CHAPTER 14

The "Woman Question"

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In the second half of the nineteenth century, few social problems were deemed more urgent in Russia than those of sexuality and female emancipation: indeed the issues referred to collectively as the "Woman Question" (*Zhenskii vopros*) were seen as inseparable from the most fundamental decisions regarding how society was to be organized. A series of questions about women's social roles (were women to be emancipated or not, maternal or not, educated or not?) were tied to thorny economic, religious, legal, and political issues at a time when institutions were "modernizing" (or Westernizing) with disorienting speed. Especially as the state worked to implement vast legal and social changes (Alexander II's "Great Reforms" described in Chapter 6) aimed at restructuring many sectors of Russian society, Tolstoy was not alone in raising questions about the traditional family's ability to sustain itself in modernity. Both canonical and less canonical works by his contemporaries implied similar reservations, with some looking ahead to various brave new worlds in which all such problems would be resolved. But even by the standards of an era preoccupied with the Woman Question, Tolstoy's intense focus on questions of sex and gender is remarkable.

Women's roles in Russian novels were conditioned by laws and social mores that often differed sharply from those elsewhere. In France, for example, the 1804 Napoleonic Code put men in control of virtually all property, whereas in Russia as early as the eighteenth century, married women enjoyed the right to own and manage their own property. Yet despite their legal rights, Russian women had traditionally lived under strict and even tyrannical patriarchal control, with husbands and fathers exercising enormous power over wives and children. Since the patriarch's power within the family mirrored that of the autocrat at the level of the state (and that of serf-owners over their human property), it is not surprising that reform-minded Russians tended to favor the more or less radical revision of "traditional family values" (see Chapter 15). In fact,

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progress itself could be associated with change in family structure, including the emancipation of women within, beyond, and even from the family, an institution that some judged to be irredeemably backward.

Direct impetus for the Woman Question's emergence can be traced to anguished soul-searching and loosened censorship following the Crimean War and the death of Nicholas I (1855). Women's issues had been publicly raised in earlier decades (for example, in debates about women's education and in discussions of George Sand, whose scandalous novels questioned the possibility of sexual and emotional satisfaction within the traditional family). But the first systematic treatment of the Woman Question as a social issue came only after 1858, when poet-publicist M.L. Mikhailov began publishing a series of articles (mostly in *The Contemporary*) arguing for women's rights. Refuting well-known anti-feminist French writers Jules Michelet and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (who claimed women were biologically and intellectually inferior), Mikhailov argued that women – like blacks in America, he noted – had simply not been given opportunities for development. In 1860 he published a Russian translation of Harriet Taylor Mill's and John Stuart Mill's 1851 essay "The Enfranchisement of Women": and while the issue of enfranchisement had no relevance in Russia, the Mills' argument proved important in that it linked "women's emancipation to the whole tendency of extending rights and abolishing the old privileged monopolies of monarchy, aristocracy, and church."[1] In the ensuing decades – that is, throughout most of Tolstoy's adult life – Russian thinkers across the political spectrum were developing these links, debating issues ranging from prostitution and birth control to female peasant labor and socialist sewing collectives. The left in particular emphasized the extent to which women's liberation depended on thoroughgoing social transformation, and even on revolution.

Thus while English novels often looked, implicitly or explicitly, toward an idealized traditional family that was thought to be under threat, Russian novels not infrequently did the opposite.[2] In Nadezhda Khvoshchinskaya's 1861 novella *The Boarding School Girl*, for instance, family life is matter-of-factly equated with institutionalized violence (beatings, coercion). The young provincial heroine asks herself, "What kind of life is this? What's housework – swearing, nonsense, racket all day! . . . it's impossible to live this way."[3] The narrative concludes with her escape from impending marriage: she runs off to Petersburg to become economically self-sufficient (as a translator and copyist), thus joining what the text represents as modernity – an escape that in this case requires an emphatic rejection of

