COMMENTARY

What is Pussy Riot's 'Idea'?

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It goes without saying that the Pussy Riot trial was an even more obscene performance of power than the punk prayer in the church itself. But the most 'avant-garde' and cynical part of this 'power performance' started not today, not a year ago, and probably not just in Russia either. If we refresh our memories, we find that all over the globe the power of the state is producing some most impressive and provocative performances. How else can we understand the Assange case, for example?

While 'Western' liberals admired the heroism and sacrifice of these 'Eastern' dissidents fighting for democracy and freedom of speech, sixteen ordinary participants in anti-Putin protests were arrested in an equally performative manner in mid-May 2012 and have already spent five months in prison. As this received no public attention, perhaps we should ask: what makes the Pussy Riot case so special? Why have well-known pop stars and public figures stood up in support of the group? In his recent letter of support for Pussy Riot, Slavoj Žižek wrote:

> Their message is: IDEAS MATTER. They are conceptual artists in the noblest sense of the word: artists who embody an Idea. This is why they wear balaclavas: masks of de-individualization, of liberating anonymity. The message of their balaclavas is that it doesn't matter which of them are arrested — they're not individuals, they're an Idea. And this is why they are such a threat: it is easy to imprison individuals, but try to imprison an Idea![1]

When it comes to Pussy Riot, everyone is looking for something, but is this something really the creation of universal meaning?

For liberals, the band's performance laid bare the authoritarian essence of the Putin regime. The local intelligentsia echoes this and speaks about the emergence of new dissident martyrs in Russia. Pussy Riot do not oppose this point of view. Nadezhda Tolokonnikova quotes Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and in her closing statement in court proclaimed herself the successor to the spirit of Soviet dissidence. Some feminists have understood 'Punk Prayer' as an attempt to attack the patriarchal state, and Pussy Riot declared themselves, from the very beginning, to be radical feminists. In texts, interviews and performances the band's main point was feminist criticism of the modern Russian state. Artists and critics speak of a 'new actionism' in Russia; some even foresee a Russian 1968. For socialists and communists, the main positive effect of the performance was to produce a splash of anti-clerical critique in communities of ordinary believers and among the majority of anti-Putin protesters. Finally, anarchists and others leftists focus on the anonymity of the group, its secret spirit, the risky character of its interventions and the tactics of direct action that are for many the symbol of a multitude in revolt. All this is true. But many knew about Pussy Riot for the first time only when three women took off their balaclavas in a court building.

Does this mean that the Pussy Riot moment grasps the universal meaning of the contemporary world drama? If so, the drama of this world is that feminism can be

mixed up with liberalism, and dissident moralism with the values of 1968. The sense of these things probably lies elsewhere. Here, I shall concentrate on various effects of the Pussy Riot affair and present some details of its context as symptoms of unresolved antagonisms in public life and culture in Russia.

New digital dissidents

The phenomenon of Pussy Riot is part of a media activist subculture, on the one hand, and an actionist movement in art, on the other. This media and Internet culture arose under post-Soviet conditions as a reaction to the total depoliticization of society after a series of economic, social and ecological catastrophes: the dissolution of the USSR, the constitutional crisis and the attack on the White House in 1993, economic 'shock therapy', the default of 1998, two Chechen wars, and the blowing up of houses and an anti-terrorist paranoia that became a part of daily life. These catastrophic times provoked mistrust of any form of public politics and created armies of shocked subjects, plunged into the pleasures of consumption and private life during the so-called 'Putin stability'.[2] In this context, activists used popular social networks as tactical media for mobilization, information, agitation and for sharing ideas. This was the context in which Pussy Riot emerged as a separate initiative by ex-Voina group activists.[3]

A great deal of empirical sociological research was undertaken during the 2000s into the use of blogs and social networks as alternative platforms for the creation of communities in post-Soviet Russia. Cyberspace was understood as a new underground for the intelligentsia, a retreat from the brutal reality of post-Soviet life and a permitted place for texts, comments and social experiments that were dubious from the point of view of official politics. Most of this research describes the Russian Internet as an alternative public sphere, compensating for the lack created by the cleaning up of social and political space. In this regard, cyberspace was for many liberals a small land of 'civil society' with its own communities, heroes and leaders, and the political meanings of these digital communities were up for discussion. There was a strong belief in the Habermasian utopia of the public sphere with its discursive competition between different groups.[4] Once submerged in salons and cafés, it could be found again in post-communist cyberspace. The main task of such commentaries was to show a rising democracy in Russia, despite all the conservative tendencies of official politics.

