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Anastasia Kayiatos

Global Gays/Local Crips: Or, Why Neoliberalism Needs Russia's (Retarded) Orphans

Between Pussy Riot in prison and Edward Snowden shacking up at Sheremetevo airport, Russia has been so hot in the American headlines lately, it's like the Cold War never ended. And though America hastened a conclusion to that earlier episteme, even implementing shock therapy to quickly convert Russia to the good side of global capital, the no-longer-communist country seems no less a backward and evil empire to us today. This contribution to the conference theme of "cripping development" homes in on the Russian state's recent promulgation of homophobic legislation, foremost among these, the law against "gay propaganda" which applies to Russian nationals and foreigners on Russian territory; and the ban on the adoption of Russian children by Americans (called the Dima Yakovlev or Anti-Magnitsky Act), and LGBT Americans and Russians alike. While the former splits political opinions along predictable lines in the US, the latter legislation against transnational adoption has found detractors on both sides of the aisle, amidst religious conservatives and progressive advocates of gay rights. Curiously common to both groups is the critique that the ones who will suffer most from the law are Mother Russia's disproportionately high number of developmentally-delayed and maladjusted orphans--an implicit indictment of the failed Russian family and the propitious expansion of American kinship forms. Suspending judgment on the laws themselves, this paper considers the multiple rhetorical roles played for its American audience by the crip orphan in contemporary Russia. It argues that Russia's unadoptable children are the inheritors of a cold-war discourse about the country's own developmental delay under an alternative anti-capitalist modernity; at the same time, they animate homonormative and homonational discourses of futurity embodied in the figure of the Child; and finally, most significantly, this new lost generation of post-communist crips disables critiques about neoliberalism writ large, especially with respect to the privatization of care and other basic human needs of the sort that state socialism, however hollowly, promised to provide for its population.