Pussy Power

Feminism, Protest and the Remasculinisation of Putin’s Russia

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Abstract

This paper examines how feminist protest, specifically in the case of Pussy Riot, contests the power structures that sustain the authority of Vladimir Putin in Russia. I investigate how Pussy Riot engages in revolutionary activity, oftentimes unaccepted in Russia, to expose and subvert the gender dynamics that are foundational to formal and informal institutions in the country. I present a typology, designed to facilitate an understanding of the strategies Pussy Riot utilise to disrupt public life in Russia. This paper addresses how power, and the structures that generate and then sustain it, is contested and re-negotiated, even in oppressive and homogenizing societies. More specifically, I address the androcentric bias of power that is emblematic of Putin's Russia. Doing so requires beginning from a position that necessarily accepts what Oleg Riabov and Tatiana Riabova termed the 'remasculinization' of Russia, a renewed focus on the production of 'social borders and hierarchies,' based on conceptualisations of masculinity and femininity. Constructions of gender, in which femininity is subordinate to masculinity, have become essential to the legitimisation of Putin's position at the apex of the power vertical and the promulgation of images of Russia as sovereign and powerful. The aim of this paper is not to judge the success of the Pussy Riot collective, but rather, to offer insight into the potential for feminist protest, and protest more generally, in the future in Putin's Russia.

Keywords

1 A Punk Prayer

On the 21st February 2012 five women, clad in dresses and tights of decidedly unorthodox hues, entered the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, Russia, put on their balaclavas of equally vibrant colours and hurriedly performed their ‘Punk Prayer.’ Formally titled «Богородица, Путина прогони» (‘Mother of God, Drive Putin Away’), the song performed by the self-described feminist punk protest collective Pussy Riot explicitly denounced the returning President Vladimir Putin. Invoking the problematic relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Russian State, Pussy Riot members sang their lyrics as they climbed onto the soleas in the Cathedral where women are forbidden. The performance itself lasted only forty seconds before the women were escorted outside.

Almost two weeks later, on 3rd March, two of the Pussy Riot members, Nadezhda (Nadia) Tolokonnikova and Mariia (Masha) Alyokhina were arrested by the authorities on criminal charges; a third member, Ekaterina (Kat) Samutsevich, was arrested on 16th March. In August, Nadia, Masha and Kat each received a two-year sentence in a Russian penal colony for their roles in the Punk Prayer performance. Following an appeal to the Moscow City Court in October of the same year, Kat was released on two years’ probation. Her new lawyer, Irina Khrunova, argued that Kat had in fact not taken part in the act of hooliganism. Khrunova argued that “she [Kat] didn’t have a chance to sing or shout any obscenities, she did not pray, jump or do anything described.”

Ironically, the video of the ‘Punk Prayer’ was proof of Kat’s innocence. Nadia and Masha remained in prison until their early release in December 2013 when the state Duma approved their amnesty. The Sochi Winter Olympics took place two months later in February 2014, a month before Nadia and Masha’s expected release date.

2 Understanding Pussy Riot in Putin’s Russia

This paper addresses how power, and the structures that generate and then sustain it, is contested and re-negotiated, even in oppressive and homogenizing societies. More specifically, I address the androcentric bias of power that is emblematic of Putin’s Russia. Doing so requires beginning from a position that necessarily accepts what Oleg Riabov and Tatiana Riabova termed the “remas-

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1 Storyville: Pussy Riot – A Punk Prayer, Dir. Mike Lerner and Maxim Pozdrovkin, BBC, 21/10/13.
culinization” of Russia, a renewed focus on the production of “social borders and hierarchies,” based on conceptualisations of masculinity and femininity.\(^2\)

Constructions of gender, in which femininity is subordinate to masculinity have become essential to the legitimisation of Putin’s position and power in Russia, and the promulgation of images of Russia as sovereign and powerful.

This paper understands power in Putin’s Russia in the Foucauldian sense of “bio-power,” “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” by the state.\(^3\) This is achieved, according to Foucault, through the “anatomo-politics of the human body” and “regulatory controls: a bio-politics of the population.” Bodies are disciplined and regulated like machines, but they are also how the state organises life.\(^4\) As Andrei Makarychev and Sergei Medvedev have outlined, biopolitics is thus a “relatively soft,” but invasive, form of power in which the state focuses its control over citizens in areas such as “health, sanitation, birth rate, and sexuality.”\(^5\) Biopolitics in Putin’s Russia is predicated on a hypermasculine corporeality that invariably denigrates and subjugates supposedly aberrant non-heteronormative bodies – i.e. any body that is not identified as possessing the ‘traditional’ qualities of masculinity, “strength, reason, will, responsibility, vigor, fairness.”\(^6\)

Exposing and rejecting this gendered hegemonic socio-political discourse can be interpreted as an undeniably feminist act of disruptive protest. It is the denial of an (incoherent) conservative and normalising ideology, cloaked in the language of patriarchal and misogynist patriotism. Pussy Riot are disruptive because they refute the biopolitical oppression of the state. The strategies utilised by Pussy Riot to disrupt public life and challenge Putin’s regime are explored through the development of a tripartite typology, labelled simply as: provoke, subject, and subvert. Each component of the typology corresponds to the evolution of Pussy Riot’s protest. However, I suggest that this typology follows a cyclical pattern, a series of revolutions as it were, given that Pussy Riot are still active today. A feminist institutionalist approach to the discussion of


\(^4\) Ibid., 139.


\(^6\) Riabov and Riabova, 24.
these typologies allows for the analysis of how gender dynamics shape institutions in Russia against which Pussy Riot protest.\(^7\)

This paper concentrates its analysis on Putin’s third presidential term (2012–2018). It is the period during which Russia under Putin experiences a “biopolitical turn.”\(^8\) Through recourse to a moralising and othering rhetoric, Putin reconstitutes the boundaries of the Russian political community, the ROC serving as a nodal point around which gendered ideas of the nation could be articulated.