However, there are many reasons to think that, on the contrary, retreat into cyberspace and the peculiar subjectivity prevailing in its community-based networks was the result of the horrifying violence of the 1990s and a symptom of the rebirth of the repressive state in the 2000s. 'Internet dissidents' mirrored the disintegration of social relations, and their communities emerged in the wake of the collapse of official politics and social status; in universities, workplaces, art and other cultural fields there were many self-organized initiatives which combined the idea of setting up alternative institutions with a desire for official recognition by the state and capital. In the middle of the 2000s, the creativity of such dissidents was invested in ambitious projects, and many of them became supervisors of new pro-government institutions, workers for big international media corporations, or leaders and managers of new political parties.

Another important outcome of this system was mistrust of any form of formalized discourse, with established definitions and intellectual histories. This type of consciousness was born of a situation of post-shock aphasia, when the right words to explain what is going on just cannot be found. When all that one has to use are the different pieces – words, discourses and traditions – scavenged from past and present, the result is no more than a strange artistic collage. Cyberspace is populated by communities of 'postmodern orthodoxy' or 'liberal cosmists', alongside alternative cultural forums. In the middle of the stagnant 2000s, with the swift politicization of this milieu, a bizarre mixture of conservative, liberal and 'cynical-postmodernist' ideas was digested and normalized by Pussy Riot activists in a more speculative way.

In the post-shock society, where alternative politics is relegated to the ghetto and official public life is concentrated on the affirmative rituals of representatives of power, the only way to break the situation of passivity and silence is – somehow – to practise this hysterical and obscene speech. There are no other tools to use. This is why actionism became the main artistic movement in Russia and always had a strong political spirit. All the actions that were produced during this period depended on public scandal to distort the surface of a fake 'stability'.

Only the brave parrhesiast can speak to power in this situation, because this power was always personified, and with the expectation and emergence of a leader the response of power was always personal too. In such situations people search for face-to-face relations and if there are none, they feel abandoned. It is thus to 'The Face of Power' – president, church and the police – that actionists address their provocations. It started with the now-famous performance by Alexander Brener of 'Boxing Champion (The First Glove)' in Red Square in 1995. Dressed in shorts and boxing gloves, Brener stationed himself in the place for executions near St Basil's Cathedral and began to shout: 'Yeltsin! Come here! Yeltsin! Come here!' This and many other examples show that playing 'Punk Prayer' in church has a long art history behind it.

The history of political actionism in Russia is a history of scandals. It seemed that only in this way was it possible to dissolve the sedimented contradictions and change the balance of power in society. After the mass mobilization of protest in Russia in 2011–12, it looked as if the epoch of scandals had come to an end. At first, Pussy Riot's performances, born in a situation of apolitical stagnation, were perceived as inadequate to the moment. However, after the arrests of the band's members and other activists, it became clear that underground times can react back on local realities and give them a new look.

One lesson of the Pussy Riot case lies in the fact that local activism and radical art can survive only if they are visible in media space. To cause a scandal and maintain its effects requires of the artist-activist the creation of a powerful image and a heroic self-representation, as well as a strong organization and a smart technology of action, to go from point A to point B. In this realm, 'anything goes': provocations, PR, advertisement or the recycling of old myths.

The dark side of the Pussy Riot multitude is an extreme individualism, manifest in the gesture of the removed balaclavas, behind which a unique 'Russianness' appears: first, the face of the leader, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova; second, dissident moralism, spirituality and asceticism – the brand identity of Russian revolutionaries since the populist movement of the nineteenth century; and third, the visibility of the local art and intellectual scenes as such. Tolokonnikova wrote:

> The people that I have had the chance to work with during my actionist years were quite unusual for Moscow. They were not interested in money or comfort… They preferred not to spend time and their consciousness, which was ready to include and transform everything around them, on the daily grind and the striving for creature comforts. When they wanted to eat, they would break a loaf of bread. Their hearts were not heavy from either overeating or drunkenness. Their minds were fully occupied with whatever they were currently working on. They worked a lot, with fervor and enthusiasm. Even their knowledge of the fact that they might have to pay for their activities with prison did not stop them.[5]

We are all Pussy Riot in the sense that without masks we are of the touching, phantasmatic East – wild, risky and unknown. If I speak of an 'Eastern exotic' it is without any cynicism towards to the group. Thanks to Pussy Riot our local political and artistic scene has at last received some attention. We are now very busy: curators make exhibitions about Pussy Riot, activists give lectures about Pussy Riot, and intellectuals and art critics, like myself, write texts about Pussy Riot…

Searching for 'likes'

