concept of human rights was developed in Europe in order to manage the emergence of minorities and refugees in the wake of the territorial reconfigurations and revolutions following the First World War. The intention was to “make everyone equal before the law” and to assimilate these groups into the state rather than to support difference. “Since sovereignty was rooted in man (not God), it seemed natural that the inalienable Rights of Man

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<sup>85</sup> Morozov 2008, 173

<sup>86</sup> Neumann & Sending 2007, 699

<sup>87</sup> Brown, 456

<sup>88</sup> Brown, 456

<sup>89</sup> Charvet, John & Kaczynska-Nay, Elisa. *The Liberal Project and Human Rights: The Theory and Practice of a New World Order*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008

would become a part of the right of people to self-government”.<sup>90</sup> Human rights are thus “natural and inalienable” only in the context of the nation-state, the existence of which they legitimize. And so, “when a person is nothing but human, he cannot embody rights”.<sup>91</sup> By needing to ask for their rights, stateless people revealed that they in fact had no inalienable rights at all. For Arendt, “the right to have rights”, i.e. the right to belong to a community, is the more fundamental right implicit in the phenomenon of human rights. “[E]quality, like human rights, depends upon our *decision* to guarantee these to ourselves”<sup>92</sup> - an empowerment that stems from membership in a community and not despite of it. Human rights, by supporting those who find themselves without citizenship, re-enforce the importance of the state within the international order and, by framing statelessness as an exception, contribute to the continuous exclusion of migrants, minorities and refugees.

International human rights’ accentuation of universality and, more importantly, naturalness of certain principles carry an inherent paradox. Since socially created products are defined against the non-civilizational natural, “there is a distrust of the natural within all highly developed civilizations”.<sup>93</sup> Those possessing natural, universal rights beyond the state, therefore, are a fundamental threat to the state. To quote Slavoj Žižek at length:

It is not only that every universality is haunted by a particular content that taints it; it is that every particular position is haunted by its implicit universality, which undermines it. Capitalism is not just universal in-itself, it is universal for-itself, as the tremendous actual corrosive power that undermines all particular lifeworlds, cultures, traditions, cutting across them, catching them in its vortex.<sup>94</sup>

Žižek cautions against searching for “the secret European bias of capitalism,” arguing that “actual universality appears (actualizes itself) as the experience of negativity, of the

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<sup>90</sup> Parekh, Serena. *Hannah Arendt and the Challenge of Modernity. A Phenomenology of Human Rights*. Routledge, New York, 2008, 23

<sup>91</sup> Parekh, 24

<sup>92</sup> Parekh, 24, italics in original

<sup>93</sup> Parekh, 26

<sup>94</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, „Tolerance as an Ideological Category,” *Critical Inquiry*, 34, 4 (Summer 2008), 672

inadequacy-to-itself of a particular identity”.<sup>95</sup> The significance of human rights in this regard is that their universal ontology negates the legitimacy of political action, and, consequently, disempowers the carriers of such rights. By stripping the individual down to bare life, human rights re-enforce biopower as they aim to counter-act its negative effects. Here, the immunizing logic of capitalism reveals itself. Just as the state is granted the task of protecting the private sphere from its own influence, human rights are an example of biopower liberating the individual from the dominion of the sovereignty on which biopower rests. Arguably, the Western-centric anchoring of international power-relations that support the spread of neoliberal governmentality are not to be ignored. Nevertheless, it is important to wonder whether the oppressive relations produced by capitalist universalism may run deeper than its imperialist origins.

#### ***2.4. Mapping Out Possible Areas of Resistance***

Considering governmentality as a genealogical outgrowth of the logic of capitalism raises questions concerning the cultural implications of capitalist expansion throughout the world. In their influential book *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri explore trends in global hierarchies of exploitation through the lens of capitalist post-modernity. The authors argue how, in the wake of World War Two, the subsumption of the state by capital has induced a paradigm shift which carries with it more indirect modes of social control. Society is described as having become “ever more completely fashioned by capital”,<sup>96</sup> through globalization and “informatization”. Hardt and Negri do not ignore the colonial roots of capitalist expansion and maintain how, as capitalism inevitably expands into new territories, “each new segment of the non-capitalist environment is transformed *differently*, and all are integrated *organically* into the expanding body of capital”.<sup>97</sup> This creates a persisting hierarchy and relationship of inequality among the different regions of the world. The spread

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<sup>95</sup> Žižek, 673

<sup>96</sup> Hardt, M., and A. Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000, 255

<sup>97</sup> Hardt et al., 237, italics in original

of capitalism cannot be equal, as “the modern state exports class struggle and civil war in order to preserve order and sovereignty at home”.<sup>98</sup> In order to manage the multitude of conflicts and resistance to its rule, the imperialist state develops methods of maintaining legitimacy and influence. Thus, the transformation of the capitalist order is not merely a function of the economic theory of capitalism itself but, according to the authors, a historically contingent process of reaction and counter-reaction between subjugated groups and the capitalists’ attempts at controlling them. Hardt and Negri focus on the example of humanitarian NGOs in identifying the depth of global biopower, noting that such organizations are “the capillary ends of the contemporary networks of power,”<sup>99</sup> in that they extend their activity into defining bare life itself.

Despite the seemingly insidious, all-encompassing nature of governmentality, Foucault identified how, by creating political truths, governmentality also creates conflict with itself as “things persons or events always appear to escape those bodies of knowledge that inform governmental practices”.<sup>100</sup> Governmentality inevitably creates contradictions within itself, which not only threaten the efficiency of its programs but are also “the very condition of their existence”.<sup>101</sup> The presence of marginalized or anti-social groups defines governmentality and draws attention to the possibility of resistance inherent in it. If only due to the mere complexity of global social relations, international resistance can be expected to have a particular type of potency. Nevertheless, the ability that governmentality displays of managing complexity throws doubt on both the possibility of an outside from which resistance can occur. Consequently, resistance from the inside presents its own difficulties.

The ongoing process of globalization has shown to exclude many areas and groups from neoliberal citizenship while simultaneously allowing for flexibility in local

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<sup>98</sup> Hardt et al., 232

<sup>99</sup> Hardt et al., 313

<sup>100</sup> Rose et al., 190

<sup>101</sup> Lemke, T. (2002). “Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique.” *Rethinking Marxism* 14 (3), 57

interpretations of exported neoliberal governmentalities. Thus, certain spaces created by the spread of neoliberal governmentality do promise the potential for resistance. Partha Chatterjee observes that, especially in the post-colonial world, a gap has been created between the norms that define global civil society and the role of the state. Certain community subjectivities cannot find space to articulate their needs within the confines of citizenship. Instead, political activity is observed on the margins of society. Such activity does not fit imported civic norms but nevertheless, by laying claims to welfare from the state, contributes to the legitimacy of civil society as such.<sup>102</sup> Based on studies of Indian society, Chatterjee terms this phenomenon “political society” and distinguishes it from “civil society”. He attributes this phenomenon to “an emerging opposition between modernity and democracy”.<sup>103</sup> Such observations indicate the persisting importance of political social life within the mechanisms of governmentality. Communities claim rights and recognition, not as free subjects operating within a capitalist rationality, but on the basis of their belonging to a community as such. This poses a challenge to the individual-based model of Western civil society. Such examples demonstrate that by collapsing the taken for granted distinction between public and private, resistance proper may be possible.

