What the Case of Pussy Riot Tells Us About Putin's Russia

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MARK YOFFE, AUG 29 2012

As a scholar of culture I get my cues from cultural phenomena. And this year, so far, there has not been sharper cue or a louder "canary in a coal mine" reflecting upon the state of internal affairs in Russia than the case of Pussy Riot.

Why attribute such importance to this feminist punk band and the treatment its three arrested members (Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, 23, Yekaterina Samutsevich, 30, and Maria Alyokhina, 24,) received from the hands of Putin's government aligned with his lap dog, the Russian Orthodox Church?

I think three major issues played the role in this drama that helped the entire world to see the true face of what Russia and its newly found ideology promise the country and the world. These issues are: gender, generation, and anti-constitutional fusion of the religion and the state.

Women are a danger to the state

Compared to their male colleagues-guerrilla artists, arrested Pussy Riot members were subjected to an unprecedentedly harsh sentence of two years in a penal colony by the authorities for the "crime" that does not even exist in Russian legal code. In comparison, their male comrades from the art collective Voina (War) who overturned a police car, spent some time in pre-trial jail, and had their charges dropped all together.

And here is the message the Putin government wants to deliver to all these "silly girls" out there daring to challenge misogynistic, sexist, patriarchal culture of Russia: "You open your mouths too wide, you make too much noise–you'll pay for it! Go back into the kitchen, and rear children as you're supposed to!"

This is happening in a country where even female members of intelligentsia shy away from the label "feminist," and where, during Pussy Riot court proceeding, though the judge "criticized the women for embracing feminism while noting that feminism is not a legal violation or a crime in the Russian Federation", a lawyer for several of the trial's "victims" declared that feminism has no place in the church. "This [feminism in the church] does not correspond with reality," Yelena Pavlova said. "Feminism is a mortal sin."

This is a stark serious warning from the Russian government to all the budding female revolutionaries who are considering challenging the status quo.

These kids need to learn to behave!

The second issue is generational. Russia came out of perestroika and into the 1990s with a very strong and highly developed tradition of Soviet counterculture. Counterculture that produced socially active youth movements such as hippies and punks, as well as extremely vocal and influential rock culture, vibrant art scene, and daring journalism. However after Perestroika, through the later 90s and into the 21st century, Russia's counterculture suffered an identity crisis that manifested as an inability to find its voice and role, and apply itself effectively in the new post-Soviet reality.

In addition, merciless time took its toll. Former heroes of garage rock grew heavy and became respected session musicians, profitable stars, producers and studio owners with families to feed. The first decade of the 21st century can be classified as a period of "stagnation" as far as counterculture and countercultural art forms are concerned.

In 2008 the last great star of Russian cultural dissent iconic punk-rocker Yegor Letov died of a heart attack, and the whole era of Russia's glorious counterculture came to an end. The new generation of artists and musicians who matured after the Soviet period had not grown up yet, and the old generation was too bored, too tired, or too busy.

With the exception of several brilliant and scandalous actions of the guerrilla art collective Voina–the period from February of 2008 when Voina announced itself with an orgy at the Biological Museum mockingly celebrating Medvedev's ascendency to Presidency of Russia, to August 2011 when Pussy Riot formed–Russia was quiet.

When Pussy Riot arrived, it proclaimed its arrival louder and braver than anything that ever happened in Russian culture, perhaps since the time of Russian Futurists in the early 20th century. Pussy Riot also made manifest a very important fact: the birth of a new generation of Russian counterculture. A counterculture very different from anything that Russia has ever known: new stylistically; new because of its cultural awareness and behavioral code, its westernized moral and political values, its openness to diversity and multiculturalism; and new in terms of its gender make up. These twentysomethings were culturally, politically, technologically, and media savvy as no one before. They had ideas, the drive and know-how needed to implement them.

That spelled trouble for Putin and the new Russian ideology he fashioned to substitute for communism–the reified Russian Orthodox Church. This is what Nadezhda Tolokonnikova's courageous lawyer Mark Faygin, one of the keenest observers of Pussy Riot phenomenon, referred to in his Novaia Gazeta interview. The authorities apparently felt that the new seedling of Russian counterculture had to be squashed before it turned into a major problem. That's why they went after these twenty somethings with all the mercilessness of medieval inquisition's machine. Pussy Riot's arrest, trial, and sentencing became the cruelest display of the whole array of intimidation practices that the government is using against youthful protesters to date.

And this can only spell one thing on the part of the government–fear. Therefore Pussy Riot was right when its members sang in their now iconic song "Putin Pissed Himself," performed in front of the Kremlin on Moscow's Red Square: "Revolt in Russia / Putin got scared."

The question is, will the new young counterculture in Russia be squashed, or will it grow into a power like the counterculture movement of the 80s that so greatly contributed to the Soviet regime's collapse?

Russia's new ideology challenged

Just a few months ago scholars of Russian affairs scratched their heads, the way they did through the last 12 years, asking each other: what is going to be Russia's new ideology that will substitute Marxism-Leninism?

And then Pussy Riot answered the question and made transparent the third issue: Russian Orthodoxy is a main component of the country's newly found ideology. With childlike simplicity they announced in their now world-famous punk prayer "Holy Mother Chase Away Putin" that the king is indeed naked, and there is an unconstitutional and immoral cahoots made between Putin's secular government and Russia's Patriarchy. The Patriarchy shamelessly supported Putin in his bid for his third Presidential terms, proclaiming that Putin's last presidency was a miracle from God, and in "Holy Mother Chase Away Putin" Pussy Riot dared to call the spade a spade.

But there was something about them and their song other than reveling the obvious that scared Putin and the Patriarchy into punishing the newly minted heretics of Putin's newly cobbled together "Orthodox nationalism" with all brutality of Soviet lawlessness: neither the women nor their song denied religion and church. They did not proclaim militant atheism. On the contrary, Pussy Riot's song and its statement proclaimed honest religious belief and respect for the institution of Orthodoxy.

It was not a joke when they labeled their song a punk *prayer* and used the theme from Sergei Rakhmaninov's moleben Bogoroditse Devo in the chorus. According to Tolokonnikova's lawyer Mark Feygin, the sincere honest religiosity of Pussy Riot can be extremely threatening to the Patriarchy, because it can lead to a schism and the formation of an independent liberal stream in the Medieval and patriarchal tradition of Russian Orthodoxy.

Liberal Orthodoxy freed of Patriarchy's control could appeal to many free-spirited believers, and can become a very powerful tool in the hands of the new generation of equality-seekers represented by Pussy Riot.

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