

Is sextremism the new feminism? Perspectives from Pussy Riot and Femen

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As Pussy Riot has changed the face of political protest in Russia, to the south, Ukraine has seen the emergence of Femen, famous for their topless protests against everything from sex tourism and trafficking to hot water shut-offs in Kyiv to sexism in the Ukrainian government to Putin's visits to Ukraine. Their concurrent appearance in the post-Soviet sphere encourages a discussion around the mobilization of sexuality as protest in the region. Both groups appropriate sexual language and imagery as well as physical sexuality in protest of their current regimes. This article engages the question of similarities between the two groups' efforts and considers what differences structure their political goals and philosophies. What potential does the global visibility of these groups have to influence an emerging women's movement, and, more generally, how can sexuality be harnessed as a unifying force in anti-government activism in post-socialist Russia and Ukraine?

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Following the outcry against the arrest and imprisonment of three members of Pussy Riot (and the subsequent release of Yekaterina Samutsevich), the media presence of the punk collective has fluctuated. Femen has been consistently prevalent in recent media, particularly because of their recent actions against Islamic fundamentalism. I suggest that this is related to each group's definition of and potential influence on feminism, as both Femen and Pussy Riot call themselves feminist, yet for different reasons. Much of my perspective

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is framed by the question of what makes an action or a group feminist. Femen famously claims to be feminists (in their words, “sextemist feminists”) heralding a new wave of feminism by using their nude bodies in protest. This has included one Femen activist cutting down a wooden cross with a chainsaw while nude – in response to the sentencing of the Pussy Riot activists.

Pussy Riot also claims a feminist worldview, but, as Korkach (2012) points out, Pussy Riot’s mobilizations have not focused particularly on women’s rights. Femen, on the other hand, often frames actions around women’s rights (including a recent misguided response to attacks on women’s reproductive rights in which Femen activists climbed the bell tower of St Sofia Cathedral – an Orthodox church – and rang the bell “for women’s rights” while neglecting to recognize that the attacks came from the Ukrainian Catholic Church, a completely different entity). Ultimately, however, Pussy Riot’s version of feminism resonates more strongly both with self-identified feminists in the USA as well as among student activists in Ukraine, some of whom mobilized around the Pussy Riot sentencing with an action organized in a student camp in Crimea, in which I participated during the summer of 2012.

Pussy Riot’s feminism is not just about women’s rights, which makes it more powerful – and therefore more dangerous. It is rooted in an understanding of global patriarchy, which the current Russian political regime embodies in extremely destructive ways. Their protests against Vladimir Putin’s presidency, his links with the church, and the failure – or inability – of any other politician to throw a wrench into Putin’s monopoly are not just about governance but about how governance affects Russians and their possibility for dissent. Women’s rights are bound up within Pussy Riot’s broader critique of current Russian politics, and their protests reflect a global criticism of stagnant regimes and of continuing repression of dissenting voices.

How are sexuality and gender being mobilized in dissent? Femen activists, of course, are famous for their toplessness, which they claim symbolizes them as feminists, as a women’s movement, as gatekeepers of democracy, and also as representations of a desirable and attractive womanhood. Many disagree that this selective nudity is a feminist act in itself. Perhaps in part agreeing with such a sentiment, Pussy Riot members distanced themselves from Femen’s action in support of the band of cutting down the cross which, according to some reports (Tayler 2012), was erected in memory of the victims of Stalinist repression. While a Femen leader linked this denial with pressure from the authorities, I think it is equally likely that Pussy Riot is actually disavowing Femen’s methods.

At the same time, one Pussy Riot member has participated in her share of nude protests: Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, as a member of the protest group *Voyna* (from which Pussy Riot is an offshoot) was part of an action in the zoological museum in Moscow protesting against the presidential elections in 2008 in which almost a dozen participants were photographed and filmed having sex in the museum. Sexuality was used here in an effort to link with then-president Dmitrii Medvedev’s focus on reproduction and increasing the birth rate. (Tolokonnikova was pregnant at the time of the action.) While Pussy Riot as a group did not perform this action, it is interesting to note that one future Pussy Riot member was central in its performance. It is also intriguing that Pussy Riot has cultivated a much more androgynous image, as they are known much more for bright colors and balaclavas than for being excessively feminized or sexualized.

The comparison of Femen’s and Pussy Riot’s actions provides a lens for reflecting on the role of sexuality in protest, and particularly in feminist protest. If feminist movements actively challenge both gender inequality and patriarchy, as many suggest (Basu 2010; Beckwith 2000; Mohanty 1986, 2003), the effectiveness of Femen is questionable. While Femen is currently working to open “branches” around the world – most successfully

in Paris and Brazil, and less successfully in Tunisia – they seem to be ignorant of both their essentializing of all Arab women and of the ways their tactics alienate many feminists (the latter is related both to their toplessness and to their essentializing). Pussy Riot's actions are much more effective as challenges to patriarchy, on both local and global scales, reflected in the outpouring of support after their sentencing. We may also conclude that Pussy Riot is understood to be more dangerous to the current regime and its governance, as their sentencing is particularly harsh, especially in comparison with Femen's brushes with law. At the same time, Pussy Riot does not make the same claims to a "new feminist world order" that Femen does, suggesting the question of whether localized activism can have a more global effect than intentionally globalized activism (like Femen's version).

Mainstream women's organization and many academic feminists see Femen's topless actions as simply giving men more of what they want – easily accessible women's bodies (Khaleeli 2011; Wesnianska 2011). Thus, not only are Femen's actions not part of a feminist consciousness, but also they cannot be considered feminist because they do not challenge any form of patriarchy – they simply support it. I wonder, however, if this is not a simplistic interpretation of Femen's actions simply because so many of the women consuming Femen's image would never think about taking their shirts off to protest against anything. The surprise of seeing breasts – and of women proclaiming that their breasts are weapons that make *only* themselves powerful – makes it challenging to get *past* the breasts and into the question of what Femen's goals as feminists really are. This separation of tactics and goals may be necessary, because, while Femen's self-description suggests that the two are linked (toplessness = feminist power), the topless actions are often completely irrelevant to the issues at hand. Their actions often appear sloppy and reactionary.

I make this point because of the potential comparison with the Voina actions in the zoological museum, despite the fact that it did not get as much attention as Femen's actions have done. In this case, can we separate the tactics from the message? Does it just look like an orgy? Or does the fact that it is out of place (surrounded by taxidermied animals) and includes intercourse among both men and women change the nature of the tactic? The Voina protest also included a pregnant woman and both men and women of various ages and body types, while Femen notoriously only includes young, conventionally attractive women. Does this more realistic representation make Voina's act more effective and more clearly a mockery of the patriarchal system rather than a support of it?

Therefore, is sextremism the future of global protest movements? Is Femen's attention-grabbing tactic limited to their own brand, or will it gain legitimacy among feminists and other social justice activists? Both Femen and Pussy Riot recognize that patriarchal oppression is something women – and men – face every day in Ukraine, Russia, and the rest of the world. Because of these two groups, a new breath has been blown into a discussion of global feminism and its future. By polarizing their audiences, perhaps these women are taking the first steps in a new discussion of feminisms in the twenty-first century – discussions that must continue if feminism is to remain a salient movement.

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