Hardt and Negri argue that the global information economy has produced new modes of interpersonal relations, particularly within the phenomenon of affective labor. Citing the Toyotism model, the authors argue that network-based productive activity creates a form of interactivity that can “continually modify its own operation through its use”.<sup>104</sup> The network becomes both the product and the means for its own production. Cooperation and social interaction that is not externally imposed underlies immaterial labor and, according to the

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<sup>102</sup> Eldin, Munir Fakher, “The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World by Partha Chatterjee,” *The Arab Studies Journal*, 13/14, 2/1 (Fall 2005/Spring 2006), 141

<sup>103</sup> Chatterjee, Partha, „Beyond the Nation? Or Within?” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32, 1/2 (Jan. 4-11, 1997), 33

<sup>104</sup> Hardt et al., 291



authors, provides “the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism”.<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, critics have questioned the actual immateriality of immaterial labor. Paul Thompson argues that “knowledge and intangible assets, whether in services or any other form, can be calculated, rationalized, rule-governed and ultimately commodified”.<sup>106</sup> The commodification of immaterial labor denies any claim to liberation, as the subjectivity of the worker becomes lost within the process of providing a product that is firmly incorporated within the capitalist system of production. As it is measured and monitored, knowledge becomes separated from the knower. The worker, therefore, does not participate in communication and cooperation as a subject, but simply fulfills a function that leaves him or her ultimately alienated. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind the flexibility with which capitalism adapts to pre-existing social inequalities. Feminist studies have shown that the management of affect and the importance of moral commitment for professional success, in fact, continue to support motherhood as a form of free labor. Self-help platforms such as Dr. Phil, for example, encourage women to instrumentalize their emotional capacities for the sake of “social glue” in their family life rather than for their own enjoyment.<sup>107</sup> Thus, “media convergence can position the female self-helper within the valorized sphere of ‘active’ citizenship, even as it simultaneously extends her domestic burdens”.<sup>108</sup> Within a somewhat different context, research has demonstrated how formerly existing gender stereotypes in Moldova align with neoliberal rationalities to simultaneously empower and disenfranchise migrant worker mothers.<sup>109</sup> With such examples in mind, the capitalist management of affect does not preempt optimistic conclusions concerning the possibility of resistance from within neoliberal societies.

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<sup>105</sup> Hardt et al., 294

<sup>106</sup> Thompson, P., “Foundation and Empire: A critique of Hardt and Negri,” *Capital & Class*, 25 (2005), 84

<sup>107</sup> Ouellette, Laurie & Wilson, Julie, “Women’s Work: Affective labour and convergence culture,” *Cultural Studies*, 25, 4-5 (2011), 551

<sup>108</sup> Oulette et al., 555

<sup>109</sup> Keough, Leyla J., “‘Globalizing ‘Postsocialism’: Mobile Mothers and Neoliberalism on the Margins of Europe,” *Anthropological Quarterly*, 79, 3 (Summer 2006), 555

Hardt and Negri's account has not been free of criticism, especially in relation to their treatment of the role of the state. The international order hardly appears as smooth and homogeneous as the authors claim. Although liberalism may increasingly function as a "standard of reference",<sup>110</sup> heterogeneity in the local adaptation of international should not be ignored. Additionally, as Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey point out, "a world in which international war is alive and well is not one that is 'smooth' and subject to a single 'logic of rule'".<sup>111</sup> Indeed, the presence of international war is indicative of more conflict than would be fitting for a model of a successfully instated global order. Since governmentality aims to erase conflict and to rationalize human affairs, areas where conflict persists, be it violent or discursive, can point towards "glitches" in the international system. Exploring cracks in the order where meanings continue to be contested can bring to the foreground the political nature of neoliberal governmentality. Thus, by revealing certain naturalized concepts as contested, international discourse can be emancipated from the hegemony of the power-relations that define it. Instead of associating global governance as purely a tool of Western imperialism, it may be helpful to view it instead as a platform within which power-relations can be (re)negotiated.

Wanda Vradi points out that neoliberalism "seeks to universalize market rationality across the entire social field by promoting social and moral orders that are conducive to the ethos of competition and entrepreneurial conduct".<sup>112</sup> As Slavoj Žižek puts it, "we can have the global capitalist cake, i.e., thrive as profitable entrepreneurs, and eat it, too, i.e., endorse the anti-capitalist causes of social responsibility and ecological concerns".<sup>113</sup> Thus, the incorporation of subjectivity and morality into the machinations of the capitalist market guides action in accordance with capitalist rationale. Capitalist efficiency does not necessarily

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<sup>110</sup> Vradi 2013,16

<sup>111</sup> Barkawi, T. & Laffey, M., "Retrieving the Imperial: Empire and International Relations," *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 31 (2002), 125

<sup>112</sup> Vradi, Wanda, „'Caring' Capitalism and the Duplicity of Critique," *Theory & Event* ,14, 4, (2011) [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory\\_and\\_event/v014/14.4.vradi.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v014/14.4.vradi.html)

<sup>113</sup> qtd in Vradi, 2011

need to contest or even find ways to tolerate dissent, but can thrive off anti-capitalist sentiment. Neoliberal governmentality, despite its origins in liberal concepts of natural human nature, has become a “constructivist project” that empowers the figure of the entrepreneur that creates his surrounding environment. This creative action must not necessarily endorse rationality or even stem from belief in the moral superiority of the capitalist ethic. In accordance with the logic of “immunization”, social critique functions to underpin the workings of governmentality rather than to place it under political scrutiny.

In their attempt to identify continuities and differences that characterize the post-modern capitalist ethic, Comaroff and Comaroff explore identity politics as displacement of political subjectivity. The authors maintain that the post-modern, millennial capitalist subject experiences a “radically individuated sense of personhood,”<sup>114</sup> that results in the assertion of collectivities through mere likeness and difference of traits, whereby socioeconomic conditions are treated as life-style choices and identity-markers rather than points of solidarity. Consequently, “citizenship is measured increasingly by the capacity to transact and consume” to the point that “the personal is the only politics there is”.<sup>115</sup> Simultaneously, the individual comes to be seen as a source of inefficiency rather than the motor of economic growth and development. Hard work loses its value as a staple of success. Instead, the capitalist ethic brings to the foreground the importance of the unpredictable forces of luck, probability, the invisible hand and, more generally, the ability to “conjure wealth...by appeal to techniques that defy explanation in the conventional terms of practical reason”.<sup>116</sup> By involving the emotional world of consumers, post-modern capitalism incorporates the chaotic elements of human subjectivity into its workings.

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<sup>114</sup> Comaroff, Jean & Comaroff John L. “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming”. In *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*. Ed. Comaroff, Jean & Comaroff John L. Duke University Press, Durham & London, 15

<sup>115</sup> Comaroff et al., 15

<sup>116</sup> Comaroff et al., 19

## Chapter 3. Case Study: Gay Rights Discourse at the 2014 Sochi Olympics

### *3.1. Gay rights activism surrounding the Winter Olympic Games in Russia*

#### **3.1.1. “Not my Olympics”: Sochi the Potemkin Village**

As the host of the 2014 Winter Olympic Games, Russia inspired both domestic and international criticism. The claimed disproportionate costs of the Games contrasted with the many corruption scandals, severe environmental issues and stories of mistreated workers and displaced town residents. The arrival of journalists on the scene quickly resulted in the painting of the host town Sochi as an elaborate “Potemkin Village”,<sup>117</sup> an absurd scene of grandiose theatrics put on for the benefit of the burgeoning ego of an oriental despot. The Twitter account “#SochiProblems” gained wide popularity and showcased innumerable examples of everyday Russian insanity.<sup>118</sup> International journalists documented the various hotel facility malfunctions, including unusual toilet etiquette, cardboard walls, rude staff and the consistent lack functioning locks and light bulbs (See Image 1). By the time of the opening ceremony, attention was finely tuned towards identifying cracks in the festive façade of the games. When the last Olympic ring failed to open on time, the image entered the social media with great metaphorical force, even inspiring a T-Shirt design<sup>119</sup> (See Image 2).

