Pussy Riot, Putin and the Politics of Embodiment

Brian Rourke & Andrew Wiget

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On 21 February 2012, five young women clothed in brightly coloured short skirts, knit tights and rudely made balaclavas ruptured the silence of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, Russia, with raucous electric guitar music, dancing and an obscenity-laced song asking the Virgin Mary to deliver Russia from the impending re-election of its former president Vladimir Putin. The Russian Government responded to this provocative but non-violent act with unexpected and unprecedented coercive force against the small group of activists. In this article, we argue that Pussy Riot’s ‘Punk Prayer’ and its aftermath demonstrate that the volatility of the conflict arises from a socio-historically specific form of the tension between a political citizenship and an embodied social agency. The Pussy Riot phenomenon was particularly explosive because it exposed the unstable coexistence of authoritarianism with a liberal constitutional state whose legitimacy depends upon the exclusion of arbitrary authority from the political field. Pussy Riot’s ‘Punk Prayer’ and its aftermath demonstrate the subversive potential of even the most local, sporadic and symbolic feminist and queer challenges to the established order. The response of the Russian State exposed its dependence upon and investment in patriarchal and heteronormative power structures often rendered politically invisible through relegation to ‘private life’. The value of Pussy Riot’s performance lies in its making visible, and thus available for public debate, the ways in which authoritarianism legitimates its exercise of power by exploiting social divisions through a network of institutionalized forces which civil society had come to take for granted.

Keywords Pussy Riot; feminism; queer politics; embodiment; agency; Russia
Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, were arrested; a third woman, Yekaterina Samutsevich, was arrested on 16 March; two of the participants evaded the sweep and were reported to have fled the country. Their arrests and over four months of pre-trial detention brought Pussy Riot, already well known in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, to the attention not only of the country but also of the world.

After the December 2011 elections to the Federation Duma (the lower house of the national legislature) were challenged as corrupt in social media, widespread protests broke out across Russia, but particularly in Moscow, which were only intensified by the foreknowledge that Putin would certainly be elected president in March 2012 as a result of what many expected to be an equally tainted process. Prior to the March presidential election, the government appeared to be indifferent, even condescending, to the opposition. Against Pussy Riot’s ‘Punk Prayer’, however, the government suddenly and unexpectedly responded with maximal coercive force: the three women arrested were held without bail for several months, publicly tried and sentenced to two years of penal servitude (one was later released), and only recently freed as part of a pre-Olympic amnesty.

Why did the government respond so repressively to a single act, admittedly provocative but nevertheless non-violent, by a tiny marginal group of activists, when certainly only the so-called ‘opposition movement’ constituted any kind of real, albeit minor, threat to the Putin regime’s power? We argue that Pussy Riot’s ‘Punk Prayer’ and its aftermath demonstrate the subversive potential of even the most local, sporadic and symbolic feminist and queer challenges to established social order, since it depends on not only the proper appearance and action of bodies but also the desires and beliefs driving them.

The response of the Russian State exposed its dependence upon and investment in patriarchal and heteronormative power structures often rendered politically invisible through relegation to ‘private life’. The Pussy Riot phenomenon was particularly explosive because it exposed the unstable coexistence of authoritarian strategies and dispositions aimed at the discipline of bodies with the contemporary liberal-capitalist-secular state whose legitimacy depends upon the exclusion of arbitrary authority from the political field. In short, both subversion and retrenchment depend on the tension between a liberal polity of citizens and embodied agents located in social space.

Gender and social identity: the politics of embodiment in liberal democracies

When Pussy Riot protested against the Church’s support for Putin’s re-election, the symbolic stakes went beyond which party would govern, or even the form of government, to one of the social foundations of liberal democratic states: the belief of social agents that a polity of citizens can through self-government pursue
not just their rational interests but also their unarticulated, perhaps even unrecognized, desires – to pursue happiness, as it were, in the full sense of the word. Liberalism’s legitimacy depends on the freedom it claims to protect and enable its ability to accommodate an ever-widening scope of practical social action.

The unpredictable fluidity of politics can be traced to the embodiment and social location of social agents. The positive motive driving bodies to forge connections with their material circumstances, human and non-human, can best be understood as desire, an incessant pressure to produce, connect and experience the results. Desire provides positive propulsion towards action, over and above instinctive needs or instrumental motives. All desiring production involves connecting the fragmented/untotaled body to the social field at the level of the unconscious. Interests derive from the whole/totaled and socially coded (by nationality, kinship, gender and sexuality) body’s position in the ‘social body’. The social body channels desire through codes that locate and regulate bodies and their interrelationships – though never completely, which would require shutting down desiring production altogether. Anything that appears as an outside attack on the social body and/or its legitimate relations with the naturalized body can potentially trigger unconscious aggressive, reactive responses even in those for whom, consciously and preconsciously, that same action is in their interests or targets their oppression. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, we all have a ‘disinterested love of the social machine’. Even one’s own interests can be in conflict with that love (1977 [1972]), p. 346). What one begins to see, as Foucault (1975, 1980), Žižek (2008) and others have pointed out, is that any social system requires two forms of violence, the foundational violence of revolution and the secondary institutional violence of legislation and enculturation, an arbitrary violence that is then propped up/secured/obscured as a recognition of the Natural or the Traditional, that is, not even the people’s will but God’s immutable will. Under such conditions, the state’s enlistment of or alliances with religious institutions should not be explained with appeals to the inherently authoritarian nature of religious faith, something that in liberal politics can only appear as atavistic and obscurantist interference with secular rational political deliberation. Belief, including the kinds we call ‘religious’, is no less social, and thus no less productive of interests, than economic production or political power. Neither is it less stratified along class, regional, ethnic or gender lines (Kizenko 2013).

The secondary violence associated with the naturalization of arbitrary structures is surely revealed in the discovery that liberal democracy accommodates some social identities much better than others. If we think of ‘interest’ in the classic sense of one’s connection to the sociopolitical order of the material world then it is clear that only embodied social agents and not universalized subjects can have interests, because only embodied subjects have social positions by virtue of which their agency can be exercised or frustrated. The connection
between various dimensions of embodiment and agency is principally historical, discursive and institutionalized through violence. That it took so long for sexuality and gender be given legal consideration could surprise true liberals, who ignore the naturalized authority of patriarchy and heteronormativity as the product of a long history of secondary violence, none of which is supposed to matter, given their faith in presumptive formal equality. But the discovery that liberal democracies accommodate some social identities better than others raises unsettling questions about the secondary violence involved in identifying the human body with the body politic: Is the body politic male or female? Is it straight or queer? Will it be ‘docile’ or ‘resistant’ (Mahmood 2001)?