all sexual relationships. Chernyshevsky's extraordinarily influential *What Is to Be Done?* (1863) reveals a similar interest in the liberatory potential of alternative domestic arrangements, but without the rejection of conjugal love: instead, by linking his heroine's political awakening to her sexual emancipation, Chernyshevsky (building on Sand) offers readers both a how-to manual for revolution and a story of happy bigamous domesticity. Dostoevsky – who famously declared that "the contemporary Russian family is becoming more and more an *accidental* family"[4] – found Tolstoy's treatment of family life to be out of step with the times: he claimed that "gentry literature" (*pomeshchich'e slovo*, literally "the landowner's word") had already "said everything it had to say (superbly in the case of Lev Tolstoy)."[5] But in fact Tolstoy's writings repeatedly addressed the most urgent contemporary issues, foremost among them the Woman Question, and his ideological evolution, as we will see, was toward increasing radicalism.

As early as his first novel *Family Happiness* (1859), the story of what starts out as a love match between a very young woman and an older man, Tolstoy was thinking about how mythologies of romantic love and the institution of marriage could deform women's lives. *Family Happiness* ends by suggesting that perhaps the best a married woman can hope for is that some attenuated version of conjugal contentment can be achieved – that is, after the possibility of happiness has been renounced and emotional resources have been redirected to the next generation. In a word, the text espouses what today's theorists term "reproductive futurism."[6] *War and Peace*, too, privileges reproduction and future generations above all, a move that obviously requires a significant investment in the heterosexual family ideal. In *War and Peace* an emphatically traditional vision of family life and gender roles helps make possible a certain vision of the Russian nation as a whole, united by blood ties and necessary sacrifice in a story of national survival. Such an emphasis on generational continuity can help naturalize not just gender roles but even institutions like serfdom, which can be construed as a family relation rather than a relation of power (as we see in Tolstoy's early novella *Childhood*, 1852).

Anna Karenina (1875–8) is in large part a cautionary tale about the consequences of unbinding people (especially women) from the family responsibilities that in turn bind all of society together. As an adultery novel, it places the Woman Question in clear relationship to all the other questions facing Russia during the Great Reforms – legal, religious, economic, social – thereby highlighting the fragility not only of marriage, but

of other institutions that structure people's lives: calling marriage into doubt calls *everything* into doubt.[7]

Adultery novels mediate between subjectivity and social constraint by focusing on marriage as the institution where the personal and the political merge most powerfully, where authenticity (which is supposed to be experienced as something personal) and authority (which is supposed to be experienced as something external) are meant to come together. In *Anna Karenina* a somewhat baffling plot element highlights the tensions generated by such expectations: why exactly does Anna decline Karenin's early offer of divorce, and why does Karenin change his mind later when Anna says she wants a divorce? While the text suggests certain motivations that might lie behind both refusals, and while both characters offer their own somewhat garbled reasons for what they do, these explanations are neither conclusive nor sensible. The passages where divorce is discussed are confusing, sometimes contradictory.[8] Even though Anna's dissolute brother assures her that "divorce would completely solve [*razviazyvaet*, literally "untie"] everything" (18:449/Pt. 4, Ch. 21), the text overall seems to imply that divorce offers no real solution: it simply lacks the power to untie the bonds that tie a woman to her husband.

Tolstoy's preoccupation with sexuality, marriage, and women's proper role never diminished. Indeed, in his last decades such concerns become central to his ideas about the entire social order.[9] For late Tolstoy, who advocates (but does not practice) sexual abstinence, what is wrong – very wrong – about sex and marriage cannot be separated from what is wrong with virtually all other social institutions, from the police and the Orthodox Church to the fine arts and the market economy: all are based on coercion and violence. Such subversive ideas find expression in the infamous novella *The Kreutzer Sonata*, which was the subject of intense debate and scandal across the political spectrum. Beginning in 1889, *The Kreutzer Sonata* circulated widely but mostly in illegal form: the authorities did not permit its publication as a separate (i.e. affordable) edition, although Sofia Andreevna Tolstaya was granted permission to include it in the eighth edition of her husband's Collected Works after she personally petitioned the Tsar.[10]