2.1 **Liminality and Pussy Riot**

The actions of Pussy Riot, namely their protests, locate themselves at a critical moment where discourses on gender and the nation-state, notably those surrounding a Russian national identity, almost visibly overlap and become noticeable to those outside of the dominant power structures in Putin's Russia.\(^9\) For Victor Turner, to grapple with the nature of periods of liminality involves an assessment of the generation of “myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works art.”\(^10\) I posit that liminality facilitates the metaphysical analysis of how varying peoples respond to moments of transition, observing its potential as a transformative, if not revolutionary, moment in time. Through recourse to analysis by Igor Cherstich, Martin Holbraad and Nico Tassi I demon-

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\(^7\) Feminist institutionalism (FI) has emerged more recently from within the paradigm of new institutionalism (NI). James March and Noah Olsen observed that NI is the argument that “the organization of political life makes a difference.” NI recognises and develops the position that there exists a more profound and reciprocal relationship between institutions and individuals. There is also a focus on the roles of formal and informal institutions in distributing resources that can constrain or enable the power of individual actors or groups. For Fiona Mackay, Meryl Kenny and Louise Chappell, a gendered lens through which to interpret the distribution of power affords feminist institutionalists “critical insights into the institutional dynamics of inclusion and exclusion.” See: James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, 'The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life', *The American Political Science Review*, 78/3(1984): 747; Fiona Mackay, Meryl Kenny and Louise Chappell, 'New Institutionalism Through a Gender Lens: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism?', *International Political Science Review*, 31/5, (2010): 583.

\(^8\) Makarychev and Medvedev, 49.

\(^9\) This paper assumes a more nuanced approach to liminality that that which was first introduced by Arnold van Gennep. Van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* (1939) introduced the concept of liminality to social anthropology, observing that ‘the life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another’. See Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* [1939], trans. by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1963).

strate how Turner’s understanding of liminality necessarily invoked ritual “not as the opposite of revolution[... ] but as its avatar.”

I propose that liminality is essentially subversive, resistant to structure; it evades the normalising tendencies of both formal rules and informal codes of behaviour. It is also in liminality that communitas, a “modality of social interrelatedness,” intrinsically opposed to the notion of “social structure,” is developed. Pussy Riot are a fruitful example of the communitas that emerges in liminality. Wearing balaclavas, central to their identity as conceptual artists, Pussy Riot deny the hierarchic stratification that is symptomatic of social structure. Their anonymity makes them “liminal personae” who “elude or slip through the network of classification.” The group’s communitas persists today, despite Turner’s assertion that, eventually, such a close affinity to others will “decline and fall” into structure and law. Rather, Pussy Riot continue to exist without any formal hierarchical structure, refusing to concede to the system which oppresses them. In this sense, Pussy Riot remain suspended in the liminal. Perhaps, for Pussy Riot, existing on the margins is where they have the most potential to be revolutionary, free from the constraints of the inherently masculine power structures that govern Putin’s Russia.

3 Feminism in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia

Organised feminism remains unpopular in Putin’s Russia; it is considered almost exclusively as the object of academic debate. Partly, this is due to its negative association as a distinctly Western import. Mostly, however, feminism has struggled to become mainstream in Russia because of an intense state-mandated project to keep it well at the margins of society. Janet Elise Johnson points to the legal repression of feminist NGO crisis centres and the co-optation of elite women into positions of political authority as marked instances of the successful suppression of feminism in Russia. Religion has also been instru-

14 Ibid, 132.
mental in curbing feminist organisation. Pussy Riot’s self-ascribed feminism has been an anchoring point for the propagation of anti-feminist discourse. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the Pussy Riot trial. Feminism, during the trial, was projected as objectively negative, even harmful. The judge, Marina Syrova, encouraged witnesses for the prosecution to give their opinions on Pussy Riot’s performance and what the ROC specifically meant to them, conflating the group’s feminism with religious hatred. In fact, as she directly asked one witness: “[...] in your opinion [...] are these immoral acts of hooliganism?”

As Masha Gessen notes, in accordance with Russian law “witness opinions must be disallowed when offered and must never be solicited.”

3.1 Pussy Riot and Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality has become foundational to contemporary discourses on feminism. First introduced into the American legal canon by lawyer and scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, the term intersectionality sought to address, and explain, the failure by the courts to recognise that Black women faced discrimination by reason of both their race and gender. In her foundational paper titled “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” Crenshaw discussed the problematic tendency of interpreting race and gender as “mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis.” Since the publication of her paper, Crenshaw’s intersectionality has become an enduring feature of the contemporary zeitgeist. It has become in vogue for feminist (and other social justice) movements to identify as intersectional. Yet, as Crenshaw notes, when “white women speak for and as women” as a homogenous entity, the exclusion of Black women is only further emphasised. Beyond the feminist paradigm that has traditionally focused on the intersections of race and gender, intersectionality today is also profoundly concerned with the interactions between class, religion, sexuality and socio-economics.

There is no doubt that Pussy Riot are conscious of the systemic racism that remains endemic to modern society globally. Their songs like ‘I Can’t Breathe’ (2015), written in protest against the killing of a Black man in America, Eric...
Garner, at the hands of the police, demonstrates an awareness of the brutality of racism, particularly within formal institutions that are designed to protect the rights of citizens. The opening shot of Pussy Riot’s music video for ‘I Can’t Breathe’ shows a packet of cigarettes on the ground. The label on the packet reads “курение убивает” (“smoking kills”), a derisory allusion to the idea that Garner’s death was a result of his allegedly selling cigarettes illegally on the street. Smoking, or indeed, the sale of cigarettes did not kill Eric Garner. Rather, it was the hands of a white man in a position of power on an oppressed Black body that resulted in Garner’s death. More recently, in July 2020, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests, Pussy Riot released their new song ‘Riot’, announcing in an accompanying statement that “we [Pussy Riot] stand with the protestors for racial equality and justice [...] we demand to defund the police and punish killer cops.”