Sitting recently in a café in the company of various activists and artists after a cultural event in Moscow, a young and impassioned activist, who had impressed the oppositional milieu with her speeches in recent protest rallies, introduced her friend to me as a 'Voina group activist and author of Pussy Riot projects'. The unknown author just nodded and continued tapping his iPad. I wondered what authorship might mean in this case, and got the following answer: 'it means to be effective in PR and to know how to make things work'. In the background, someone tried to talk about the most recent political events in Russia, but it was impossible to follow this interesting conversation because the situation looked too much like a scene from a film. Phlegmatic guy in Tarantino movie style and ambitious young girl with red lipstick are sitting close to each other, permanently checking Facebook accounts, posting comments from time to time or expressing general criticism of key oppositional figures. 'He is our main political technologist. Media visibility is very important for the Left as they are still very marginal', she said, and they both continued to click on Facebook. She explained to me that after her experience giving speeches on mass demonstrations she had decided to study performing art with an older actress. It was clear that her secret author and PR adviser had emerged from an oppositional liberal subculture and she was proud to have turned him towards the Left.

Later I learned that 'to know how to make things work' means to put street politics into the field of technology and media. The problem of the marginal position of the Left and the strong anti-communist mood in post-Soviet society is to be solved through the creation of attractive pop images of its activists. The secret director of the Pussy Riot performances introduced me to the idea of the necessity of invisible choreography for underground activism – nothing to do with a clandestine way of life, but the creation of a tactical media methodology which can borrow from pop culture and commercial advertisements. During the evening he shared a lot of this knowledge with us and explained very quickly this new philosophy with living examples. He asked his friend to 'put more feminism in comments on Facebook', to 'be more careful with words, use the same statements, especially in interviews' and set up 'a new "public figure" account on Facebook'. The results were visible by the next day.

The situation of openness and uncertainty after the recent presidential election shifted the atmosphere of 'Putin stability' for a few years, but the result of this long struggle was the emergence of large number of confused people, awakening after ten years of depolitization and hesitating between different oppositional forces. The social and political composition of the protest was unstable from the very beginning, but the dominance of 'middle-class' citizens, students, managers, cultural and educational workers in the anti-Putin movement was obvious. Virtual space is the only place for communication with these active oppositional forces preoccupied with the idea of recruiting such people to their side. For all of them, everyday activism was transformed

into a hunt for 'likes' on Facebook. These 'head-hunter leftists' try to recruit the progressive part of the movement: students, art bohemia and cultural workers of all sorts.

There is nothing surprising in the Facebook obsession, since the possibilities for political debate in the public sphere in Russia are extremely limited, and after the Pussy Riot story these limitations have become even more severe, along with the repression of activists. What is more ridiculous is that after the mass mobilization against Putin, some Russian leftists have arrived at the modernist – I would say Leninist – belief in the centrality of media. Lenin's 'First, we have to take the post, the telegraph and the bridges and finally we will take power' was transformed into the primacy of the Internet and television. At this point I discovered that something new had arrived in the local left community: an after-Pussy-Riot syndrome or 'will to likes'.

Beyond the face

So, to return to my point of departure: what is the Idea of Pussy Riot? It would seem that Pussy Riot represents the generalized aspect of a resisting mass of people, an assemblage of the discontented of the entire world – liberals, human rights defenders, leftists of all kinds, feminists, atheists (and not just atheists – some members of the band have stated publicly that they are truly religious, but against the Orthodox Church as a corrupt institution) and even depoliticized philistines. This monolithic construct reduces the mass of people with different political views and beliefs to the 'universal' category of the discontented, returning us to a liberal idea of a confrontation between the human and the state machine. This is a dangerous simplification, ignoring the inner multiplicity of political qualities and social differences.

However, the post-Soviet world reproduces this Noah's Ark within itself. The protesters' milieu in Russia recruits a part of the radical Left, more liberals and nationalists, some previously apolitical people; all of them attending the same protest rallies, after which they discuss together at the same newborn committees and civil forums. Behind their masks, Pussy Riot took care of this whole mixed bag of people. This is why we are once again back with the Habermasian utopia of the public sphere, proclaimed by local liberal media theorists in the 2000s – cyberspace actively moving in offline space. All these processes reinforce the belief in representative democracy, which, according to this logic, should replace the authoritarian regime. So, the Idea of Pussy Riot would be Freedom itself, a perverted 'Hegelian' response to the question.

The forced expansion of images into social life started long ago, in the early colonial period, when religious paintings played the role of 'agitation and propaganda' for the values of new authorities, and images have served for many centuries as a powerful instrument of control.[6] More recently, the hope has arisen that one can use new media technologies differently, recoding stamps of mass culture according to progressive and critical ideas. The Pussy Riot case opens up criticism of the politics of tactical media practised widely in the activist milieu, and its ways of distributing subversive images, information or discourses. The focal point of this critique should be an analysis of the circulation of images under the conditions of global capitalism, the system of coding/decoding images, the loss of meanings and the proliferation of new meanings dependent upon particular contexts.