**Gender performance in a post-Soviet context**

The experience of twentieth century Russia provides one of the clearest examples that gender’s:

concrete expression in the world must be understood as the taking up and rendering specific of a set of historical possibilities. Hence, there is an agency which is understood as the process of rendering such possibilities determinate. These possibilities are necessarily constrained by available historical conventions. (Butler 1988, p. 520)

Soviet gendered citizenship, as Zdravomyslova and Temkina (2005) have reminded us, was entirely determined by the state from its very beginnings. Even at its earliest, most ‘liberal’ phase immediately after the revolution, when it attacked the foundations of the bourgeois family, it did so in the name of ‘liberating’ women into the structures of collective labour, so that by Stalin’s time ‘repression and strict control, combined with social security guarantees for motherhood, were used to stabilise the patrimonial, state-determined contract of the “working mother.”’ The right to socially useful labour and Soviet motherhood became obligatory duties’ setting up the image of the Soviet superwoman for whom the formulaic double burden became the norm (2005, pp. 98, 104). The gendered citizen’s new status was underscored by the construction of communal apartments as the dominant form of public housing, which had the effect of making much private life public. After Stalin’s death, the situation was changed significantly, though often in unintended ways, by the Khrushchev government. The door was opened by the decriminalization of abortion in 1955 and the ideology of ‘voluntary motherhood’. At the same time, the massive construction of huge apartment blocks aimed at providing individual families with their own living space made possible the restoration of much of the intimacy of private life that had been lost in the Stalin era. One result of these combined forces was that:
the family became a kind of ‘competitor’ with the state, leading to the problematisation of gender roles in public discourse … In this period, the type of urban family which had developed, in which the woman generally combined work with the duties of mother and wife, restricted childbirth. The fulfillment of the civic duties of motherhood became problematic … [At the same time] the impossibility of fulfilling the part of single breadwinner and protector was leading to a ‘crisis of masculinity’. (2005, pp. 106–107)

By the 1970s time of Brezhnev and stagnation, many people had come to feel marginalized from those others who, through their conversations or behaviours, unreflectively (or perhaps only much less reflexively) continued to sustain that cultural system and the hegemony of ‘tradition’ through what anthropologist Alexei Yurchak (2005) has called the triumph of ‘empty forms’, i.e. a politically cynical willingness to participate in those symbolic forms that characterized politicized life in the Soviet Union – everything from the ‘show of hands’ vote to forms of address – while withholding any personal investment in the allegiances and ideology those forms signified. Explicitly critical political discourse became confined to the kitchen table, where it became entangled in the personal realities embodied in the patriarchal family. If, as we are wont to say, the personal is always political, the reverse is also true.

Depending upon the depth of habitus, depth both in a phenomenological sense and in the Geertzian sense of nested framing, one can move more or less unselfconsciously. But social stress frustrates the unselfconscious inhabitation of the objective field, the sociohistorical space, and provokes reflexivity and an awareness or the relativity and artificiality of social identities that open up divisions. Thus, while social and historical contexts matter irrededucibly and cannot be changed at will, certainly not by isolated individuals, nevertheless social relations and cultural forms are contingent, changeable and even knowable – the latter opening up the possibility of something like conscious, free, transformative action. Such radically democratic politics is performative through and through, enabling the construction of new, supplementary identities or some other basis of solidarity, such as shared goals, that can legitimate political organization, unity and discipline. The non-identical replicability, the Derridean differance, of these nested but simultaneously engaged frames, situational and sociohistorical, enables not only the reproduction of the culturally normative but also deception, subversion and parody – in short, the denaturalization of identity categories such as gender.

In the Soviet Union, the ‘gender’ question arrived with a certain urgency in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the seeds first planted by dissidents during the Khrushchev thaw began to ripen in the Brezhnev period of stagnation into a specific kind of multiply-framed, repeatedly reframed social stress. Second-wave feminism reached a Soviet Union staggering through the crisis in gender
ideology that Khrushchev’s policies had exposed. As already marginalized persons, engaged women, by virtue of being exposed to alternative, and by definition historically alien, discourses, began to see the outlines of their worldview precisely as a cultural system, that is, as an arbitrary structure of related values, beliefs and practice, now made available for the first time to their consciousness as an object for reflection and criticism. The availability of this alternative, alien discourse made possible through enunciation the objectification of their marginalized experience as a kind of heterodoxy. In this way, Bourdieu observes, “private” experiences undergo nothing less than a change of state when they recognize themselves in the public objectivity of an already constituted discourse, the objective sign of recognition of their right to be spoken and spoken publicly” (1977 [1972], p 170, emphasis in the original).

At the same time, however, the alternative discourse also made visible the arbitrariness of the historical trajectory which had been taken for granted as ‘traditional’, exposing it as neither natural nor inevitable, but only naturalized and willed.

This was certainly the case for Tatiana Mamonova, the iconic figure of Russian feminism whose earliest activity began in the late 1960s, the first years of Brezhnev’s rule. Later, much influenced by Robin Morgan’s anthology, Sisterhood Is Powerful, and the work of Susan Brownmiller and Kate Millett. Mamonova aimed to reach out for support to the international feminist movement through her Woman and Russia: An Almanac for Women about Women, which first appeared in 1979, but her publicly expressed attitudes towards sexuality brought her to the attention of the KGB. At about the same time, another group of women circling around Tatiana Goricheva, all of whom had been associated with Woman and Russia, had come to adopt a much different vision of woman grounded in an Orthodox Christian image of Mary the Theotokos or God-bearer (Ruthchild 1983). They split with Mamonova, whose emphasis on ‘compulsory equality’ and focus on individuals and objective conditions they criticized as insufficient, arguing that modifications to the legal sphere had never really addressed the more fundamental issue of a ‘moral equality’ between men and women, and they proposed instead a nationalist, communitarian model of personhood aimed at spiritual transformation (Buckley 1986). Despite their very different perspectives, both groups nevertheless were viewed by the State as dissident elements. On the eve of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow, Tatiana Mamonova, along with Club Maria leaders Tatiana Goricheva and Natalia Malakhovskaya, was bundled off to exile abroad on an Aeroflot flight.

But feminism in any form was not the only line, so to speak. Late Soviet ‘liberal’ criticism of gendered citizenship from academic and journalistic sources was often a displaced attack on the ideology of Soviet collectivism disguised:

as a protest against the Soviet version of equal rights for the sexes, and a defense of a certain tradition which was perceived to have been destroyed
by force. This tradition was presented as a practice of marked gender differences which had been ‘wiped away’ by socialism in order to mobilize ‘human resources’. (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2005, p. 108)

This emergent neotraditionalism (neo- because it assumed the pre-Soviet existence of something that in fact had not existed) reflected essentialist notions of gender and patriarchal notions family quite different from those of Soviet feminists like Mamonova. Even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the emergence of a neotraditionalist discourse of women, families and gender roles was buttressed by a rehabilitated Orthodox Church which argued that feminism and Orthodoxy were incompatible, if not hostile, by definition, a point recently reiterated by Patriarch Kirill. But much depends upon who is doing the defining and the sociohistorical context that demands definition.