Russian social media also produced a wide range of cynical critique of the event, terming the Olympics “Korrumpiada” (a play on the word “corruption”) and, more popularly, “Raspiliada” (merging the Olympics with the image of “sawing something apart”) (See image 3). The Russian addition to the “Potemkin Village” reference came in the form of a wide

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<sup>117</sup> Duffy, John, „Puttingrad: Sochi as the ultimate Potemkin Village,” *The Globe And Mail*, Feb. 24, 2014 <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/putingrad-sochi-as-the-ultimate-potemkin-village/article17062267/> (accessed May 31, 2014)

<sup>118</sup> Ilich, Bobby, “Sochi Problems: Hold On, Wait... What Problems?“, *International Business Times*, Feb 22, 2014. <http://www.ibtimes.com/sochi-problems-hold-wait-what-problems-1557321> (accessed May 31, 2014)

<sup>119</sup> Koerber, Brian, “Olympic Rings Fail Is Already on a T-Shirt,” *Mashable*, Feb 8, 2014 <http://mashable.com/2014/02/07/sochi-problems-tee/> (accessed Jun 1, 2014)

range of memes applying the title of an Alexandr Pushkin story, “Feast in the Time of Plague”, to the Olympic Games. Images of veterans and pensioners living in poverty flooded Russian social networks, captioned with quotes such as “These are not my Olympics” (See Image 4). Claiming “What if I don’t need [the Olympics]?”, a VKontakte group called to boycott the Games due to the economic and environmental burden of the event on the country. By indicating a dissonance between the patriotism of the Olympic Games and the life of the Russian population, the Olympics figured as a strong symbol of unjust sacrifice in living standards for the sake of international prestige.



### Image 1

Examples of „Sochi Problems“ posted by international journalists on the scene, including a “How to” guide indicating that drinking vodka is the only way to survive staying in a Sochi hotel.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>120</sup> Image source: “Photographic Proof That Sochi Is A Godforsaken Hellscape Right Now”. *Buzzfeed*, Feb 6, 2014 <http://www.buzzfeed.com/bennyjohnson/proof-that-sochi-is-a-godforsaken-hellscape-right-now> (accessed Jun 2, 2014)





**Image 2**

a) T-shirt design based on the „Olympic Ring Fail“<sup>121</sup>; b) Russian meme. Translation: “What are you ready to sacrifice for the Olympics?”<sup>122</sup>; c) Screenshot of the moment when the last Olympic ring malfunctioned at the opening ceremony<sup>123</sup>; d) Russian meme. Translation: “We did not mess up, we just didn’t build it on time”<sup>124</sup>.



**Image 3**

Popular depiction of the Olympics as a violent and corrupt “Raspiliada”.<sup>125</sup>

<sup>121</sup> Image source: Koerber, *Mashable*

<sup>122</sup> Image source: Boycott of the 2014 Olympics in Sochi (*Rus.* Бойкот Олимпиады-2014 в Сочи), VKontakte, <http://vk.com/club44615768> (accessed Jun 1, 2014)

<sup>123</sup> Image source: Grossman, *Times*

<sup>124</sup> Image source: Boycott of the 2014 Olympics in Sochi (*Rus.* Бойкот Олимпиады-2014 в Сочи), VKontakte, <http://vk.com/club44615768> (accessed Jun 1, 2014)

<sup>125</sup> Image source: “Raspiliada: perspectives on Sochi’s long building process” (*Rus.* “Распилиада: перспективы сочинского долгостроя”), Rabkor, Apr 12, 2013 <http://rabkor.ru/report/2013/04/12/raspiliada> (accessed Jun 2, 2014)



**Image 4**

Russian meme claiming that the Sochi 2014 games are “NOT MY Olympics”.<sup>126</sup>

### 3.1.2. The State of Exception

In the time leading up to the Olympics, Russia made the headlines through stories of police failure to prevent homophobic crimes as well country-wide arrests of gay activists.<sup>127</sup>

As a result, gay athletes expressed fear concerning their own safety during the Games.

Activists drew attention to the lack of free speech in the country, criticizing Russia’s ban of gay pride parades and its controversial law against “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors expressed in distribution of information ... aimed at the formation ... of ... misperceptions of the social equivalence of traditional and non-traditional sexual relations”.<sup>128</sup> Russia defended its new law by pointing out that it expresses the desire of the majority of Russians, whose negative attitudes towards homosexuality are well documented in

<sup>126</sup> Image source: Boycott of the 2014 Olympics in Sochi (Rus. Бойкот Олимпиады-2014 в Сочи), VKontakte, <http://vk.com/club44615768> (accessed Jun 1, 2014)

<sup>127</sup> Brydum, Sunnive, „WATCH: LGBT Russians Arrested, Antigay Protestors Undisturbed,” *Advocate*, Feb. 7, 2014 <http://www.advocate.com/sports/2014/02/07/watch-lgbt-russians-arrested-antigay-protestors-undisturbed> (accessed Jun. 2, 2014)

<sup>128</sup> Wintemute, Robert, “Russia should learn from Britain’s record on gay rights,” *The Guardian*, Jul 24, 2013 <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/24/russia-britain-record-gay-rights-propaganda> (accessed Jun 2, 2014)



opinion polls. Additionally, Putin accentuated that Russia's low birth rate has negative implications for the country's ability to maintain its sovereignty. "Non-traditional sexual relations", according to this argument, would further endanger the reproductive rate of the population.<sup>129</sup> Putin stated that same-sex marriage and adoption were Western methods of dealing with their demographic crisis, which is an approach that Russia is not willing to adopt.<sup>130</sup> Insisting on the importance of keeping gay rights issues outside of the public sphere, Russian Duma Minister proposed that gay pride events be held "in a field, in a forest", where no children would be able to witness them.<sup>131</sup> Thus, while homosexuality was to be removed from the public sphere in Russia, the law threatened to impact a wider range of freedoms. This was particularly relevant for activists, since the Russian LGBT community works closely with other organizations for the promotion of democracy and free speech.