Although solidarity with the oppressed is paramount to the Pussy Riot ethos, Pussy Riot’s implicit claims to the intersectionality of their protest are inherently problematic. According to the collective, ‘I Can’t Breathe’ was dedicated to ‘all who suffer from state terror’. However, this statement elides Garner’s unique experience as a Black man. The music video shows Nadia and Masha, dressed in Russian OMON riot police uniform, slowly being buried in a grave. It is an undeniably powerful image, demonstrating that police brutality and the oppression of dissenting or marginalised voices remains persistent in both Russia and the US. After all, as Nadia later wrote, “when two peoples [the US and Russia] fight for a long time, they end up looking more and more alike.”

The packet of cigarettes upon which the label “курение убивает” (“smoking kills”) is placed, are called “Русская Весна” (“Russian Spring”). An acerbic reference to the term used by Kremlin ideologists to describe Russia’s renewed sovereignty following its annexation of Crimea in 2014, this once again conflates the concomitantly similar but invariably different experiences of oppression endured by marginalised peoples.

25 Harding, ‘Russian punk band.’
In ‘I Can't Breathe’, Garner’s final words are read by a white man, the punk musician Richard Hell. Though this might seem inconsequential, it is in fact a stark reminder of the complacency that frequently besets white feminist and white social justice movements when they try to amplify the lived experiences of Black people. There is a notable omission from Pussy Riot’s political protest regarding the experience of Black women. bell hooks writes that, unlike white women and Black men, who can act as “oppressor or oppressed”, Black women have “no institutionalized ‘other’ that we [Black women] can exploit or oppress.” White women, hooks notes, can be victims of sexism but oppressors of Black people, and Black men can be victims of racism but oppressors of women. Black women, hooks indicates, consistently occupy the lowest position on the social ladder.26 Pussy Riot songs such as ‘Riot’ for example, forgo the opportunity to amplify the voices and existence of women of color.

The maxim that ‘anyone can be Pussy Riot’ is further cause for concern. It neglects to account for Pussy Riot’s privileged position as (predominantly) white women. It ascribes an antiquated and false universality to feminism, erasing the distinct struggle of Black women and other women of colour as groups who experience “double-discrimination.”27 This is in part due to the paucity of literature that exists on the topic of intersectional feminism in Russia. In fact, the topic of race, racism and antiracist politics remains largely unaddressed in Russian socio-political discourse.

Their whiteness, and more specifically, their ethnic ‘Russianness,’ afforded Nadia, Masha and Kat protection from discrimination based on gender and race during their trial. Nadia, Masha and Kat were nevertheless subjected to discrimination based on other factors which cast them as unpalatable in Russia. During her pre-trial detention, Kat was reportedly considered a “weak link” by investigators owing to her queerness, her “non-traditional sexual orienta-

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26 bell hooks is the pen name of the late feminist author and professor Gloria Jean Watkins. Hooks said on multiple occasions that the decision to write her name in lowercase was because she wanted people to focused on her work and not her identity. That said, in a 2009 interview hooks noted that she was not “attached” to the lowercase spelling of her name. Rather, for hooks it was more important to tackle the “substance” of the issues presented, as opposed to the “shadow” (the identity) of the person behind the work. As she asked her interviewer Randy Lowens (the pen name of the late anarchist writer Don Jennings), “Is it more important that you, as a white male, read my work and learn from it, or what you call me? I think it’s more important that you read my work, reflect on it, and allow it to transform your life and your thinking in some way.” See Randy Lowens, ‘How Do You Practice Intersectionalism? An Interview with bell hooks’, *Northeastern Anarchist*, 2015 https://blackrosefed.org/intersectionalism-bell-hooks-interview/; bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984), 14–15.

27 Crenshaw, 149.
As mothers to young children, Masha and Nadia received considerable media attention. Masha in particular appears to have suffered the consequences of being a single mother and a Pussy Riot member; the courts twice refused to defer her punishment until her child reached the age of 14. The implication here is that being a ‘good’ mother and a Pussy Riot member are mutually exclusive and Masha chose the latter.

Pussy Riot’s position as revolutionary feminists in Russia therefore remains open and unfulfilled. As bell hooks attests, feminism can only have a “revolutionary [and] transformative” impact once it becomes a mass-based, inclusive movement.29 As such, I suggest that Pussy Riot, and more specifically Nadia, given that it is she who makes reference to intersectionality and bell hooks in her book Read and Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism, have somewhat misunderstood the fundamental precepts of intersectional theory. Importantly, for Pussy Riot’s feminism to become truly intersectional in the Russian context, they will need to engage more profoundly with, and interrogate, the impact of race and gender as co-constitutive elements of discrimination and oppression within Russia’s borders.