Notably, late Soviet feminism, though following Mamonova’s line and tapping into Western discourse, continued to focus on those relations governed by the Family Code. This was precisely at a time when the so-called ‘sexual revolution’ was stirring in the USA, and a public sexual culture, including gay culture, was surfacing, though not without resistance. In Russia, however, questions of sexual practices and orientations were occluded, as they had been nearly from the beginning of the Soviet State. The Stalin era had made sexuality in general a tabooed political topic (a standard joke was, ‘Among us there is no sex’), so that even today a ‘sexologist’ is considered someone who deals with psychological maladies. And despite its long and well-documented history, homosexual behaviour in Russia, criminalized since Stalin’s time, had been driven underground. It is no wonder then, that when the new social forces first unleashed by the Khrushchev liberalization blossomed in the glasnost policies of the late 1980s and led to the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1993 and its removal in 1999 from the list of medical psychopathologies, the move would meet with open hostility. Today most Russians still think of homosexuality as a disease. A line in the sand had been drawn that would circumscribe both the State’s interest in gendered citizenship as the engine of social and biological reproduction and the Orthodox Church’s interest in moral discipline.

Thus, while addressing novel issues like artificial insemination and surrogate motherhood, in the sphere of parenting the new 1995 Family Code insists on natal definitions of family, for example, privileging the claim of the actual birth mother, even if surrogate, over that of the donor mother. And although the Family Code does not specify that the adopting parent(s) be heterosexual, Putin has explicitly refused to follow the lead of France and the Netherlands in allowing homosexuals to marry or adopt. And the present Family Code continues to make parents responsible for the ‘moral upbringing’ of children, although no standard is provided except that implied by legislation. The latter has become an especially tense issue in the recent attempts to suppress homosexual presence in the public sphere where banning gay pride parades and
criminalizing the distribution of literature about homosexuality are often rationalized in public discourse as preserving the nation’s youth from corruption and paedophilia. Instigators of these moral panics over sexuality are often able to displace national grievances about the plundering and manipulation of the 1990s onto resentment against a supposed Western conspiracy to undermine Russia not only economically and culturally but also morally. This often resulted in such curious alignments as Russia joining Iran, Egypt and the Vatican to oppose a recent declaration of the UN Commission on the Status of Women’s on stopping violence against women because it included language that addresses lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues, contraception and abortion (‘Unholy Alliance’ 2013).

Pierre Bourdieu (1987, p. 134) describes these acts as part of the ‘symbolic struggle over the power to produce and impose the legitimate vision of the world’. This struggle takes objective form in those collective demonstrations that have the aim of making the group exist visibly or in those individual demonstrations aimed at the presentation of self or at subverting one’s position in social space. The struggle to redefine the relationship between body and social location is carried on:

by trying to transform categories of perception and appreciation of the social world, the cognitive and evaluative structures through which it is constructed. The categories of perception, the schemata of classification, that is, essentially, the words, the names which construct social reality as much as they express it, are the stake par excellence of political struggle. (1987, p. 134, emphasis in the original)

As Bourdieu observed:

the class (or the ‘people’, the nation, or any otherwise elusive social collective) exists only if and when there exist agents who can say they are the class, by the mere fact of speaking publicly, officially, in its places, and of being recognized as entitled to do so by the people who thereby recognize themselves as members of the class. (1987, p. 139)

In articulating these interests publicly, feminists and the LGBT community define themselves as a group against supporters of a conservative Orthodoxy and of Putin. In this way, their weakness as marginalized citizens might be transformed, both objectively and subjectively, so that – however defined by others – marginals can see themselves as agents because they arrogate to themselves:

the power to impose and to inculcate a vision of divisions, that is, the power to make visible and explicit social divisions that are implicit, [which] is political
power *par excellence*. It is the power to make groups, to manipulate the objective structure of society. (1987, p. 139, our emphasis)

But feminists and the LGBT community, like the political opposition and many other marginalized groups in Russia, have difficulty in achieving this level of agency because access to channels of public discourse is consciously denied to them. What is at stake today, not only in Russia but also in many states throughout the world, is the role of religion in serving the state’s need to manage the aspirations of embodied persons by sanctioning only those identity performances that correspond to the reproductive and disciplinary needs of the state, a situation made even more problematic when the legitimacy of the state is questioned. Pussy Riot performed in the cathedral precisely as a stage on which to enact this ‘symbolic struggle over the power to produce and impose the legitimate vision of the world’.

**Gender performance *in situ*: the naked and the clothed**

Because performance and social action inhabit the same ‘plane of immanence’ (Deleuze 1988 [1981], p. 122), a single musical performance can have social force beyond what the metaphysical opposition between representation and reality would allow. Ontologically speaking, nothing has ‘more being’ than anything else. The rituals performed in Russian Orthodox cathedrals every day and the various live musical performances in clubs and stadiums all interact on the same plane, but not, of course, with equal sociopolitical effect. What happens at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, or St. Peter’s Basilica, is obviously more important and has more social capital, than a daily mass in a provincial city – in this respect, the two actions may be said to differ in key or modality of performance, one marked, intensified and singular and the other unmarked, ordinary and common – but, however different, both the provincial daily mass and the solemn mass in the Cathedral are connected by a shared grammar of action, so that, whether in the provincial church or in the Cathedral, one recognizes the reproduction of the same cultural form. This is also true for the less complex, less socially marked forms of action, such as the iterative performance of normative gender, whether rendered almost invisible by its unmarked customary form or called to attention by exaggeration, parody or contravention in a heightened modality of performance. On that ‘plane of immanence’, both marked and unmarked, exaggerated and normative, forms present themselves as available to the mobilizing self, who can, with a more or less well-formed consciousness of the consequences, become present in and through them. Unsanctioned participation in unconventional, highly marked forms that exaggerate or parody normative modes of presence always calls attention to the arbitrariness of social norms by making visible the unnatural natural of the exclusions they entail. Such unsanctioned actions may be of little
social consequence if they are characterized as accidental or foolish – ‘God loves
madmen and fools’, it is said – but when they are done intentionally, which can
be recognized by the context and structure of the action, they present a grave
danger to those invested in preserving distinctions by exposing the arbitrariness
of the exclusions entailed in the normative, and so reopening the wounds of
secondary violence.