In response to these rising concerns about the vagueness of the new laws, Putin explained that being gay privately was not a crime in Russia and assured the international community that gays "can feel relaxed and calm, but leave children alone please".<sup>132</sup> Regarding the issue of homophobic violence in the country, Russian authorities insisted that protests would provoke social unrest. Regulations of public gatherings were strengthened, including a ruling against the establishment of a Pride House in Sochi. Putin's continuous assurance that international visitors need not worry about the laws worked towards maintaining a sense of confusion. The unpredictability of the rule of law in Russia was particularly notable on the backdrop of Putin's recent granting pardons to a number of high profile political prisoners, including two members of the feminist punk band Pussy Riot and tycoon Khodorkovsky. The high level of security measures instated in Sochi for the duration

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<sup>129</sup> Lenskyj, Helen Jefferson. *Sexual Diversity and the Sochi 2014 Olympics: No More Rainbows*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2014, 13

<sup>130</sup> Lenskyj, 15

<sup>131</sup> Lenskyj, 4

<sup>132</sup> Walker, Shaun. "Vladimir Putin: gay people at Winter Olympics must 'leave children alone'". *The Guardian*, Jan 17, 2014 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/17/vladimir-putin-gay-winter-olympics-children> (accessed May 2, 2014)

of the Olympics has been described as a “state of emergency”.<sup>133</sup> The Olympic Games became shrouded in confusion through the combination of intense securitization with the simultaneous de facto suspension of the gay propaganda promised by Putin. While many laws were in place, it was difficult to predict when and how they would be enforced.

### 3.1.3. Protecting Civilization and Measuring Development

An active debate flourished over whether to boycott the Olympics on the grounds of widespread human rights violations in Russia. International resistance against Russian human rights violations quickly spread to the sphere of consumer ethics. Actor Hugh Laurie tweeted “I’d boycott Russian goods if I could think of a single thing they made besides the rest of the world depressed”.<sup>134</sup> LGBT activist Dan Savage launched a boycott of Stolichnaya vodka. The movement gained popularity, inspiring dozens of U.S. gay bars to remove the vodka brand from their shelves, but was not without controversy once it was revealed that the Stolichnaya is neither owned by a Russian company nor produced on the territory of Russia. In the face of consumer pressure, large international corporations continued to play a significant role in framing the Sochi Olympics through the topic of LGBT rights. Critical action against McDonalds and Coca Cola, neither of which actively expressed direct support for the protest, was used to spread awareness of gay rights issues in Russia. Activists hijacked McDonalds’ Twitter hashtag #CheersToSochi and flooded it with content about Russia’s gay propaganda law. Similarly, a promotion campaign on Coca Cola’s website was used to design

<sup>133</sup> Podrabinek, Alexander, „Putin’s Olympic Fever,” *Institute of Modern Russia*, Jan 14, 2014 <http://imrussia.org/en/politics/641-putins-olympic-fever> (accessed Jun. 2, 2014)

<sup>134</sup> “Hugh Laurie causes stir with call for Russia vodka boycott”, *The Telegraph*, Jan 21, 2014 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/10586946/Hugh-Laurie-causes-stir-with-call-for-Russia-vodka-boycott.html> (accessed Jun 2, 2014)

bottles with messages such as “LetsAllBeGay” and “HelpLGBTInRu”.<sup>135</sup> Other Olympic sponsors such as AT&T, Chobani and DeVry publicly condemned Russia’s anti-gay laws.<sup>136</sup>

In a much publicized open letter to the British Prime Minister and the Olympics Committee, actor and comedian Stephen Fry called for a full boycott of the event, comparing the Russian government’s treatment of gays and lesbians to the fate of the Jews under the Third Reich. He questioned the status of international sport as apolitical, arguing that “politics interconnects with everything for ‘politics’ is simply the Greek for ‘to do with the people’”.<sup>137</sup> If world leaders and the IOC fail to take a definitive stance against Russia’s “barbaric, fascist law”, the author insists, then the Olympic “Five Rings would finally be forever smeared, besmirched and ruined in the eyes of the civilised world”.<sup>138</sup> Also relying heavily on the Nazi analogy, actor and playwright Harvey Fierstein published an op-ed in the *New York Times* claiming that “Putin has declared war on homosexuals.” He called for a boycott of the Olympics and reminded the readers that “[T]here is a price for tolerating intolerance”.<sup>139</sup> Parallels between Putin and Hitler continued to figure in the language used by critics of the gay propaganda law. Protesters in London held up placards of Putin made to look like Hitler. Russian protesters similarly adorned posters with crossed out swastikas.

Voices against the boycott avoided drawing parallels with fascism, but remained true to the civilizational argument. Some critics drew attention to the fact that not only do over 70 countries have significantly more repressive anti-gay laws but that, also Western countries have had similar laws in their very recent past. Openly gay Austrian ski jumper Daniela

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<sup>135</sup> Elliott, Stuart, “Activists Try to Hijack Promotions by Sponsors of Sochi Olympics” *New York Times*, Jan 27, 2014 <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/28/business/media/activists-try-to-hijack-promotions-by-sponsors-of-sochi-olympics.html> (accessed Jun 1, 2014)

<sup>136</sup> Garcia, Michelle, “Two More Olympic Sponsors Condemn Russian Law”, *Advocate*, Feb 6, 2014 <http://www.advocate.com/sports/2014/02/06/two-more-olympic-sponsors-condemn-russian-law> (accessed Jun 1, 2014)

<sup>137</sup> Fry, Stephen, “An Open Letter to David Cameron and the IOC”, *The New Adventures of Mr Stephen Fry*, Aug 7, 2013 <http://www.stephenfry.com/2013/08/07/an-open-letter-to-david-cameron-and-the-ioc/2/> (accessed Jun 1, 2014)

<sup>138</sup> Fry

<sup>139</sup> Fierstein, Harvey, “Russia’s Anti-Gay Crackdown” *New York Times*, Jul 21, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/22/opinion/russias-anti-gay-crackdown.html> (accessed Jun 1, 2014)

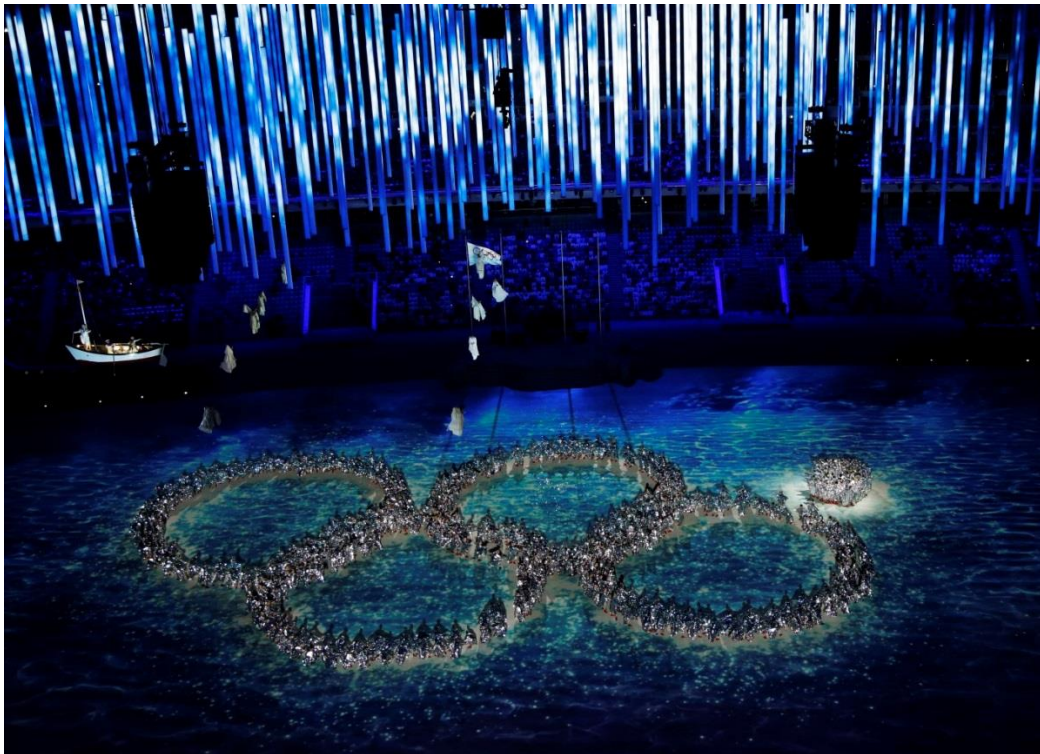
Iraschko-Stolz, who was criticized for accepting a congratulatory hug from Putin after winning a gold medal, went so far as to say that „no one cares” about political issues at the Olympics and that she was sure “Russia will go and make the right steps in the future and we should give them time”.<sup>140</sup> Russian news also quoted a Sochi gay club owner’s assessment of Russia as “not mature enough” for public discussion of gay rights.<sup>141</sup> The “not quite there yet” argument is often found within the Russian official stance alongside the more anti-Western rhetoric. To cite a somewhat different example: During the closing ceremony of the Olympics, Russian performers referenced the “Olympic Ring fail” in their routine by building four rings and leaving the fifth one small<sup>142</sup>(See Image5). This gesture, besides being an attempt at saving face through humorous self-deprecation, demonstrates both an acceptance of the given civilizational structure (there should be five full rings), but also insists on the possibility of an in-between stage of on-going development.