4 The Evolution of Pussy Riot’s Protest

4.1 Step 1: Provoke

4.1.1 Why Provoke? Understanding the Reasons for Pussy Riot’s Provocation

The impetus of Pussy Riot’s political protest is the hope that their provocation will engender a re-evaluation of the repressive conditions to which the citizens of Putin’s Russia are subjected. To do so, Pussy Riot occupy an innately anti-capitalist position. As Nadia wrote to Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, Pussy Riot’s objective is to expose the deceptions of modern capitalism. That capitalism appears “lose, even erratic” and anti-hierarchic is simply effective advertising. Rather, as Nadia contends, behind the illusion of capitalist liberalism resides the “totalizing normality” in which “homogeneity and stagnation rule.”30 Although the whole of society becomes vulnerable to this inertia, the

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29 hooks, x.
people who suffer the most are invariably those who do not form part of the hegemonic masculine framework.\textsuperscript{31}

Nadia was greatly influenced by the work of Václav Havel. In his seminal political essay, \textit{The Power of the Powerless}, he wrote intensively on the danger of societal passivity, an insidious condition in both communist and capitalist societies. Distributed in samizdat in 1979, Havel describes the ritualised continuity of life in a ‘post-totalitarian’ system, the contemporary communist regime in former Czechoslovakia. The prefix ‘post-’ signalled the departure of the system from classical dictatorships, nevertheless retaining some of the principle, albeit permuted, characteristics of the former structure.\textsuperscript{32} This includes succumbing to the “blind automatism” that frames the system.\textsuperscript{33} Havel introduces the allegory of the greengrocer, who compliantly puts the slogan “Workers of the World, Unite!” up in his shop window simply because everyone else does the same and that is what is expected. By accepting to put up the slogan, Havel continues, the greengrocer accepts “the given rules of the game.” Such is the Machiavellian nature of ideology, “a bridge between the system and the individual,” but only until the individual becomes subsumed within the system. In fact, in a rather Turnerian manner, Havel described the greengrocer’s actions as the acceptance of a “prescribed ritual.”\textsuperscript{34} Between receiving the slogan and putting it up, the greengrocer entered a moment of liminality. However, as a member of the “ideological communitas,” already absorbed into the wider structure that governs him, the liminal moment is soon over.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{31} The term “hegemonic masculinity” was coined by R.W. Connell to map the position of a particular (dominant) masculinity in relation to other (subordinate) forms of gender, namely femininity and non-heteronormative masculinities (i.e., homosexuality). Hegemonic masculinity endeavours to assert its power by maintaining practices and cultures that have institutionalized its dominance over other forms of gender. However, power, according to Cynthia Enloe, is a “relationship”, and it is critical to recognize how the centres of power only exist in the context of the margins that they create in the process. Pussy Riot’s act of defiance, then, is that they harness the power located in the margins of society to reveal the extent to which elite, masculinity-drive politics is reliant on the silent quiescence of people that exist on the peripheries of the establishment. See R.W. Connell, \textit{Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics} (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 183–185; Cynthia Enloe, ‘Margins, silences and bottom rungs: how to overcome the underestimation of power in the study of international relations’, in \textit{International Theory: Positivism and Beyond}, eds. by Steve Smith, Ken Booth and Marysia Zalewski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 186–202.


\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 19.

\textsuperscript{34} Havel, 14–22.

\textsuperscript{35} Turner, \textit{The Ritual Process}, 132.
The greengrocer, too, became a victim of “ideology [that] is always subordinated ultimately to the interests of the structure.”

I offer the beginning of the greengrocer’s story because it neatly illustrates the point that Nadia makes about capitalist ideology and the need for its rupture. It also seamlessly encapsulates how Putin’s biopolitics functions in Russia. As Foucault wrote, much like bio-power was consequential to the development of capitalism, so too is capitalism (consequential) to the endurance of biopolitics. In order for capitalism and biopolitics to function in symbiosis, effective methods of governance need to be established. Such strategies must necessarily control how bodies are optimally inserted into “the machinery of production” without becoming ungovernable.

In Putin’s Russia, I argue, this evolves in the promotion of a patriotic narrative, at once homogenising, and therefore placating, for those who adhere to it and deeply othering for those who do not.

In 2012, after the wave of protests against Putin’s return, his press secretary, Dmitrii Peskov, announced that the President was definitely “thinking about ideology” and that “ideology [was] very important. Patriotism [was] very important.” In December 2019, Putin continued to affirm that “patriotism is the only possible ideology,” even suggesting that it needed to be “depoliticized and aimed to strengthen the inner framework of the Russian state.”

A significant part of this depoliticising patriotism has been the endorsement of gendered ways of understanding and contributing to the growth of the nation.

In promoting normative masculinity through patriotism, the Kremlin has: donated notable funds to the commemoration of battles in Russia’s history; renewed the authority of the ROC and its fundamentally patriarchal conceptions of gender and the family in education; recently sanctioned a new military-patriotic youth movement, Iunarmia in 2015.

The introduction of the ‘maternity capital’ programme in 2007, now extended until at least 2026, incentivises

36 Havel, 24.
37 Foucault, 140–141.
39 Putin, quoted in n.a., ‘Patriotism is Russia’s national idea, says Putin’, TASS, 10/5/20 https://tass.com/society/1154865.
women to have more than one child, offering vouchers in lieu of cash to be used for state-approved purchases. As Putin said in 2012, “women know what they need to do and when.” Reproducing the nation in Russia is, quite literally, a for-profit enterprise.

The resultant effect is what political scientist and socialist feminist Zillah Eisenstein (in 1979) describes as the development of a “capitalist patriarchy ... [the] interdependence of capitalism and patriarchy.” The theory of capitalist patriarchy is rooted in the treatment of power through the synthesis of Marxist and radical feminist analysis which highlights that women are subjected to oppression by virtue of both their economic class and sex. Eisenstein’s analysis is somewhat limited by its biological approach to the capitalist patriarchy, which considers the patriarchy to be defined by only sex as opposed to accounting also for conceptions of gender. Nevertheless, the premise of the capitalist patriarchy, that the ideologies and discourses of the powerful (in this case, the hegemonic masculine figures in Putin’s Russia) are preserved at the expense of marginalised figures, retains its potency.41 Class and gender in Russia are perpetually exploited in order to sustain biopolitical power, buttressed by the ability to punish harshly any dissent.