In what follows, we attempt to understand how real persons and their
powers are characterized, and sometimes caricatured, as much by themselves as
by others, for social and political purposes. The power of ‘Pussy Riot’ derives
from recognizing that an explicitly engendered political discourse enables one to
dowel natural symbols like the body with a polysemic resonance, so that they
have special cogency for civil society in Putin’s Russia. Of special interest, here
is the way in which the collusion of Church and State strive to constrain the
polysemity of the body, naked or clothed, linking embodiment to agencies they
want to limit, while activists in the political struggle for the legitimacy of a
more liberating understanding of gender confront such constraints in order to
expose their artificiality and political beneficiaries and so make room for a more
pluralistic and tolerant society. In this sense, terms like ‘Putin’ or ‘Pussy Riot’
or ‘patriarch’ or ‘women’, while having referential qualities, are in fact tropes
deployed by rhetorical agents to establish various kinds of relationship among
the set of terms covered by the trope. That rhetoric and reality cannot be
separated is clear enough, for Pussy Riot’s performance, which some in the
West want to label as merely an example of bad taste in free speech, was not
free at all. It cost the performers real prison time, and it did so because it is in
those tropes, those symbols, where power is created, leveraged and, yes,
pricked.

The naked masculine: Vladimir Putin

Unlike many Western democracies, whose political traditions are grounded in
Enlightenment assumptions, Russia never embraced the notion of natural
human rights, but only rights specified by positive law; individuals have no
rights as persons, only as citizens. Vladimir Putin himself emerged from a very
specific context of post-Soviet social disintegration, the lack of a popular
political culture and a historical public deference to centralized power. Taken
together, these factors account for the fact that there are few if any means to
publicly mobilize opposition, which is always made to appear marginal and
inconsequential, because in point of fact it is, and its expression is either modest
enough to be patiently suffered or aggressive but limited enough to be
mischaracterized and contained, unless, of course, it can find a way to occupy
the moral high ground in the public view.

Putin himself was fortunate to be able to lead his country during an
economic recovery, thanks principally to the rise in international oil prices and
increased oil and gas production, but he defined for himself a series of management problems. The first was the increasing restlessness of the regions, to which he responded by creating a ‘vertical power’ (вертикальный власть) that significantly reduced popular sovereignty in all but the most local elections and placed former associates from the security services, known collectively as siloviki, in important administrative positions. The second was the more nebulous but, at least in the minds of many ideologues, nevertheless real lack of a ‘national idea’, by which was meant a public sense of genuinely belonging to and having pride in one’s country following the loss of great power status and the shambles of the Yeltsin years which created a keenly felt sense of public humiliation. Putin’s response was to position Russia rhetorically as still a great power, to present the West and especially the USA as a sometimes rival but always real shadow opponent, to evoke old formulas like ‘Russia has its own way’ and to reinvigorate certain national symbols, like the national anthem. A third, less tractable problem was what became known as Russia’s ‘demographic crisis’, a rapid decline in population even during the increasing prosperity of the Putin years. Though now reversed, at the time, the worst estimates were that Russia’s population would decline approximately one-third by mid-century. Beginning with the public recognition of this as ‘an issue of national security’ in a 2006 speech, Putin has taken some steps to reverse this trend, including substantial financial awards to families with two or more children, and beginning in 2009, the Kremlin began awarding a ‘Parental Glory’ award, which evolved from the Soviet ‘Maternal Glory’ award established by Stalin near the end of Second World War to encourage large families that would compensate for war losses.

These social problems – unresponsiveness of internal organs to the head of state, lack of coherent vision and coordination, loss of reproductive capacity and lack of pride even shame in physical appearance – very readily generate the conventional homology between the politics of the body and the body politic (the phrase ‘body politic’, which implies a much more specialized structure, was never used in the Soviet Union, which instead regularly referred to the ‘social organism’). The illness was diagnosed as a severe infection of Western social values, which must be excised, and fought diligently with Russia’s own homoeopathy. The body was sick or disordered and needed strong medicine and a good example: Putin positioned himself as both. Some sense that the government was itself the problem, which was exacerbated by images of the later Soviet gerontocracy, and the drunkenness of Yeltsin, to say nothing of a public nurturing of the sense that Gorbachev’s weakness has betrayed the Soviet Union. Even today, it is still not at all uncommon to hear people respond to his liberal critics by saying, ‘Russia needs a strong man to govern her’.

No wonder, then, that from the very beginning, a public relations campaign cultivated the hypermasculinist image of Putin as a ‘real man, who leads by doing’, yet another of the strong man/leader types, like Stalin the ‘man of
steel’, familiar from Russian history. Just a few months after becoming acting president in 2000, for example, Putin arrived in the capital of Chechnya riding in the back seat of a fighter jet; other macho photo-ops included tranquilizing an Amur tiger with a rifle dart and riding a motorcycle alongside the Russian analogue of Hell’s Angels. A whole series of Putin vacation photos reminding us of his ‘naked power’ by featuring the man shirtless in Siberia on horseback, fishing and swimming occurred while Putin was biding his time serving as Prime Minister to his anointed successor, Dmitry Medvedev. The contrast between the two could not have been starker: Putin the retro mature macho man against whom Medvedev, the slightly progressive ‘moderate’ lawyer in a blue suit, looked like a recent high school graduate sometimes frowning artificially in an attempt to look serious. Man and boy. Putin’s macho images provoked an interesting counterpoint. In October 2010, a group of female students at Moscow State University published an erotic calendar to celebrate Putin’s birthday. In June 2011, when it was still a question of whether Putin would run in the 2012 Presidential election for which he was again eligible, a group of high-heeled bikini clad girls who called themselves ‘Putin’s Army’ but whom the press called ‘Putin’s Amazons’ staged erotic car washes for free for any Russian-made car. Arguable the extreme of this trend was the campaign commercial comparing voting for Putin to a young woman’s having sex for the first time (First Time 2012).

By consciously cultivating a public image as a powerful male, Putin substantively engendered political discourse in Russia in ways never seen before and doing so made ‘Putin’ the figure a ripe target for Pussy Riot. In his book, Male Fantasies (1987 [1977], v.2, p. 13), Klaus Theweleit called attention to a similar strategy in his discussion of German Fascist propaganda, and asked, ‘Are we then dealing here with competition among males to determine who is the ‘real man’? Is effeminacy the worst imaginable shame?’ In today’s Russia, the candid answer to these questions must be Yes, considering the long history of Soviet glorification of the athlete as national hero, where today real men do not use condoms and make women bear the burden of contraception, where gay pride marches are banned and homosexuality popularly branded a disease and equated with paedophilia. It is precisely this kind of hypermasculinity that was attacked through VOINA’s bridge-penis erection (Russian art group VOINA 2012), by representations of Putin as gay in protest placards, and by Pussy Riot’s performance.