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<sup>140</sup> Passa, Dennis. “Gay ski jumper says protests aren't worth it”, *AP: The Big Story*, Feb 9, 2014 <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/gay-ski-jumper-says-protests-arent-worth-it> (accessed Jun 1, 2014)

<sup>141</sup> Novinkova, Inessa. “Foreign media concerned about the life of Sochi’s gays”, *Sochi News (Rus. Новикова, Инесса. “Зарубежные СМИ обеспокоены судьбой сочинских геев”, Сочинские Новости РФ)*, Feb 17, 2014

<sup>142</sup> Grossman, Samantha, “Russia Pokes Fun At Itself By Recreating Olympic Rings Malfunction”, *Times*, Feb 23, 2014 <http://time.com/9287/russia-pokes-fun-at-itself-by-recreating-olympic-rings-malfunction/> (accessed Jun 2, 2014).



**Image 5**  
Choreographed Russian performance at the closing ceremony referencing the Olympic ring malfunction.<sup>143</sup>

### 3.1.4. “We are Normal People”: The Indirect Approach to Politics

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) faced heavy criticism for not exercising more pressure on the Russian government. Citing the Olympic Charter, the Committee justified its neutral stance and warned athletes against making political statements during the Games. The Committee assured the international community that it was working together with the Russian authorities to ensure public safety, including setting up designated areas for protest. While both Russia and the IOC urged the international community to keep politics and sport separate, human rights organizations saw a flaw in the definition of homosexuality as a political issue. One anonymous blogger pointed out that if a gay couple were to kiss, “it wouldn’t be called love. It would be called political”.<sup>144</sup> Another journalist argued how, if “sexual identity” is a basic human right, then “support for sexual freedom is more adequately

<sup>143</sup> Image source: Grossman, *Times*

<sup>144</sup> Juzwiak, Rich, “The Olympics Failed Gays, and Gays Failed the Olympics“, *Gawker*, Feb 24 <http://gawker.com/the-olympics-failed-gays-and-gays-failed-the-olympics-1527255336> (accessed Jun 1, 2014)

understood as a condition of membership to the Olympic movement, not a political choice”.<sup>145</sup> As a result, it was proposed to adjust Principle Six of the Olympic Charter, which states that discrimination "on grounds of race, religion, politics, gender or otherwise is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic movement". While the U.S. Olympic Committee adjusted its anti-discrimination policy to include sexual orientation,<sup>146</sup> the IOC argued that sexual orientation was already implied in the formulation.<sup>147</sup>

A common argument against the boycott relied on a similar belief in the depoliticization of the gay rights issue. Many hoped that, through participation and peaceful signs of support, proponents of gay rights could make a stronger point and show that gays are “normal”, “good people” that “play sports and win medals”.<sup>148</sup> Openly gay Olympic athletes expressed reservations against boycotting the Olympics, arguing that such action would unnecessarily harm athletic careers and proposed that, by attending, they could both demonstrate the equality of gays and inspire Russian audiences.<sup>149</sup> Many Russian activists encouraged international visitors to “express their support for gay rights in ways that Russian state television will be unable to ignore, like wearing rainbow outfits on the track”.<sup>150</sup> Also preferring indirect action, President Obama included openly gay athletes in the U.S. Delegation to the Winter Olympics while not attending himself. Although the French and German Presidents avoided giving reasons for their absence from the Olympic Games, Obama

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<sup>145</sup> Miah, Andy, “Being Gay at the Sochi Olympics,” Huffington Post, Feb 7, 2014

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/andy-miah/being-gay-at-the-sochi-ol\\_b\\_4742965.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/andy-miah/being-gay-at-the-sochi-ol_b_4742965.html) (accessed Jun 2, 2014)

<sup>146</sup> Rayman, Noah. “U.S. Olympic Committee Adds Sexual Orientation to Anti-Discrimination Policy”, Times, Oct 11, 2013 <http://keepingscore.blogs.time.com/2013/10/11/u-s-olympic-committee-adds-sexual-orientation-to-anti-discrimination-policy/> (accessed Jun 1, 2014)

<sup>147</sup> “IOC president: Heavy security, gay rights issue won't detract from Sochi Olympics”, *Fox News*, Feb 4 2014 <http://www.foxnews.com/sports/2014/02/04/ioc-president-heavy-security-gay-rights-issue-wont-detract-from-sochi-olympics/> (accessed Jun 1, 2014)

<sup>148</sup> Mcclam, Erin. “Open Games' Set After Olympics to Protest Antigay Law”, *NBC News*, Feb 19, 2014 <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/sochi-olympics/open-games-set-after-olympics-protest-antigay-law-n33551> (accessed Jun 1 2014)

<sup>149</sup> Gregory, Sean, “Gay Olympian: Let’s Go To Sochi, And Speak Out” *Times*, Aug 3, 2013 <http://keepingscore.blogs.time.com/2013/08/03/gay-olympian-lets-go-to-sochi-and-speak-out/> (accessed Jun 1)

<sup>150</sup> Antonova, Maria. “Russia's Gay Community Opposes Sochi Olympics Boycott Calls”, Hufington Post, Oct 13, 2013 [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/14/russia-gays-sochi-boycott-\\_n\\_4093864.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/14/russia-gays-sochi-boycott-_n_4093864.html) (accessed Jun 3, 2014)



made his position clear by speaking out for diversity and stating that he looked forward to gay and lesbian athletes winning medals. Framing his support in terms of Olympic success, he added that ““If Russia doesn't have gay or lesbian athletes, then, it'll probably make their team weaker””.<sup>151</sup> The presence of gay athletes and symbols of gay culture at the Olympics was presented as a powerful subversive force aimed at disconnecting victory from heteronormativity.