It is no wonder, then, that Pussy Riot’s protest provokes such an indignant and hostile reaction. Their ‘Punk Prayer,’ in which they satirised the expected role of women, singing “In order not to offend his Holiness/Women must give birth and love,” clearly exhibited the collective’s contempt for pronatalism and the hierarchical socio-political categorisation women were subjected to.42 The deliberately ambiguous reference to “His Holiness” (it could be either Putin or Patriarch Kirill) denoted the extent to which the Church and state have coalesced. A reference to the “teacher-preacher” was a caustic commentary on the invasion of religion into the lives of young, impressionable children (who also happen to be the future of Russia). Pussy Riot’s bodies also became provocative tools, albeit they avoided the sexualisation of the female form. Instead, in a brief, but significant liminal moment, Pussy Riot’s bodies crossed the threshold of the soleas, subverting both the gendered and the institutional power of the ROC. In every sense, Pussy Riot rejected the ideology of patriotism that the state, and the ROC, sought to impose.

The punk music genre, with its quintessential anti-capitalist aesthetic, has substantially informed the nature of Pussy Riot’s provocation. According to Kot, a Pussy Riot member, the character of punk is “aggressive protest.”\footnote{Kot, quoted in Henry Langston, ‘Meeting Pussy Riot’, Vice, 11/3/20 https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/kwnzgy/A-Russian-Pussy-Riot [accessed 27/8/20].} The use of the punk genre thereby codifies the groups oppositional stance towards Putin’s regime. However, Katharina Wiedlack emphasises that Pussy Riot do not identify themselves with the punk movement.\footnote{Katharina Wiedlack, ‘Pussy Riot and the Western Gaze: Punk Music, Solidarity and the Production of Similarity and Difference’, Popular Music and Society, 39/4, (2016): 410–422 (412).} The influence of Riot Grrrl, a US-based feminist punk movement established in the 1990s, amongst others, on Pussy Riot is well-documented.\footnote{See Tolokonnikova, 25; Langston, ‘Meeting Pussy Riot.’} Yet, in line with Wiedlack, I contend that the punk genre was Pussy Riot’s means to a political end; invoking Western feminist punk, nevertheless with a distinctly Russian focus, made the Pussy Riot message accessible to a transnational audience.\footnote{Wiedlack, 411–412.} However, as was evidenced by the resoundingly negative domestic reaction to the “Punk Prayer,” punk had not yet found its way into the mainstream in Russia. Mark Feigin, Nadia’s lawyer, acknowledged that punk and performance art had never taken root in Russia and because it was not well understood it was inevitably poorly received.\footnote{Mark Feigin, quoted in Storyville: Pussy Riot.}

4.1.2 Revolutionary Squares and Liminality
Urban public spaces, like squares, specifically Red Square in the case of Pussy Riot for example, can be crucial sites in which power is contested. Majdi Faleh observes that public squares as places of “encounter and exchange” can be traced back to the time of the Greek Agora or the Roman Forum.\footnote{Majdi Faleh, ‘How city squares can be public places of protest or centres of state control’, The Conversation, 3/10/18 https://theconversation.com/how-city-squares-can-be-public-places-of-protest-or-centres-of-state-control-102275 [accessed 30/9/20].} Squares are thus both foundational sites of embodied democracy but also of repression. The magnetism of public squares as arenas for revolution or protest is precisely that they are fundamentally anti-structural, to use Turner’s concept; public squares belong to the people, not the state. It is then all the more painful when squares built in the name of independence become the scenes of violent rupture and death, like Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in Ukraine during Euromaidan (2014), and not as scenes of liberation.
Importantly, this paper suggests that squares are material sites of liminality. In their songs «Osvobodi bruschatky» ('Free the Cobblestones', 2011) and «Putin zassal!» ('Putin Has Pissed Himself!', 2012) Pussy Riot urge the Russian people, but more specifically, women, to occupy Red Square as a site of revolution. In 'Free the Cobblestones' Pussy Riot explicitly reference the 2011 Arab Spring – “Egyptian air is good for the lungs/Create Tahrir on Red Square” – as an example of what can be achieved when oppressed and marginalised people reclaim urban public (liminal) spaces to extricate themselves from the constraints of their ideological communitas so as to revolt.49

According to Mark Allen Peterson, Tahrir Square evoked Turner’s concept of ‘social drama;’ the revolution demonstrated the same processual structure that is expected of prescribed rituals, yet the experience of liminality was uncontrolled, beyond the constraining reach of any particular social actor or institution.50 Tahrir Square, Peterson observed, achieved its objective, the resignation of Hosni Mubarak, because the revolution was guided again and again by “liminality, communitas, and antistructure.”51 This is something Pussy Riot have continued to emulate in their own revolution. Standing on top of Lobnoe mesto, an historical landmark in Moscow’s Red Square, also the site of the 1968 protest against the invasion of Czechoslovakia, in 'Putin Has Pissed Himself!' Pussy Riot called for the “Revolt in Russia – riot! Riot!/Take to the streets/Live on the Red/Set free the rage/Of civil anger!”52 By asking citizens to “live on the red,” Pussy Riot were demanding the permanence of anti-structure, the perpetuity of living within the liminal. This rejection of conformity, where Pussy Riot instead hold power in liminal space impervious to hegemonic masculinity, is the collective’s ultimate provocation.

49 Pussy Riot, ‘Free the Cobblestones’, in Gessen, 72–73.
50 Social dramas arise in conflict situations and are characterised by four phases of public action: the breach of a ‘crucial norm,’ a crisis (the ‘threshhold between more or less stable phases of the social process’), reressive action (informal or formal methods of handling the crisis) and finally, reintegration into a modified social structure. Until their imprisonment, Nadia and Masha had avoided the final two phases of the social drama; Pussy Riot’s protest had continued to oscillate between the breach of the ‘crucial norm,’ their supposedly inferior and submissive femininity, and a prolonged crisis (liminal moment) in which they challenged the governing structures. See Mark Allen Peterson, ‘In Search of Antistructure: The Meaning of Tahrir Square in Egypt’s Ongoing Social Drama’, in Breaking Boundaries, 164–183 (176–177); Turner, Drama, Fields, and Metaphors, 37–42.
51 Peterson, 165.
4.2 Step 2: Subject
In an interview with the BBC’s Stephen Sackur, Nadia contends that, although she knew Pussy Riot would be reprimanded for their ‘Punk Prayer,’ the possibility of a prison sentence had never been considered.\textsuperscript{53} Discourse analysis of court transcripts, published in Gessen’s book, reveals the crude nature in which heavily gendered power was imposed on Nadia, Masha and Kat to subject them to an unfair, but fundamentally impregnable trial.