The naked feminine: FEMEN

Prior to Pussy Riot’s appearance as an identifiable group, the most prominent ‘feminist’ protest collective and predictable antagonist of macho Putin and his hypermasculinist discourse was the Ukrainian feminist group, FEMEN, founded in April 2008 (Mezzofiore 2011, FEMEN 2012). Today FEMEN is best known
for its topless confrontations with authority in the corridors of power, but in the beginning, FEMEN did not demonstrate bare-breasted. Instead, they wore sex-shop lingerie to protest another Western value—glamour—that had come to dominate Russian popular culture through television, film and glossy fashion and personality magazines, many of which were American in origin or Russian clones. As described by Francisco Martinez (2012):

Russian glamour culture took shape under President Vladimir Putin, and by 2006 it had become one of the hottest topics in the Russian media. … Under Putin’s rule, the initially negative image of the ‘new Russians’ underwent a transformation—from vulgar and vicious criminals in brightly colored jackets and gold necklaces to a stylish *haute bourgeoisie* who invested in art and clad themselves in expensive Western clothes … During the first eight years of Vladimir Putin’s presidency the glamorous message soaked everyday life in Russia, becoming a form of social currency that one would strive to acquire through the symbolic exchange of cultural capital.

For feminists and the intelligentsia, all this *glamur* was so much *poshlost* (vulgarity and banality). It was particularly demeaning to women, who had to suffer through the 1990s with the international image of the date-by-mail, ‘green card’ bride, ready to trade sexual and domestic compliance for a way out of her country. FEMEN organized and went on the offensive at the peak of glamour cycle, often targeting events, organizations or countries that in its view explicitly repressed women or promoted sexist images. Macho men thus confronted were persons of power, who included Putin; Alexander Lukashenko, President of Belarus; Silvio Berlusconi, then Prime Minister of Italy; and Dominque Strauss-Kahn, then head of International Monetary Fund.

FEMEN also has not been bashful about attacking organized religion. In November 2011, one of its member was detained in St. Peter’s Square, after Pope Benedict had just completed his regular audience, when she stripped off her top to protest the Church’s attempt to ‘impose patriarchal, medieval concepts of social and cultural positioning of women’. Then, on 9 December 2011, three members of FEMEN who had come to Moscow for the following day’s opposition rally to protest the December 4 Duma elections, widely considered fraudulent, stood in front of the same Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, their heads decked with garlands of flowers, stripped to expose their naked breasts and upper bodies painted with an inverted Orthodox cross, and began to dance and flagellate themselves in mock penance, holding up signs reading, ‘God, chase away the Tsar’, before being wrapped in overcoats and bundled away. They were not arrested. In April 2012, FEMEN occupied the belfry of the Saint Sofia Cathedral in Kiev, ringing the bells to protest anti-abortion legislation. In July 2012, a topless FEMEN demonstrator confronted Patriarch Kirill in Kiev with the words ‘Kill Kirill’ painted on her back. That same month, another of their number, topless, cut down a huge cross with a
chainsaw to protest the sentences of Pussy Riot which were to be handed down later that day. And Christian churches were not FEMEN’s only target. In London to protest against the 2012 Summer Olympics inviting countries with Islamist regimes, the women held up signs reading ‘No Sharia’ while cross-dressed as Muslim men.

These confrontations were not without hazard. In Belarus, the FEMEN-ists claimed to have been abducted, taken to a forest, stripped, doused with oil and threatened with being set on fire, and one of the women who cut down the cross in Kiev received death threats and felt compelled to flee the Ukraine. Yet governmental responses, whether in Rome, Moscow or Kiev, typically amounted to no more than a brief detention or a misdemeanour jail sentence of 15 days. The contrast between their treatment and that of Pussy Riot must be explained by more than the fact that, after being confronted by topless FEMEN member while visiting Angela Merkel in Germany, Putin remarked: ‘As far as the action is concerned, I liked it. However debates on political issues proceed better when participants are dressed’ (Budrys 2013). Numerous comments posted by leering YouTube viewers suggest Putin was not alone in his approval of bare-breasted women, but there is more here than meets the eye. On the one hand, nakedness historically is a sign of our common humanity, our vulnerability. On the other hand, the body, as so many have recently reminded us, is not the neutral site of signification and universality. Nakedness and bared chests especially are encoded quite differently for men and women.

It is a mark of the asymmetry of gender performance that the exposure of a naked male torso is, to be precise, unremarked, that is, so sanctioned as ordinary that we do not notice its frequency or significance. We are so accustomed to seeing men stripped for work, or in the classical period for war, that we automatically register the naked male torso, as Putin was frequently imaged, as a simple display of physicality and strength. The stripped male torso may be augmented by instrumentalities such as tools or weapons to multiply its force in order to achieve its ends. This is all so familiar that we overlook the fact that the male body, stripped for work and armed with the tools of the trade, takes as its goal the domination of nature through the transformation and subjugation of matter, time and space. It signifies the prerogative to order and transform the world into its image. Such an assertion is neither poetry nor hyperbole: as anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1987) has demonstrated, the association of woman with nature and man with culture is about as close to a cultural universal as one finds in ethnology.

Nevertheless, the asymmetry of gender performance that provokes a male leer at FEMEN’s exposed breasts is not entirely overwritten by FEMEN’s association with violence, and in part, this fact seems to have dissuaded Pussy Riot from adopting FEMEN’s strategies as much as they admire the group’s activity and reach. As a Pussy Riot member told an interviewer in February 2012 just days before their performance and arrest:
Our opinion on Femen is a complicated story. On one hand, they exploit a very masculine and sexist rhetoric in their protests – men want to see aggressive naked girls attacked by cops. On the other hand, their energy and the ability to keep on going no matter what, is awesome and inspiring: One day they are in Switzerland scaling the fence of the World Economic Forum and the next day they are in Moscow attacking the HQ of Russia’s biggest Natural Gas producer. And even after they were tortured and humiliated by KGB agents in Belarus, they vowed to keep on fighting even harder. Energy is very important these days; Street groups in Europe and America often lack power, but these girls have really got it. (Langston 2012)

Yet curiously, despite its ubiquity and aggressive imagery, FEMEN’s member was not imprisoned after its December 2011 performance outside the Moscow Cathedral, and even its confrontation of the Patriarch in Kiev with bared breasts and the words ‘Kill Kirill’ earned it a modest 15 days in jail.