### 3.1.5. Fluid Meaning, Contradictions and Coincidences

Also following the indirect approach, several of the commercials aired during the Olympic opening ceremony pointedly included gay themes in the videos.<sup>152</sup> Olympic sponsor Google chose a rainbow colored “Doodle” image to represent the day of the Olympic Games, providing a link to Principle Six of the Olympic Charter on anti-discrimination<sup>153</sup> (See Image 6). The role of symbols and indirect expression proved particularly important for the Games, even if some actions were more easily interpretable than others. Principle Six became the most widely spread signifier of protest, appearing on an American Apparel clothing line and used by celebrities such as pop singer Rihanna.<sup>154</sup> On a search for hidden meaning, journalists wondered if the German Olympic team’s colorful uniforms were intended to look like a rainbow<sup>155</sup> or if the design resembling a Pussy Riot member on the board of a Russian snowboarder was an intentional sign of protest<sup>156</sup> (See Image 7 a) and c) respectively).

Although both the German team and the snowboarder denied that they were trying to make

<sup>151</sup> “Billie Jean King, Caitlin Cahow will attend the Sochi Games, sending a message about Russia's antigay law”, *Aljazeera*, Dec 18, 2013 <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/12/17/obama-signals-russiawithgaysinolympicdelegation.html> (accessed Jun 1, 2014)

<sup>152</sup> Lowder, Brian, “Bringing Gay to the Games”, *Slate*, Feb 6, 2014 [http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/02/06/sochi\\_olympic\\_gay\\_videos\\_luge\\_and\\_channel\\_4\\_bring\\_gay\\_to\\_the\\_games.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/02/06/sochi_olympic_gay_videos_luge_and_channel_4_bring_gay_to_the_games.html) (accessed Jun 2, 2014)

<sup>153</sup> Debnath, Neela, “Winter Olympics 2014: Google Doodle marks the Sochi Games”, *The Independent*, Feb 7, 2014 <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/winter-olympics-2014-google-doodle-marks-the-sochi-games-9113389.html> (accessed Jun 1, 2014)

<sup>154</sup> Juzwiak

<sup>155</sup> Rayman, Noah. “Germany Says Rainbow Olympic Uniforms Aren’t a Jab at Russian Anti-Gay Laws”, *Times*, Oct 2, 2013 <http://world.time.com/2013/10/02/germany-says-rainbow-olympic-uniforms-arent-a-jab-at-russian-anti-gay-laws/> (accessed Jun 1, 2014)

<sup>156</sup> “Alexei Sobolev: ‘Is the image on the snowboard related to Pussy Riot? Everything is possible’,” (Rus. Алексей Соболев: «Связано ли изображение на доске с Pussy Riot? Все возможно») *Sports*, Feb 6, 2014 <http://www.sports.ru/others/skiing/157515810.html> accessed Jun 1, 2014)

any kind of statement, speculations continued. Identifying rainbows posed a particular challenge, considering the popularity of colorful imagery in sports. The Greek team, for example, defended their suspiciously colorful gloves as representing the colors of “the Olympic rings”, which, admittedly, are also a rainbow<sup>157</sup> (See Image 7b)). The choice of Russian faux-lesbian duo t.A.T.u. at the Games added for more conceptual confusion and was described by many as a “strange” choice considering the Russian government’s stance on public homosexuality. As proclaimed heterosexuals, the singers have a strained relationship to the gay community, which has led to their performance of the 2001 hit “Not Gonna Get Us” to be described as “show of pseudo tolerance”.<sup>158</sup>



**Image 6**

The rainbow Google Doodle of Feb. 7, 2014, the day of the Opening Ceremony of the Sochi Olympics. The image comes with a quote of the non-discrimination clause in the Olympic charter.<sup>159</sup>

<sup>157</sup> Papapostolou, Anastasios, „An Olympic Mix-up: ‘Greece Stands Up for Gay Rights in Sochi with Rainbow Gloves?’,” *Greek Reporter*, Feb. 7, 2014 <http://eu.greekreporter.com/2014/02/07/an-olympic-mix-up-greece-stands-up-for-gay-rights-in-sochi-with-rainbow-gloves/#sthash.zyx6QzPv.dpuf> (accessed Jun 1, 2014)

<sup>158</sup> Zimmerman, Amy, “Yes, the Pseudo-lesbian Band t.A.T.u. Sang at Sochi’s Opening Ceremony,” *The Daily Beast*, Feb 7, 2014 <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/02/07/yes-the-pseudo-lesbian-band-t-a-t-u-sang-at-sochi-s-opening-ceremony.html> (accessed on Jun 2, 2014)

<sup>159</sup> Image source: “Rainbow Google doodle links to Olympic charter as Sochi kicks off”, *The Guardian*, Feb 7, 2014 <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/feb/07/google-russian-anti-gay-laws-winter-olympics> (accessed Jun 1, 2014)





**Image 7**

**a)** German team's almost rainbow uniform is suspected to be a silent form of protest<sup>160</sup>; **b)** Greet team's colorful gloves were suspected to hint at the rainbow flag despite representing the colors of the Olympic rings<sup>161</sup>; **c)** Russian snowboarder Alexey Sobolev carries a board with a design resembling a Pussy Riot member, but declines to comment on whether the choice was politically motivated<sup>162</sup>.

Hijacking of concepts and fluidity of meaning extended beyond wardrobe choices and entered the political debate. English language news sources and Russian media exchanged accusations of manipulating information and ideological bias. Rivalling interviews of a Sochi gay club owner appeared in the Times and the Sochi News, while Western media's treatment of the Sochi Mayor's controversial statement that there are "no gay people in Sochi" was criticized by Russian sources as taken out of context. The statements of Russian politicians contributed to the confusion by putting concepts such as "liberalism", "discrimination" and "diversity" to use in ways that contradict Western conventions. Reacting to accusations about the discriminatory implications of the gay propaganda law, Russian Foreign Minister contended: "We're not discriminating against anyone, we just don't want reverse

<sup>160</sup> Image source: Rayman, *Times*

<sup>161</sup> Image source: Papapostolou, *Greek Reporter*

<sup>162</sup> Image source: Sobolev, *Sports*

discrimination, when one group of citizens gets the right to aggressively impose their values, unsupported by most of the population, especially on children".<sup>163</sup> The phrasing "gay propaganda" itself is similarly confusing and appears almost exclusively in quotation marks within English language media. The Russian President's proclamation of the value of "diversity" for Russia also took the word out of context, removing it from the use by proponents of gay rights and using it in defense of cultural diversity and Russian sovereignty. In his state of nation address, Vladimir Putin lamented the rise of a "genderless and infertile" liberalism in the West that supports the "equality between good and evil".<sup>164</sup> Thus, both "equality" and "liberalism" acquire a different meaning.