The novella tells the story of an upper-class man who has murdered the wife he suspects has been unfaithful, though the question of her infidelity (did she or didn't she?) is never resolved. Virtually the entire text is taken up by the words of the murderer Pozdnyshev, who narrates the story of his life and crime to an unnamed interlocutor. Their conversation is quite explicitly set up by and as a dialogue on the Woman Question: the text

opens in a train compartment, where a group of passengers representing different social and moral positions (a "progressive" woman, an old patriarchal merchant, etc.) discuss what is to be done about divorce, adultery, courtship, and romantic love inside and outside of marriage. The epigraph is our first signal that the novella's view of what constitutes "adultery" will be expansive: "But I say unto you, that every one that looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matthew 5:28).

And indeed Pozdnyshev ends by asserting that all sexual relations are in effect adulterous, because they cannot be separated from the coercion, injustice, and violence characterizing relations between men and women generally. Thus under current social arrangements, man is "a depraved slave owner" and woman is "an abject and depraved slave," barred from achieving fully human status because she is "an instrument of enjoyment" (27:24–5). Garden-variety misogynistic tropes are right on the surface in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, and readers have never found it difficult to trace their roots to Tolstoy's own biography. "Women, like tsaritsas, hold nine-tenths of the human race in a state of slavery and hard labor," says Pozdnyshev, "simply because they have been deprived of equal rights with men. And so they avenge themselves by acting on our sensuality . . . [making of themselves] a weapon to act upon our sensuality . . . I see in it something that's outright dangerous to people, something against the law; I feel like calling a policeman, appealing for protection from danger" (27:25).

But if we read passages like these as *nothing more than* misogyny, we will fail to see how tightly they are bound to Tolstoy's critiques of other social institutions, including the state writ large. The power imbalance and violence of gender relations mirror the power imbalance and violence between people and the state: hence "the internal ideological relatedness between [Tolstoy's calls for] abstinence and his pacifism."[11] In other words, what is wrong with marriage lies not in sex but in the fact that marriage, like all institutions, perpetuates and justifies power imbalances and violence. What would initially seem to be a jarring parallel between marriage and armies therefore makes sense. This is the logic that underlies the call for total abstinence, even, Tolstoy declares, if it leads to the extinction of humanity: only abstinence can free people, especially women, from the objectification and "slavery" (a recurring word in *The Kreutzer Sonata*) that go along with sex. For late Tolstoy, to be free and good would be to cast off the yoke of sexual desire and reproduction, which would mean creating new forms of sociality premised neither on blood ties nor on sexual and economic exploitation.[12] As extreme as such propositions

sound, they share common ground with ideas that were being put forth by Tolstoy's contemporaries – not a few of whom were calling for the abolition of traditional family structures – as well as with modern-day feminists' and queer theorists' critiques of the family and reproductive futurism.[13]

The Kreutzer Sonata analyzes sex not only in relation to state power, but also in relation to what we would today call consumer capitalism. According to Pozdnyshev, woman is "a slave *in the marketplace*," and modern courtship consists of too many choices among too many indulgences up for sale: maidens display their physical charms ("Choose me, not her! Look at *my* shoulders!") while "men walk about as if at a bazaar, making their selections" (27:23–4, emphasis mine). Indeed in *The Kreutzer Sonata* the life of the rich seems to be characterized above all by a profusion of choices among various pleasures, all of which are linked to sexual profligacy (should I enjoy this culinary delicacy or that one? this woman or that one?). One of these pleasures, as Pozdnyshev suggests, is art: "we all know how a man looks at a woman – 'wine, women and song,' as the poets say. Look at all poetry, all painting and sculpture, starting with love lyrics and those naked Venuses and Phrynes" (27:36).