4.2.1 The Pussy Riot Show Trial
The Pussy Riot trial was so fervently pursued precisely because the Kremlin considered itself duty-bound to protect the interests of the ROC. After all, the popular sanctity of the Church was essential to Putin’s presidential legitimation. To make an example of them, Pussy Riot were subjected to a revisionist Soviet-style show trial, dutifully concealed behind the performative veneer of impartial and democratic justice.

During the entirety of the trial, Nadia, Masha and Kat were made to sit inside a Plexiglass cage, colloquially termed an ‘aquarium.’ It was built after Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s first trial, in which the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that holding defendants inside steel cages was a violation of human rights. This cage was not much better though, airless and made worse by the fact that judge repeatedly denied Nadia, Masha and Kat’s requests for a break.\textsuperscript{54} As Norman Fairclough notes, language is not the only modality of power.\textsuperscript{55} By placing the three women in a cage, Nadia, Masha and Kat essentially became a spectacle. It was also a clear assertion of masculine power, a warning that ultimately, the patriarchal state always prevails.

The trial was centered around the theme of religion. The ‘Punk Prayer’ was depoliticised; the judge choosing to interrogate witnesses on their beliefs and affinities for the Church. Subjective ‘understanding’ of the events that took place superseded the factual basis of the performance. In fact, the judge, in dialogue with the witnesses, infantilised the three women. She asked if Liubov Sokologorskaia had tried “to use words” to explain to the women that what they were doing was wrong.\textsuperscript{56} In the end, large portions of the trial resembled a religious sermon, the witnesses encouraged to discuss at length the doctrines of Christianity.


\textsuperscript{54} Gessen, 182.


\textsuperscript{56} Gessen, 170–172.
Nevertheless, the courtroom itself became a stage fit for a Pussy Riot performance. In moments of dark comedy, the three women asserted themselves as talented performers, Masha repeatedly telling the judge that she did not understand the charges against her, specifically the “ideological aspect” of the charges.⁵⁷ That Masha’s confusion was ignored would suggest that in fact, altogether, neither did the judge, the court or the prosecutors. When the three women gave closing statements, the gallery applauded. The judge reprimanded the gallery, telling them they were not in a theatre.⁵⁸ The affair was redolent of a Soviet show-trial because essentially, all the actors were simply performing their roles. The judge was there as the “bureaucrat with a rubber stamp,” the gallery were the audience, the witnesses the victims and Nadia, Masha and Kat the perpetrators of an unholy hooligan act.⁵⁹

4.2.2 Essentialising Pussy Riot: The West’s Problematic Relationship to the ‘Punk Prayer’

The transnational solidarity with Pussy Riot that was demonstrated globally following the ‘Punk Prayer’ trial was certainly admirable. However, it would be misguided to ignore the ways in which Pussy Riot were often essentialised as symbols of the struggle for equality, particularly by the West. Wiedlack notes that Pussy Riot, and in particular their balaclavas, became commodified, accessories in fashion shows that focused on Pussy Riot as having “beautiful, young, sexy, and stereotypically feminine dissident bodies.” Rather paradoxically, Pussy Riot have simultaneously been fetishized by virtue of their ‘Russianness’ whilst also affirmed into the Western feminist canon. Pussy Riot, Wiedlack observes, have been ascribed distinctly Western morals and values of “tolerance, anti-authoritarianism, queer-feminism.”⁶⁰ Thus, the West’s veneration of Pussy Riot has arguably stymied the group’s ability to connect with their domestic audience.

Moreover, Wiedlack cautions that a personality cult around Nadia and Masha as ambassadors of the Pussy Riot cause has materialised.⁶¹ This is concerning because, as Pussy Riot member Serafima reveals, the collective’s preference for anonymity is rooted in the desire to “move away from personalities and towards symbols and pure protest.”⁶² In part, a focus on Nadia and Masha

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⁵⁷ Ibid, 163.
⁵⁸ Ibid, 208.
⁵⁹ Ibid, 168.
⁶⁰ Wiedlack, 414–416.
⁶¹ Wiedlack, 413.
⁶² Serafima, quoted in Langston, ‘Meeting Pussy Riot’.
can be attributed to the relative dearth of literature on other Pussy Riot members. However, it is also possible that Nadia, Masha (and Kat’s) veneration is a result of their ‘unmasking’.

Conflating Pussy Riot exclusively with the Western feminist tradition is invariably problematic. It codifies the Kremlin’s assertion that Pussy Riot are a part of the West’s conspiracy to dismantle the sovereignty of the Russian nation. Ilya Iablokov notes that after their ‘Punk Prayer’ performance, the idea that a war was being waged against the ROC was heavily imbued in the speeches of pro-Kremlin intellectuals and Church representatives. Moreover, journalists on state television channels like Rossiia sought recourse to Soviet-era tropes of the repression of the Church to instil fear of a “relapse into neo-Bolshevism.”

The result was the legitimisation of policies that repressed the freedom of expression of Russia’s citizens, disguised in the narrative of protecting the Russian national identity.