### 3.2. *Analysis*

#### 3.2.1. **Re-negotiating the Space of the Political**

What notably characterized the debate surrounding the Sochi Olympics was the question of politics, and more specifically, which venues were acceptable for political activity and which topics could be legitimately considered the subject of politics. Activists and proponents of a full-out boycott criticized the IOC for distancing itself from contested topics and argued, as Stephen Fry did, that all social life is, in fact, political. The more indirect approach, on the other hand, such as was preferred by President Obama, chose a somewhat different notion of the political. By purposefully subverting heteronormativity through the normalization of homosexual presence, such political action was aimed at depoliticizing the issue. Through the use of such apolitical politics, the focus switched from bringing contested questions to a sphere where they could be openly debated. Instead, it became important to establish gay rights within the natural sphere of the apolitical, thus making them undebatable. Somewhat paradoxically, the point of such political action was to show that it

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<sup>163</sup> „Gay Propaganda Ban ‘Not Discrimination’ – Russian FM“, *Ria Novosti*, Feb 26, 2013  
<http://en.ria.ru/russia/20130226/179698723/Gay-Propaganda-Ban-Not-Discrimination--Russian-FM.html>  
 (accessed Jun 1, 2014)

<sup>164</sup> Aron, Leon. "Why Putin Says Russia Is Exceptional," *Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2014  
<http://online.wsj.com/articles/why-putin-says-russia-is-exceptional-1401473667> (accessed Jun 1, 2014)

was not at all political. Instead of demanding change, the gays are “normal people” who “win medals” argument saw as its mission the unveiling of an existing norm. Obama’s framing of Olympic success as dependent on the presence of gay athletes on the team resonates with the capitalist argument of efficiency rather than with an ideological mission for change. What could be extracted from his argument is that the inclusion of homosexuality is a rational decision that stems from a better understanding of the mechanisms that govern social life and such action will naturally be rewarded with success. To contest this issue, and to make it political, is not a question of morality as much as it is a sign of being out of touch with reality.

The official Russian side of the debate would agree on some of these points even if it draws the opposite conclusions. The mere phrasing of the new law as against “gay propaganda” in itself posits homosexuality as a result of misinformation. The Russian government’s attempt to remove the discussion of gay rights from the public sphere entirely is intended to make it into a non-issue altogether. Putin’s claim that homosexuality is detrimental to the country’s population growth frames the issue as simply a question of effective biopolitics. By stating that western societies have chosen to use adoption and gay marriage as a means towards managing their own demographic crisis, Putin presents homosexuality as a problem of inefficiency, a problem he does not wish to borrow along with other, more established elements of liberalism. This highly politicized conflict is, then, a debate about the sphere of the non-political.

It is quite indicative that a proposal was made to adjust the Olympic Charter to include sexual orientation. As a self-proclaimed carrier of the values of peace and cooperation outside the uncomfortable world of politics, the Olympics offer a suitable platform for re-negotiating the limits of the private sphere. As the U.S. Olympics Committee’s adjustment of their non-discrimination clause demonstrates, the unquestionable norm of the private did in fact become subject to change. For the legitimacy of governmentality, it is important that the private remains free of contestation and from the influence of the state. Thus, its re-negotiation did

not occur organically, but only through the encounter with a perverted, misinformed Other. This draws attention to the status of gay rights in the West as a problem for the biopolitical order rather than a fully integrated element of its workings. The IOC did not make the proposed changes to its Charter and gay rights continue to be problematized in Western societies.

### **3.2.2. The Radical Potential of Gay Rights**

From the perspective of efficient biopower, a status Putin's technocratic management style appears to value quite highly, the Western debate over gay rights would appear as a problem, a sign of malfunction rather than a development of liberalism. Russia, as a subaltern empire, may indeed borrow its understanding of what it means to be powerful from the perceived colonizer, in this case the West. Nevertheless, considering how the question of gay rights is polarizing western societies, it would look more like a problem rather than like an achievement from the Russian perspective. Since Western societies have not incorporated gay rights into their "common sense" but continue to debate the issue, Russia has little incentive to see gay rights as an anchor of liberalism. In fact, accentuating gay rights brings to the surface how homosexuality remains outside the definition of the liberal individual. By propagating gay rights, Russia would effectively also risk ending up on the outside.

Gay rights do indeed pose a challenge to the invisibility of the techniques of neoliberal government. By placing established norms of sexuality under question, gay rights challenge the taken for granted delineation of the private sphere. By drawing attention to elements of the private that have not been included in the basic definition of the "free individual" subject of the neoliberal state, gay rights create an entire sphere that the biopolitics of the state have hereto failed to measure and include within the laws of efficiency necessary for the functioning of social order. The very legitimacy of governmentality relies on the naturalization of certain social understandings. If that which is rational comes under question, the sovereign's role as the fixer of meanings becomes revealed. The possibility of the

uncertainty of meaning is detrimental for a functioning “conduct of conduct” as it leaves the “free subjects” of governmentality unable to rely on any fixed principles of self-management. Who precisely constitutes a “free subject” and who does not is a particularly important element of this constellation. The exclusion of criminal, mentally ill and antisocial elements from society defines only those who make decisions according to the set rationality as capable of making rational decisions in the first place. Deviants occupy the sphere of the perverted and irrational. As elements defined by their inability to grasp the rational principles that govern society, social deviants are per definition unable to define their collective interests and build a legitimate political force. And so, when a group emerges that defines its solidarity based on interests not already included within the public sphere, the dominant social order loses the constitutive Other on which its identity relies.

Russian crackdown on gays is not unprecedented in the country’s recent political history. While today the plight of the LGBT community is making the headlines, in 2008 it was “the emo kids”. The Russian government sought to counter the rising trend among Russian youth to wear long fringes that cover their eyes, piercings and large amounts of eyeliner, all signifiers of belonging to the youth subculture trend calling itself “emo” (for “emotional”) that had gained popularity around the world.<sup>165</sup> Accentuating the Western origins of the subculture, the Russian government argued that the negative, authority defying life-outlook supported by members of the emo community pushed Russian teenagers towards self-harm and suicidal tendencies. All of this, of course, was presented as posing a danger to both the demographic problem and, consequently, to the integrity of the country. Similarly to the LGBT community, the emo subculture represents deviance on a personal level. While gay rights activists challenge definitions of sexuality, the emo subculture, and its variants, challenges mainstream conceptions of the appropriate emotionality and happiness. Both

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<sup>165</sup> Michaels, Sean, “Russia wages war on emo kids,” *The Guardian*, Jul 21, 2008 <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/jul/22/russian.emo> (accessed Jun 6, 2014).

movements are about the creation of solidarity based on private, not public, concerns. The formation of groups that politicize the free individual as such tears at the foundation of the technocratic sovereign order. Putin's assertion that Western gay rights have reached the point of equating "good and evil" takes on new meaning within this context. Gay rights attempt to shift the lines between the outside and the inside of society. Making everything "equal" here relates to making everything meaningless, including the sovereign as a fixer of meaning.

### **3.2.3. The Challenge of Center-Periphery Relations to Successful Resistance**

Although gay rights pose a promising potential for resistance, the claims to universality and naturalness that underlie such resistance can become subsumed within the biopolitical order through the mechanism of identity politics. Scholars have criticized certain trends in LGBT movements that, despite successfully spreading awareness of homosexuality simultaneously avoid any resolution and undermine the potential for resistance. A "new homonormativity" can be observed in Western cultures that is characterized by a "neoliberal sexual politics that upholds heteronormative institutions while depoliticizing gay culture, which then becomes 'anchored in domesticity and consumption'".<sup>166</sup> The flourishing "gay wedding industry" as well as the phenomenon of the "pink dollar" are a case in point. The American gay cultural staple of "coming out" as well as the wide usage of the term "gay pride" may appear to signify an active entry into the public sphere. But, by contributing to the construction of gay identity as such, these traditions more closely resemble identity politics.