So what subversive meanings are produced in the imagery of Pussy Riot? Besides the representation of the dance of the discontented of the world, it reintroduces the good old ideology of the struggle of personality against an oppressive regime. The story reproduces a standard Hollywood format: a hero stands against the dark forces of evil. The balance of power is unequal but the result should be moral victory and the ethical supremacy of the resisting individual, while at the same time political defeat is predictable and unavoidable. Pussy Riot have turned discussion of social and political demands into dissident ethics. The Pussy Riot balaclavas are not the Guy Fawkes masks

of people crowded in the square in *V for Vendetta*. The thousands of protesters do not fit the narrative of lonely heroes, but the old Soviet dissident logic recognizes only 'personality' in the revolt against the authorities.[7] As a result, the faces and personal stories of the members of Pussy Riot have become of central importance. A humanization of the victims on trial passed through a self-promoted media campaign, which made public their way of life (ascetic, selfless devotion), personal life (parents, babies, husbands) and other biographical details.

In her book *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler analyses media technologies of victims' images. The narrative of a victim always starts with a first-person point of view, recognized through its address to the history of a family, an education and a way of life. Such a victim will be humanized and legitimized as such. This humanization strengthens the feeling of being protected, allows identification with the victim, distinguishes her or his story, and gets in touch emotionally. The mask, on the other hand, the absence of the victim's face, conveys the impossibility of saying 'I'. Butler insists that the first-person narrative should be replaced by speaking in the third or second person. We can only hope that, in our context, this politics of personification and media visibility can be turned upside down, beyond the face. Maybe then we won't need masks anymore and the culture of 'likes' will be unnecessary. Maybe then we will get a more vital Idea.

This was what we expected from Pussy Riot. We expected to hear the story from the second- or third-person point of view, which was so important for their early performances. We don't want to see what is beyond the mask but what the mask is, itself. We would like to know who are these hes and shes for whom Pussy Riot is fighting. We would like to know what these hes and shes can do together, how they can collaborate, and for what they should struggle – for human rights, for smashing down a tyranny, or for a 'free market' unburdened by authoritarianism, or a new, just world for all? We would like to understand together and to learn more about these hes and shes, and we want to come to a common political viewpoint. And we would also like a more active solidarity campaign for the sixteen anonymous activists arrested on 6 May 2012 in Moscow, and for those hes and shes who are being arrested elsewhere, in so many other countries.

Notes

1. Slavoj Žižek, 'The True Blasphemy', http://chtodelat.wordpress.com/2012/08/07/the-true-blasphemy-slavoj-zizek-on-pussy-riot/
2. See Maria Chekhonadskikh and Alexei Penzin, 'From One Election to Another: Breakthroughs and Deadlocks of the Anti-Putin Movement in Russia, *Mediations*, vol. 26, no. 1, Summer 2012.
3. *Voina* (War) is a Russian actionist group known for their provocative political performances in public spaces. Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and her husband Petr Verzilov were members of Voina until 2009. The group came to public attention after the performance 'Fuck for the heir Puppy Bear', staged the day before the presidential election in 2008. Five couples had public sex in the Moscow State Museum of Biology. The title is a play on words – the patronymic surname of the elected president 'Medvedev' means 'bear' and the bear is also a symbol of the ruling United Russia party. Two members of the group were arrested for the performance 'Palace Revolution' in 2011, during which they overturned seven empty police cars. They were charged with hooliganism but released after several months because of strong international and local support.
4. See, for example, the website of a research group that studied the Russian Internet during the 2000s: www.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/russ-cyb/project/en/project.htm.
5. Nadia Tolokonnikova's closing statement on the Pussy Riot website: http://freepussyriot.org/content/nadia-tolokonnikovas-closing-statement.
6. One particularly interesting project problematizing the colonial politics of images is *Potoci Principle* by Alice Creischer, Andreas Siekmann and Max Jorge Hinderer, between art and theory. The curators of the project researched Bolivian colonial paintings and based several exhibitions, seminars and publications on them. See the project website: http://potosiprincipleprocess.wordpress.com.
7. I owe this observation to historian and activist Ilya Budraitskis, who in his analysis of Pussy Riot paid special attention to the legacy of soviet dissidents: Ilya Budraitskis, 'Pussy Riot: Ethics, Politics and New Dissidents?' (in Russian) at: http://polit.ru/article/2012/08/27/ilbdr270812.
8. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, London, 2004, pp. 5–18, 31–8.