4.2.3 Putin Will Teach You to Love the Motherland (or Whip You If You Don’t)

Beyond the trial of Nadia, Masha and Kat, Pussy Riot members have also been subjected to physical demonstrations of gendered oppression. The most highly publicized incident of gendered violence against Pussy Riot occurred in February 2014, when members of the group, including Nadia and Masha, were beaten with horsewhips and sprayed with teargas by Cossack militia members in Sochi as they performed their song «Путин научит тебя любить Родину» (‘Putin Will Teach You to Love the Motherland’) underneath a banner advertising the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics, by then in full swing. Video recordings of the incident show that as they began performing the lyrics of the song, which was “dedicated to prisoners of the swamp [a reference to those arrested during the May 2012 Bolotnaia Square protests], corrupt Olympics, ecologist [Evgenii] Vitishko and suppressed freedoms in Russia” Pussy Riot members were approached by a group of Cossack militia men and subjected to considerable violence. Additionally, members of the group perhaps less well-known than Nadia and Masha, were stripped of their anonymity as their balaclavas were forcibly removed by their oppressors.

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64 Evgenii Vitishko was jailed for three years in December 2013 for spray-painting the fence of a mansion he and other environmentalists alleged was built illegally on national park land in Sochi. See n.a., ‘IOC: Protests at Olympic sites are inappropriate,’ *Associated Press*, 19/02/14 https://apnews.com/article/d548983b41094d75bacd1b0c2df297.
This particular occasion of gendered oppression also exposes the failure of Western institutions to wholly condemn such violence. After the initial performance there were rumors that the group would try to perform another song at the Olympic Park. In response, the International Olympic Committee’s (ioc) director of communications, British national Mark Adams, warned that it would be “wholly inappropriate” for the group’s members to attempt another performance, stating also that “venues are not places to have demonstrations.” Adams further distanced the ioc from the matter by re-iterating that the Olympics are not a “political platform”, despite there being a long history of protest at the Games, including by Olympic athletes.

4.3 Step 3: Subvert

4.3.1 Mocking, and Subverting, Power Structures in Russia

Pussy Riot’s song, ‘Chaika’ (2016) disengages the punk genre in favour of a more structured, political rap. Titled after Iury Chaika, who served, until January 2020, as Prosecutor General of Russia, the song is replete with references to the benefits that (gendered) informal networks can offer to those in power. The song amplified and satirised the themes of a documentary that was released by opposition leader Alexei Navalny which detailed the relationship of Chaika’s son to the Russian mob, alongside allegations of Chaika’s own corrupt behaviour.

Fowl imagery – in English Chaika means seagull – is provided in abundance throughout the ‘Chaika’ music video to symbolise the former Prosecutor General’s corruption, although the video more broadly highlights pervasive corruption that is foundational to maintaining the status quo in Russia. In a 2016 inter-

65 Ibid.
67 Alena Ledeneva’s work on what she refers to as the ‘informal practices’, embedded in Russia’s political culture, has been essential to the demystification of the wider phenomenon of informal politics. For Ledeneva, informal practices “involve the manipulation of both formal rules and informal codes,” subsequently operationalised within formal and informal institutional frameworks, respectively, servicing only a narrow proportion of society, the political (and economic) elite. These informal practices are invariably gendered and have historically existed to preserve male-dominated power networks, including those which exist in Putin’s Russia. See Alena Ledeneva, How Russia Really Works: The Informal Practices That Shaped Post-Soviet Politics and Business (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); Alena Ledeneva, Can Russia Modernise? Sistema, Power Networks and Informal Governance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
view with Vice magazine Nadia stated that the video was in part an attempt to “help” the Russian authorities define their own aesthetic. The video begins with Nadia dressed as Chaika himself, feasting crudely on a large chicken whilst a host of female prosecutors (presumably Chaika’s subordinates) watch on in the background. According to Nadia, together with other images of excess – the video features a loaf of golden bread in reference to the golden loaf found in the residence of former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych after he fled his mansion in 2014 – such gluttony embodies the “core values of the Russian governmental mafia.”

There is also towards the end of the video a prosecutor wearing a seagull mask, no doubt an act of protest against Chaika’s corruption but also perhaps a reference to Chaika’s ability to hide his corruption behind the mask of his name which affords him power and impunity.

Accompanied by a host of female prosecutors, Nadia (dressed as Chaika) derides the informal practices that sustain the political system, rapping the following lyrics:

Слишком резвых мы на “зоне” трудоустроим/За своих мы до конца стоим, понял?/Ведь дружба, брат, это – святое!/Без проблем, брат, уголовное дело твоё закроем./Тех, кто много пит- зароем,/Кто будет выться- уедет под конвоем.

We’ll find nice jobs in the ‘zone’ for anyone who’s too smart/We look out for our homies, you know/Friendship, brother, is sacred here/No problem, brother, we’ll get those criminal charges off your butt/Anyone who talks too much will be buried alive/Anyone who fucks around will enjoy time in jail.

The ‘zone’ the song refers to is the name given to prison camps in Russia. It is where, as Masha writes in Riot Days, “anyone who observes, who records, who makes public what they have seen – everything they [Putin and the Kremlin] want to keep hidden” is sent. By contrast, those who are in official positions of

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70 Carr-Harris.
71 wearepussyriot, ‘Chaika’.
72 wearepussyriot, ‘Chaika’.
power are able to transgress the checks and balances that formal institutional rules impose to ensure that society functions in an impartial and transparent way.\textsuperscript{74} The paradox, though, is that the success of these informal systems is substantially dependent on the formal rules produced by legislative and judicial institutions. Douglass North observes that formal rules can “complement and increase the effectiveness” of informal constraints.\textsuperscript{75} Even though they might appear perfunctory, formal rules are important tools for the legitimation of informal power and, by extension, the perpetuation of emphatically male-dominated homosociality.