I would like to argue that the explosion of consumer products relating to protesting Sochi and Russia could be viewed as a continuation of this tendency. As an identity marker, support for the gay community becomes related to progressivity. The associations with creativity and critical thinking that come with the progressive marker safely position gay rights within the dominant neoliberal order of self-identification without posing any challenge to it. Support for LGBT rights becomes measurable and marketable as part of a wider life-

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<sup>166</sup> Lenskyj, 32

style. Consequently, resistance becomes subsumed within the already given array of consumer choices. The freedom offered by such choices is illusory, as life-style decisions are constitutive of social hierarchies of class, education and wealth. Freedom of sexuality loses its universal claims as soon as it becomes coupled with identity markers that, through mechanisms of negative definition, must exclude certain groups in order to remain meaningful. As similar example is, once again, the dark aesthetic of subcultural groups such as goths, punks and emos. Since these subcultures took root among the lower classes in the 1970s and 80s, many of the signifiers, such as torn clothing, brightly colored hair, aggressive jewelry consisting of spikes and chains, etc. have entered mainstream western fashion. Subcultural styles, by embracing disorder, deviance and the creative potential of human suffering, initially presented a rejection of the elitism of the upper classes. In the meantime, these styles have been recoded as acceptable, and often quite expensive, means of expressing individual eccentricity and sexual confidence.

While resistance proper aims to redefine the type of individual capable of making choices in the first place, commodified resistance turns the question around, presenting the failure to make such a choice as a result of individual, not systemic, ineffectiveness. Thanks to the Sochi Olympics, celebrities could inspire their fans by boycotting vodka and posting instagrams of themselves wearing a “Principle 6” hat. In the meantime, a teenager could go into an image-branded store and buy underwear that proclaim support for LGBT rights in Russia. Google managed re-enforce its image as a bringer of progress by uploading a rainbow colored image to its site and companies widened their consumer base through socially conscious statements supporting diversity. Russian intolerance towards the public expression of homosexuality has facilitated the incorporation of LGBT rights into the liberal consumer culture, where resistance could be rationalized as an intelligent choice.

The international treatment of gay rights in Russia belongs to a wider trend. As has been pointed out by critics of the Obama administration, support for gay rights appears to

have taken on a somewhat provocative character within U.S. foreign policy, whereby “[o]penly gay ambassadors are now placed in largely religious countries. Gay celebrations are now held in US embassies even in countries, like Pakistan, where such parties are calculated to deeply offend ... religious sensibilities and beliefs”.<sup>167</sup> Although the critique comes from a religious-conservative source, the observation about the provocative use of gay rights is quite interesting. The mentioned gay celebration at the U.S. embassy in Islamabad in 2011, for example, was openly condemned by religious groups in the country as “cultural terrorism” (“Pakistan...”) and served to polarize the political environment. Scholars have been critical of the international gay rights movement particularly for framing sexual orientation in terms of Western individualism. Apart from limiting possible forms of homosexual expression, tying homosexuality to pro-Western political affiliations, which revolve around various other economic and diplomatic problems, serves to only further disadvantage sexual minorities (Massad: 382). Simultaneously, local grassroots movements are less likely to develop forms of empowerment that do not work within the liberal model.

The power of identity politics to subsume resistance relies on a two-fold process of exclusion, one internal and the other external. I would like to argue that the gay rights discourse surrounding the Sochi Olympics demonstrates the role of the external Other for the manner in which neoliberal societies come to terms with their internal issues. Gay rights challenge the legitimacy of sovereignty by drawing attention to the political nature of what constitutes the claimed natural private sphere. Thus, the sovereign can no longer guarantee to its subjects their own freedom from perversion, since the lines between the rational and the perverted have become blurred. In the threat of unfreedom, the power of the sovereign becomes revealed. For the rationality of governance to maintain its applicability, resistance against sovereignty must enter the definition of the free, self-reflecting subject. The perverted,

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<sup>167</sup> Ruse, Austin, “Putin is not the gay bogeyman,” *The Daily Caller*, July 25, 2013  
<http://dailycaller.com/2013/07/25/putin-is-not-the-gay-bogeyman/> (accessed Jun 3, 2014)



irrational outside must be found elsewhere, not only internally, on the level of criminal or anti-social behavior, but also externally, on the level of regime type. Russia's passing of the gay propaganda law offered an opportunity for western societies to strengthen their self-definition against the image of a space where the unnatural element of the sovereign continues to infringe on the freedom of the people. This way, the conflict between the liberal individual and the state becomes externalized and attributed to the Other. Within the tradition of post-colonial and neo-marxist scholarship outlined in the theoretical chapters of this research, scholars have argued how capitalist expansion both re-creates the neoliberal subject in newly acquired territories and, simultaneously, exports its cultural conflicts in order to maintain stability in the center. This has shown precedents within feminist activism as well as with LGBT rights. The image of the oppressed Muslim woman has figured prominently both in arguments for humanitarian intervention and within feminist scholarship and activism. Contrasting the life of Western women against societies where, for example, women must fight for basic rights such as education, works towards reducing the feminist cause to a basic level that Western societies had already defined and institutionalized, thus making it, seemingly, non-issue at home. Simultaneously, by identifying with marginalized groups abroad, the liberal subject can avoid drawing parallels between oppressive politics in other countries to power mechanisms at home.

## Conclusion

The gay rights discourse surrounding the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics in Russia sparked an international discussion about the role of politics in neutral international events such as the Olympics. Many called for a full boycott of the Games as a form of opposing Russia's recent law against "gay propaganda" among minors. Although no actual boycott took place, several heads of state, including President Obama, did not attend the opening ceremony. Those who could not boycott the Games turned to lobbying for Olympic sponsors to take a firm stance against Russia. Other large companies join the movement, either by launching gay-rights related merchandise or spreading awareness through marketing and social media platforms. Others preferred a more indirect approach that would normalize gay presence in the non-political sphere. By wearing symbols of gay culture during the Games, critics of Russia's treatment of the gay community hoped to send a message of tolerance without directly politicizing the issue. A common argument put forward by activists and supporters of LGBT rights was that sexual orientation was falsely presented as a political issue. Consequently, it was proposed that the non-discrimination clause of the Olympic Charter should be reformulated to include sexual orientation.

I have argued that the Sochi Olympics provided an opportunity for western societies to re-enforce liberal identities in the face of a more oppressive Other. Heteronormativity is far from abolished in leading western states and gay rights continue to be widely contested. Thus, it is indicative that such a wide consensus condemning Russia was visible. Russia's role as the West's irrational, uncanny Other is helpful for explaining this development. By exporting the problem of gay rights to the periphery, the Western liberal core could take a further step towards normalizing gay rights at home. The wide involvement of consumer culture in the coding of gay rights resistance surrounding the Olympics represented the rationalization of gay rights activism within the western mechanisms of identity politics. I have argued that,

once resistance becomes coded in terms of existing identity politics, its potential to challenge neoliberal biopolitics becomes lost.

The Russian case may present a slightly different environment. Although the gay propaganda law was instated to ensure that gay rights do not enter the public sphere, government crackdown on a minority group can lead to active politicization. Additionally, without subsumption through identity politics, gay rights may figure as a point of solidarity for political action. Although, it is worth considering how becoming caught up in the East-West binary characteristic of Russian society may have a similarly detrimental effect on social resistance. Unlike the commodification of resistance that occurred in liberal societies, it is possible that resistance can take on more political forms in the Russian case. Only time will tell.

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