The clothed masculine: Patriarch Kirill

After his smirking approval of FEMEN’s bared breasts in Germany, Putin himself made another point: in political arguments, clothes matter. Putin himself was simply being facetious, but that did not make him wrong. Nakedness focuses attention on our personal strength and on our vulnerability, both displayed as functions of the development of our individual bodies, but from the time of the emergence of the ancient Near Eastern city states up to the present day, acts of coronation, enthronement and investiture suggest that social order has required that we clothe persons with institutional power, the exercise of one validating the other. Today investiture, though often only metaphorical and formalized by a speech act, is still frequently accompanied by the putting on of a real costume or the taking up of symbolic instrumentalities. And to this day, even in secular states, the role of institutional religion, as representing a suprasocial power that through anointing can authorize the taking up of power, is often deemed essential for the legitimacy of acts of investiture, which otherwise would be little more than a costume party or masquerade.

Russian sovereigns have historically cloaked themselves in the authority of the Church, and Orthodoxy holds that Russia as the ‘Third Rome’, the successor to Rome and Constantinople, can only be legitimately ruled by a Church-anointed Tsar. The Patriarch of Moscow is primus inter pares, the dominant figure in the Russian Church and the person who anointed the Tsars even after the historical capital was moved to Saint Petersburg. His seat, the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, was originally built to commemorate deliverance from Napoleon and later destroyed by Stalin, but in 1990, the Soviet Government on its deathbed approved the rebuilding the cathedral, thus guaranteeing that in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the
cathedral and its pastor, the Patriarch of Moscow, together with the Russian State, would serve as mutual bulwarks of each other’s legitimacy. Thus, no venue was better suited to underscore ‘the fusion of Moscow patriarchy and the government’, which has been the visible symbol of the ever-shifting ground of Church–State relations since its inception.

In that same year, 1990, Alexei II was elected Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. As the first post-Soviet Patriarch, he faced two, almost equally daunting, rebuilding tasks. First, he succeeded in restoring the material base of the Church, the visible symbol of which, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, was finally reconsecrated in 2000. Initially, Alexei was arguably less successful with the second task, restoring the Church as a moral and ideological force in Russia. He contributed to strengthening Russian nationalism by identifying Russia as the Orthodox Church’s historical fiefdom, and he promoted the Church as a repository of social values and distinctive Russianness amidst the social chaos of the Yeltsin years which was often attributed to Western influence. However, his frequent and harsh public pronouncements against attempts to initiate gay pride parades (banned in Russia) seemed less moral teaching than a reactionary pandering to popular prejudices, especially in view of the fact that the LGBT community had also been violently suppressed under the Soviets, and though his project to get Orthodox religious education into public schools was eventually realized, it did not take exactly the shape he wished.

More sinister to some was that the collusion seemed to be working towards a common goal: a silenced, intimidated, conforming, easily managed society. Research in archives opened during glasnost had revealed the Church’s open collaboration with the Soviet Government and with the KGB, a collaboration so extensive and so damaging that in 1991 Alexei felt compelled to make a public acknowledgement of it and of his own personal complicity (Confirmed 2013). Ten years later, Alexei’s frequent public appearances with President Putin seemed to confirm these suspicions of an incestuous Church–State relationship, and further stratified Orthodox Church membership, which, especially in the Moscow region, is hardly as homogeneous as often caricatured. Nevertheless, by the time of Alexei’s death in 2008, incorporation of Orthodoxy into the public sphere was routine and its identification with Russian cultural identity taken for granted despite occasional governmental gestures towards inclusiveness and religious and ethnic pluralism.

From the very beginning of his rule in 2009, the current Patriarch, Kirill I, magnified exponentially the dilemmas that had haunted the post-Soviet Orthodox Church. Because questions associated with financing the Cathedral’s construction and operations persisted, Patriarch Kirill is sometimes characterized as if he were the chief moneychanger in the Temple and the Cathedral itself was a mall or trading centre (V Khram 2013). This and other widely reported scandals surrounding Kirill himself coincided with an embrace of the state even more
explicit than Alexei’s. When Kirill was enthroned as Patriarch in 2009, the church ceremony was prominently attended by then President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin, who the following day hosted a celebratory banquet for Kirill and the Orthodox episcopacy in the Grand Palace Hall of the Kremlin. Kirill used the occasion to underscore the equal if separate place of the Church in Russian society by promoting the Byzantine concept of *symphonia*, a collaborative division of responsibility, in which the State took care of the populace’s material needs and the Church (that is, the Orthodox Church) of the spiritual needs (*Vystypleniye 2013*). In 2010, Kirill ‘heartily congratulated’ Alexander Lukashenko on his re-election to the Presidency, despite what was widely recognized as a fraudulent election, commending ‘the level of public confidence in you’ and noting that ‘Belarus has a system of church-state partnership, covering different areas of life’ (*Patriarshie 2013*). Then, on 8 February 2012, in a face-to-face meeting with Putin just a month before his re-election, Kirill appeared on all the television news programmes saying that Russia had survived the chaos of the Yeltsin years, only:

> Through a miracle of God, with the active participation of the country’s leadership … I should say it openly as a patriarch who must only tell the truth, not paying attention to the political situation or propaganda, you personally [addressing Putin] played a massive role in correcting this crooked twist of our history.

Invoking the old Soviet bugaboo of the moral decay of the West, he characterized the opposition as fueled by a love of Western consumerism, and their protests merely ‘ear-piercing shrieks … The majority [of people in Russia], I assure you, are those who agree with what I am saying’ (*Bryansky 2012*). These comments may have been the final straw that provoked Pussy Riot’s performance in Kirill’s Cathedral just two weeks later.

Yet much of the animus directed against Pussy Riot exposed a second, equally essential characteristic of the Orthodox Church, often simply taken for granted.

While gender asymmetry characterizes many, though not all, religions, by tradition, the Church has clothed its power in secrecy and exclusion. The long and complicated history of institutionalizing celibacy in Catholicism and Orthodoxy — and here we acknowledge differences between the two churches — was often rationalized historically by the idea that marriage and family distracts a man from full devotion to God’s work, and also bears the early marks of stigmatizing women as sources of pollution and temptation. Implicit in the conception of celibacy is the idea of a ‘disinterested’ power, that is, a power that rises above the attractions of lust, but as the numerous violations of celibacy, both heterosexual and homosexual, attest, such ‘disinterest’ is purchased with bodily discipline that transforms human sexuality into temptation and the proliferation of sexuality into a corrupting pleasure that weakens the male will-to-power. As Klaus Theweleit remarked in *Male Fantasies*:
The focus of repression in the soldier male is the ‘desire to desire’; concomitantly, the core of all fascist propaganda is a battle against everything that constitutes enjoyment and pleasure. Pleasure, with its hybridizing qualities, has the dissolving effect of a chemical enzyme on the armored body. Attitudes of asceticism, renunciation and self-control are effective defenses. (Theweleit 1987 [1977], v. 2, p. 7)

In this respect, the Orthodox Church’s apparent concession in permitting married men to be ordained to the priesthood while prohibiting marriage after ordination to the diaconate and excluding married men from the episcopacy entirely heightens rather than diminishes gender asymmetry. Along these same lines, Natalia Kizenko (2013, p. 601) noted that:

One might assume that priests’ daughters would be more likely than other women to conform to Orthodox gendered norms. However, precisely because priests’ daughters grow up with insider status, unlike that of the laity, they can be reminded of their permanent outsider status as women more vividly and can become more radicalized or more bitter than either their brothers or casual churchgoers. For example, Dasha (age 28) a priest’s daughter and a sports journalist, told me that she began to feel her second-class status keenly after noting that at children’s baptisms the only way to distinguish whether an infant was male or female was whether he was triumphantly borne aloft by the priest behind the iconostasis into the altar [sanctuary], indicating the potential priestly status of all males, or whether she was placed on the floor [of the solea] in front of the royal doors [opening through the iconostasis to the altar], indicating that entry behind the doors was permanently closed to her. Someone who attended only the baptism of her own child, or who helped his father at the altar, might be less aware of such broader patterns.