‘Chaika’ also alludes to the constraining effects of krugovaya poruka.\textsuperscript{76} Loyalty to Putin specifically, upon which the sustainability of existing power structures in Russia are heavily reliant, is of the utmost importance. The refrain in ‘Chaika’ specifies the behaviour expected of actors within this system:

Будь смиренным, будь кротким, не заботься о тленном/Власти, данной Богом, сынок, будь навеки верным/Я люблю Россию, я – патриот.

Be humble, learn to obey, don't worry about material stuff/Be loyal to those in power, cause power is a gift from God, son/I love Russia, I'm a patriot.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{74} See Ledeneva, \textit{How Russia Really Works}, 47–50 for insight into how administrative resources can be employed during election campaigns to ensure the ‘Selective Law Enforcement’ and ‘Selective Law Nonenforcement’ that facilitates the harassment, and sometimes unjust prosecution of the opposition. Examples of this are perceptible in the prosecution, imprisonment and exile of Mikhail Khodorkovsky on fraud charges between 2003 and 2013, and the imprisonment of Navalny’s younger brother, Oleg Navalny, between 2014 and 2018, also on fraud charges. Both of these trials were widely condemned as politically motivated.

\textsuperscript{75} North, Douglass C., \textit{Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 46.

\textsuperscript{76} Defined by Ledeneva as “a pattern of joint/collective responsibility that results in excessive influence, co-dependence and control over individuals”, krugovaya poruka is one of two examples of informal practices (of which there are many) that I consider to be instrumental in the shaping of power networks that sustain the current political system in Russia. It ensures the stability of the current political order through a “mutual control” that players within power networks exercise over each other. The other informal practice which has been popularised and heavily investigated in Western politics is the use of kompromat, “compromising materials, blackmail files”. Kompromat helps to sustain the existence of a power vertical in Russia, which features Putin at its head. Together, these two informal practices offer structure to a system which perpetuates (and rewards) subservience to power and authority and others (and castigates) dissent. See Ledeneva, \textit{Can Russia Modernise?} 273–274; Ledeneva, \textit{How Russia Really Works}, 90.

\textsuperscript{77} wearepussyriot, ‘Chaika’.
For Pussy Riot, being obedient and subservient to power is synonymous with the patriotism that the state advocates. Reward systems are in place for those who observe personal loyalty not just to Putin, but also to the ROC. Much like the lay-Russian who finds themselves at the margins of the exclusive power structures that exist in Putin’s Russia, political actors who operate informally are also subjected to gendered patriotism; it is a crucial component around which hegemonic masculine cohesion is built. A true patriot, Nadia raps, will not conduct his business with rei̇pone (“Gayrope”), a neologism employed by the Russian mass media to denote the West’s supposedly immoral acceptance of homosexuality. Instead, business will remain in-house, safely within the ‘normal,’ heterosexual borders of Mother Russia. Pussy Riot’s decision to articulate the praxis of certain informal practices which permeate Russia’s political and social fabrics is inherently subversive, inverting the hidden structures upon which the system rests.

5 MediaZona and Zona Prava, by way of a Conclusion

Becoming subsumed into the Russian penal system has been crucial to Nadia and Masha’s subsequent activism. The experience of being submitted to the harsh realities of a Russian labor camp has enabled them to truly appreciate what happens behind closed doors in Russia’s prisons. As Nadia tells Sackur, without experiencing it oneself it is impossible to truly grasp what life inside Russia’s prisons is like.

Unlike Kat, about whom there has been significantly less academic and popular investigation, since their release from prison Nadia and Masha have both published books that are part manifesto, part memoir and made numerous public appearances internationally. Together, they have established MediaZona, an independent news outlet with a focus on judicial and penal issues in Russia, and Zona Prava (the Zone of Law), an advocacy group that seeks to protect and improve the rights of prisoners. Created in response to the lack of transparency in the (largely state-owned) Russian media about the treatment of prisoners, both organisations have continued to resist the formal legislative restrictions, and informal harassment, sanctioned by the Kremlin.

The irony, as Nadia revealed, is that it was during their time in prison that she and Masha became interested in human rights. Nadia and Masha read a con-

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78 Ibid.
79 Tolokonnikova, in Sackur, ‘Nadya Tolokonnikova’.
80 Olga Zeveleva, ‘Pussy Riot’s Nadya Tolokonnikova: How to revolutionize the Russian pris-
siderable amount of dissident literature and, perhaps influenced by Havel, who wrote that to “live within the truth” a person needed to “revolt against manipulation,” they carried out multiple hunger strikes. Even from within the penal colony’s walls, Nadia and Masha were subversive, “every free expression of life” a threat to the fabric of the prison system.\textsuperscript{81}

Nadia and Masha’s new work outside of Pussy Riot has caused tensions within the group. In an opinion piece written for the \textit{Guardian}, six Pussy Riot members – Garadja, Fara, Shaiba, Kat, Serafima and Schumacher – criticised Nadia and Masha’s participation in “institutional advocacy.” It could not, they said, be constitutive to a “critique of fundamental norms and rules that underlie modern patriarchal society.”\textsuperscript{82} Though this is somewhat true, that Nadyia and Masha have unintentionally become \textit{de facto} figureheads of the Pussy Riot collective, this has undoubtedly afforded the group more influence both in formal and informal structures. Navigating power, be it in formal or informal structures, is inherently challenging and contradictory. The obstacles of gender and class can only be circumvented in moments of revolution, no matter how big or small. What remains essential is persistence and conviction; this is the power of Pussy Riot.

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\textsuperscript{81} Havel, 45.

\textsuperscript{82} Garadja, Fara, Shaiba, Cat, Seraphima and Schumacher, ‘We wish Nadia and Masha well – but they are no longer part of Pussy Riot’, \textit{Guardian}, 6/2/14 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/06/nadia-masha-pussy-riot-collective-no-longer.


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