The art–sex parallel is at the center of another text Tolstoy wrote around this time, *What Is Art?* (1897–8) – a moralizing and rather tortured tract concerning art's role in modern society. Just as *The Kreutzer Sonata* ends by condemning all sex, so *What Is Art?* ends by condemning virtually all art. And the terms of the indictments are strikingly similar: Tolstoy attributes both sexual profligacy and artistic production to the *excesses* made possible by modern life – a link that explains both texts' preoccupation with the mass production made possible by capitalism. *The Kreutzer Sonata*'s Pozdnyshev says, for example, "Go to any big city and walk around the stores. There are millions of them, and it's impossible to estimate the amount of human labor they represent." All this, he claims, is aimed at satisfying women's demands, which grow out of the demands placed on *them* by the sexual marketplace: "Count the factories. The great majority of them make useless ornaments ... for women. Millions of people, generations of slaves, all perishing of hard labor in factories just to satisfy women's whims" (27:25). *What Is Art?* employs arguments and rhetorical techniques akin to Pozdnyshev's, associating art with shameless behavior (naked ballerinas, etc.) and inundating us with numbers and lists to convey a sense of surfeit. Long passages estimate the labor hours devoted to creating works of art ("there are 30,000 artist-painters

in Paris alone"; "if not millions, then at least hundreds of thousands [of books] are typeset and printed . . . millions and millions of working days are spent," 30:158, 119).

The results of modernity's excesses, for both sex and art, are (1) exploitation and (2) the corruption of elites' tastes and desires. According to Tolstoy, in the case of art, these tastes have been "refined" to the point that sophisticates prefer works that are at worst iniquitous (like adultery novels) and at best meaningless (like Symbolist poetry). In the case of sex, so assiduously has the modern marketplace catered to men's desires that they find it normal to organize their lives around satisfying such desires, regardless of the consequences for other people – for instance, leaving women no choice but to sell themselves. The striking radicalism of these positions makes it clear that thinking about the Woman Question led Tolstoy to interrogate the very foundations of the social order.

Notes

1 This paragraph draws on Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism,1860–1930* (Princeton University Press, 1978), 29–63; quote is from 44.
2 Anna A. Berman, "The Family Novel (and Its Curious Disappearance)," *Comparative Literature* 72:1 (2020), 1–18 (at 1).
3 Nadezhda Khvoshchinskaya, *The Boarding School Girl*, trans., intro. and annotated by Karen Rosneck (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 103–4.
4 F.M. Dostoevskii, *Sobranie sochinenii v 15 tomakh* (Leningrad/St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1988–96), vol. XIV, 202–3, emphasis in the original.
5 Ibid., vol. XV, 490.
6 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
7 See Tony Tanner, Introduction to *Adultery in the Novel* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).
8 See for example *Anna Karenina*, III:13, IV:4, 5, 12, 17, 21–3, V:8, 28, VI:21–4, 32, VII:9, 17–19, 25.
9 Ani Kokobobo, "A Sexual Theory of the State – Pacifism, Abstinence, and the Late Tolstoy as Gender Theorist" (forthcoming paper cited by author's permission).
10 On the text's composition, circulation, censorship, and reception, see Peter Ulf Møller, *Postlude to The Kreutzer Sonata: Tolstoj and the Debate on Sexual Morality in Russian Literature in the 1890s* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).
11 Kokobobo, "Sexual Theory of the State."

12 Tolstoy's last novel, *Resurrection* (1899), would also draw attention to the links between sexual exploitation, social institutions, and economic structures, even envisioning a world where all might live as brothers and sisters pursuing the common good.

13 On Tolstoy's contemporaries, see Stites, *Women's Liberation Movement in Russia*, esp. 258–69. On queer theory, see Kokobobo, "Sexual Theory of the State."