As Dasha’s observation bears witness, the Orthodox Church is further distinguished from other Christian denominations, including Catholics, by the ways in which gender asymmetry expresses itself not only in celibacy but also in church architecture. In an Orthodox Church, unordained believers are restricted to standing in the nave facing an elevated platform (bema), which spans the width of the church and is divided along its length by the iconostasis or the wall of icons. Behind the closed, royal doors of the iconostasis, in the sanctuary, the male priest and concelebrants consecrate the bread and wine during the Divine Liturgy. Then the royal doors are opened, and the priest and concelebrants come out onto the portion of the platform in front of the iconostasis, the solea, a transitional space between male-gendered heaven/sanctuary and mixed-gendered earth/floor/nave, onto which the unordained step up only to receive the Eucharist. So the Cathedral as representative of
Orthodoxy and the Moscow Patriarchate was more than a target of opportunity for protestors like FEMEN and Pussy Riot.

**The clothed feminine: Pussy Riot**

As a group, Pussy Riot is a relatively late arrival on the public stage, first appearing in August 2011, only seven months before their Cathedral performance in February 2012 and subsequent arrest. Some of the members had earlier participated in VOINA, another Russia art parody protest group, and before putting on masks and picking up musical instruments, the first actions of at least two of the young women consisted of prankishly surprising female police officers with passionate kisses, videos of which were subsequently posted on the Internet.

Based on the experiences of FEMEN and reactions to their own earlier performances, Pussy Riot almost certainly could not have expected the kind of response their performance provoked. Though most Orthodox believers, like most Russians, found the performance tasteless, neither all believers nor all clergy were outraged. All the complaints about blasphemy, sacrilege, desecration and offending the feelings of believers were post hoc arguments clearly fabricated for the trial. Pussy Riot’s own explanation was more provocative because more to the point. In discussing the refrain of the song they performed in the Cathedral that refers to ‘holy shit’, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova first acknowledged that it is a common enough vulgar exclamation in English slang, and then went on to describe how their intent was to deploy it metaphorically, addressing ‘the fusion of Moscow patriarchy and the government. ‘Holy shit’ is our evaluation of the situation in the country. This opinion is not blasphemy’ (Narezhnaya 2012). Clearly, their references to Putin and the use of the Cathedral as a protest site addressed the fusion of Church and State, but so had FEMEN’s protest two months, for which they were only briefly detained and then released. Of course, political animus accounts for their heavy punishment, especially considering that, although their identities were known at the time of their performance on 21 February, the first arrests were postponed until late on 3 March, the eve of Putin’s election, probably in order not to provoke demonstrations that might colour the election. But what was so extraordinarily political about their performance itself?

For one, Pussy Riot’s Cathedral performance made visible the Church’s nested frames of exclusion by violating them, dancing not only inside the church instead of in the street but also on the solea in front of the doors of the iconostasis. As with their performances outside the jail where opposition activists were held or in Red Square or on the roof of a boutique in a chic, upscale shopping district, the spatial penetration was also a semiotic one. Pussy Riot doubly violated these spaces even though no liturgy was being performed. One might even argue for their restraint considering that they did not open the
doors of the iconostasis, in front of which they were performing, and enter the sanctuary to dance before the altar.

Although Pussy Riot’s costumes may pass unmentioned because after so many performances they are familiar, women’s clothing has recently taken on additional signification in the context of the Orthodox Church’s efforts to reach out to women who are ‘cultural Christians’, that is, only nominally Orthodox. As Natalia Kizenko (2013, pp. 606–607) points out:

This [the concern with women’s dress and appearance] is something new in Russian Orthodoxy. … In the past twenty years, however, given the long rupture with previous tradition, changes in fashion, and the highly sexualized clothing worn by (606) Russian women at the office, notions of what constitutes proper dress for church attendance or, indeed, for living as a ‘true’ Orthodox Christian now vary widely. […] As Pelageia Tiurenkova [2009] puts it, ‘Our choices are “Cosmo-girl” and “Ortho-woman”’.

As Kizenko astutely observes, women’s costume is an index of the social stratification in an especially diverse urban Orthodoxy and a site for contesting bodily discipline. Today not only signage but also security officers stand at the doors of the Cathedral ready to check the appropriateness of the attire of those entering. Pussy Riot deceived them by wearing overcoats and headscarves, which they quickly doffed before they ascended the solea to stand before the doors of the sanctuary. As was mentioned at their trial, everything about their costume is a refusal from the norms of Ortho-woman, who submits to convention and internalized church discipline. Not mentioned at their trial was that Pussy Riot’s costume was also a refusal from the norms of Cosmo-girl. Because women’s attire indexes social stratification, using the legal system to sanction a strict rather than liberal interpretation of Orthodox norms under any circumstances underscores the collusion of State and Church in disciplining the social body so that it might become more docile, more uniform and more orthodox.

Overlooked in the discussion of their costume in the contrastive environment of Orthodoxy discipline was the signification of the costumes in themselves. Their curiously identical form (simple dresses, tights and balaclavas) speaks to a common, yet anonymous gendered identity. In a February 2012 interview, when asked about the balaclavas, one member of the group commented: ‘Our goal is to move away from personalities and towards symbols and pure protest’. As if wearing balaclavas did not sufficiently ensure anonymity, another member added: ‘We often change names, balaclavas, dresses, and roles inside the groups. People drop out, new members join the group, and the lineup in each Pussy Riot’s guerilla performance can be entirely different’ (Langston 2012). But the motley nature of their costumes, in which one performer’s purple dress is echoed by another’s purple tights and a third’s purple balaclava, suggests more than a
ghostly uniform anonymity. Rather it suggests an interchangeability of parts and, from performance to performance, an increasing number of permutations, signifying a refusal not only from a fixed collective gender identity but also from a fixed singular gender identity.

The diversity in unity of costume is underlined by Pussy Riot’s movements, which consist of both synchronized movements, such as demonstrative leg kicks and power-challenging fist pumps, much like the coordinated multiplication of the same movements and gestures by members of a pop singing group, as well as highly individualized kinetic presentations. Some of the semiotic value of their kinesiology derives from its contrast to Orthodox Church discipline which requires modesty not only in costume but also in behaviour, a restraint of movement, gesture and volume of speech. Even more may be said to derive from the image of several women who sometimes seem to appear to act as an identifiable collectivity which at other moments dissolves into the apparently unnamable chaos of disparate individual actions. This certainly can be read as a refusal from any ascribed collective identity, not only for the individual members of the group but also for all women.

One might go even further to argue that the deliberate taking up of these permutations suggests a wilful desire to explore a multitude of identities while simultaneously sanctioning such exploration of multiplicity as the most creative and pleasurable kind of ‘play’. Of course, signifying such proliferation of sexualities endorses the ‘rainbow’ LGBT demand for legal guarantees for a multiplicity of gendered self-realizations, a demand vehemently resisted by both Church and State. At the same time, the insistence of both Church and State on disciplining Pussy Riot underscores their shared belief that a discipline is necessary to produce a more uniform and thus a more docile population.

In Pussy Riot’s performances, including the one at the Cathedral, there is more than a little hint of the role of absurdist play in social criticism. Their protest is more than a simple opposition. In this, they resemble the absurdist and the underground of the 1960s and 1970s who often seemed to position themselves as counterpolitical, because in their view ‘the dissident’s protest subjectivity had one mode of political functioning, the mode of opposition (against Soviet anti-Western culture and market economy)’, and the dissenter’s vision was often only an inversion of ‘the official interpretation of the Soviet political imaginary’ (Zherebikina 2010, p. 279). As Irina Zherebikina analyses it, this gave the underground avant-garde a peculiar power:

The performative aesthetic gesture of the Sixties onwards … as practices violating the normative culture/power of the creative life … was directed against the dissident mimesis of power. The collective experience of the sovereign artistic nonsense as the ‘empty action’ of everyday life in the unofficial culture of the Sixties was considered richer in its resources than the nonsense of state sovereignty, and thus it was endowed with the radical
possibility of escaping the frame of the mimetic nonsense of soviet culture/ power and the political system as a whole. (Zherebikina 2010, p. 279)

Pussy Riot’s performances are often viewed as pure ‘hooliganism’ precisely because they cannot be made entirely and transparently intelligible by reference to any singular binary. They do not simply oppose, but propose, and what they propose – in their motley costume, their contestation of State-supported Church-blessed identities, and their ‘non-music’ music – is their right, in and of themselves as social agents, to define and occupy any space – physical, social and conceptual – and there to reconstitute new individual and group identities. Where FEMEN deploys the semiotics of binary opposition to oppose straightforwardly structures of power, Pussy Riot’s performances make visible, in Zherebkina’s words, ‘the emancipatory project of molecular pluralities’. From a uniformitarian social perspective, Pussy Riot thus is far more dangerous than FEMEN, because their performances propose a new social order that mobilizes groups ‘capable of radical solidarity based on the radical, paradoxical violation of customary stereotypes of the everyday minoritarian political action/expression’.

Conclusion

We began by pointing out that liberal democracies accommodate some social identities better than others. Because the Foucauldian ‘production of sexuality’ occurs precisely in the Ranciere’s (1992) ‘political’ field where policy confronts emancipation, this fact raises unsettling questions about the secondary violence involved in identifying the human body with the body politic, questions such as whether the body politic is male or female, straight or queer, ‘docile’ or ‘resistant’? To resolve such deeply contentious issues, states that aspire to the condition of liberal democracy can bypass the opportunity for necessary public debate by falling back on authoritarianism.

Finally, one might reasonably wonder whether or not all the players in the Pussy Riot affair, let alone the various publics, really understand all this, especially characterizing motivated action as intended result? But this question misunderstands how human beings as social creatures interpret action and attribute intentionality. It is precisely because this sense of offence, among all parties, is so unconsciously inhabited because so long practised that it is more dangerous and more consequential to the development of civil society in liberal democracies than if it were all premeditated. The value of Pussy Riot’s performance lies in its making visible, and thus making available for public debate, the ways in which authoritarianism legitimates its exercise of power by exploiting social divisions through a network of institutionalized forces which civil society had come to take for granted.
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Notes

1 The original performance – Pussy Riot gig at Christ the Savior Cathedral (original video) – can be viewed online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grEBlskpDWQ.

2 The relationship of politics to the discipline of the body, which is central to the Foucauldian perspective on social organization and power, becomes particularly salient in times of social reconfiguration like that taking place presently in the Muslim world, in India and, we argue here, in post-Soviet Russia (Comaroff 1985, Abu-Lughod 1988, Hatem 1998, Wakankar 1995).

3 Dan Healey (2002, 2008) provides very good overviews of the history and status of homosexuality in the Soviet Union. The latter provides a reference for the common joke, ‘We have no sex’ (177) and a good discussion of sexology as sexopathology.

4 According to the Moscow Times of 6 September 2013: ‘many lawmakers also believe that homosexuality is a disease that should be treated through “proper education” and psychological counseling. Even more disturbing, 80% of Russians agree with them, according to an April poll by the Levada Center’. While there are always questions to be raised about polling in Russia, and the figure of 80 per cent might seem excessive, there is little doubt that most Russians do not see homosexuality as a choice but as an organic defect. Accessed online 14 September 2013 at: www.themoscowtimes.com/print/article/the-roots-of-russias-homophobia/485634.html. See also Healy 2008.

5 Months after this article was written, this rhetorical dimension was recognized by the distinguished Russian gallerist and critic of contemporary art, Marat Gelman: ‘Pussy Riot and Putin have become antonyms: he’s a man, they are girls; he is rich, they are poor; he is in the Kremlin on a throne, they are in prison; he is grey, they are multicolored; he is old, they are young. In fact they are in direct opposition to Putin, a mirror, a negative mirror, and Putin probably felt this as his personal story’ (Masuk 2013).
Notes on Contributors

**Brian Rourke** (Ph.D., Stanford, 1999) is an Associate Professor at New Mexico State University, where he teaches twentieth-century British fiction, film and critical theory.

**Andrew Wiget** (Ph.D., Utah, 1977), Professor Emeritus at New Mexico State University, is the author of numerous books and scholarly articles on American literature, folklore and ethnography. Since 1994 he has been working with Siberian indigenous communities through grant-funded folkloric and ethnographic projects. He has held two Fulbright grants to Russia (1995, 2004) where he has spent a good deal of time in the past 20 years.

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