

PUSSY RIOT AND THE SPECTACLE OF PROTEST

Joshua Foust has been criticizing the attention paid to the Pussy Riot trial in controversial ways.

Before I explain where I believe he's wrong, let me assert that the most effective protests in the US in recent years came when gay service members and veterans chained themselves, in uniform, to the gate of the White House. That protest was by no means an isolated event. Thousands of people were organizing to pressure the government to repeal DADT, and DADT wouldn't have been repealed without that underlying organization. The protest offended a number of DADT repeal supporters, mostly because wearing uniforms violated restrictions against protesting in uniform, but partly because participants in the protest were branded by some as self-promoters. Nevertheless, because the protest muddled with the symbols of power—the White House, the military, and proudly out service members—it made it far more risky for Obama to continue treating DADT repeal activists like he treats all others pressuring him on politics, by ignoring them.

When I talk about the spectacle of protest, this is what I'm referring to. The spectacle is not primarily about the number of celebrities—or even people on Twitter—responding to it (though of course the spectacle does increase the likelihood it'll go viral). It has to do with reprogramming symbols of authority in ways that undermine how they've been used. The White House protest, IMO, made sustaining DADT a slight on those men and women in uniform chained to the gate. The protest (and the subsequent charges) basically shuffled the symbolism tied to the White House and military in ways that might have been very risky for Obama.

The analogy to Kony is inapt

Which is just one of many reasons I believe Foust's analogy between Pussy Riot and Kony 2012 is totally inapt. Here's how Foust makes that analogy.

In a real way, Kony 2012 took a serious problem – warlords escaping justice in Central Africa – and turned it into an exercise in commercialism, militarism, and Western meddling. Local researchers complained about it, and a number of scholars used it as an opportunity to discuss the dos and don't of constructive activism.

In Russia, Pussy Riot's newfound Western fans are taking a serious issue (Russia's degrading political freedoms and civil liberties) and turning it into a celebration of feminist punk music and art.

I agree with Foust's assessment of the Kony 2012 campaign, and I told him on Twitter that I think it could discredit online activism in general, particularly formal campaigns.

But that doesn't make these two unlike movements the same. First, Foust claims both "commercializ[e] political action." Except that—as far as I know—there's not one organization focusing attention on Pussy Riot; it's not a formal campaign. As distinct from Kony 2012, no one entity is pushing Pussy Riot as an embodiment of its ideology and preferred solution (there is freepussyriot.org, but as far as I've seen, it's not driving the social media conversation on this and their twitter handle has fewer than 15,000 followers). And while Foust might argue all those who focus on Pussy Riot are primarily feminists or hipsters hijacking the Russian opposition movement, not only is there plenty of counterevidence to that, but it would still ignore the organic nature of the focus on Pussy Riot.

Moreover, to suggest that Pussy Riot is like

Kony 2012, you'd have to ignore that Pussy Riot is an integrated part of Russia's opposition scene (a point Foust acknowledges), one that many Russian dissidents support. That is, the agency of the Pussy Riot protest starts in Russia, not in the US. It's really no more Foust's role to decide whether and how people should respond to Pussy Riot than it was Invisible Children's role to dictate what the response to Kony should be.

Foust misunderstands the spectacle of feminism

Then there's Foust's uneven understanding of how spectacle plays here. He gets at least part of what Pussy Riot was aiming to do.

Pussy Riot are clearly not expressing hatred of Orthodox Christianity, but they are protesting the Church's close relationship to Vladimir Putin and his regime. Hating Putin is not hating religion, unless Putin is now religion in Russia.

But then he seems to entirely miss that Pussy Riot—not people on Twitter in the US—have created the spectacle here.

Focusing on the *spectacle* of Pussy Riot actually obscures the real issues that prompted their trial in the first place. Pussy Riot are not peasants grabbed off the road and put on trial for being women — they are rather famous (at least in Russia) political activists who got arrested for political activism.

After all, these women are famous—and they are therefore somewhat (though that is all relative in Putin's world) protected from the worst that Putin might do to them—because they have created a series of spectacles, spectacles that were problematic enough that the Russian state chose to prosecute them, creating the spectacle that has generated Western attention. That spectacle serves as a mockery of Putin's power, one with

the bravery to laugh as they are sentenced. Indeed, their mild sentence is akin to what the government tried to do with the DADT protestors: an attempt to reassert authority, but not too much, because doing so would betray a weakness precisely on the symbols they've mobilized. If Putin sent Pussy Riot away for 7 years, it'd be a tacit admission—while the whole world is watching—that both his performed virility and his feigned religion are just acts, acts he can't have questioned.

More significantly, Foust seems to misunderstand what role feminism plays in all of this (though he left this bit out of his Atlantic piece). Foust suggests the only reason people are paying attention is because the members are, “pretty girls in a punk band with a naughty name.” But of course, the reason they're famous enough to have that attention comes from a bunch of stunts in which they wore masks, obscuring both their individuality but also their beauty (and masks are playing a big part of the response). Moreover, to make this argument, he seems to ignore the heightened attention that Kasparov's arrest at the verdict has gotten; Kasparov may be a famous genius, but he's not physically attractive.

Foust's most telling statement, however, came when he tried to mock—complete with scare quotes and another use of the word “girls”—a comment from Chloe Sevigny.

It wasn't thousands of people rallying in the streets of Moscow for political freedom that got Le Tigre into Russia, it was three girls in a punk band showing up in her twitter feed. And she responded by going to a poetry reading in Manhattan.

[Chloe] Sevigny, in a white eyelet dress and flats, read a letter Ms. Alyokhina wrote long before the trial began, describing being cold and tired in detention. “It seems like it

really won't get any worse," Ms. Sevigny-as-Ms. Alyokhina said, with feeling. Ms. Myles read a letter the group wrote to Prime Minister Dmitri A. Medvedev.

"There's a Joan of Arc-type resonance," she said afterward, "that they're standing up to patriarchy. It's poetry in and of itself."

Just so we're clear: the band members of Pussy Riot are not analogous to Joan of Arc, who was burned at the stake by the English after leading French troops into combat.

[snip]

Amidst the "confront patriarchy" literature – I didn't realize Russia's biggest sin against freedom was its male chauvinism

Ignore for a second that Foust misstates the analogy (Sevigny did not say Pussy Riot's acts were akin to leading a battle, she said they were akin to standing up to patriarchy), it's hard to understand how someone in this day and age equates "patriarchy" to "male chauvinism." I suppose Foust believes it is mere "chauvinism" when elected representatives tell "girls" they have to bear the children conceived of rape?

If you don't understand that patriarchy involves a larger system of power, one that affects both women and men, and one that creates precisely the kinds of silences that Putin uses to undercut his critics, then you're also not going to understand why the spectacle created by Pussy Riot—one that mocked both the literal mobilization of the Patriarch to reinforce Putin's power as well as the virility that is a key element of Putin's image—will have a resonance that is different from attacking Putin's corruption. It is fundamentally about

mocking Putin's authoritarianism.

Once you concede that this spectacle is one created by these "girls" to delegitimize an authoritarianism that is fundamentally patriarchal, then criticizing the spectacle that results amounts to exercising an authority of really dubious origin.

The teaching opportunity

Now, ultimately, I think Foust is right to want people to look beyond just Pussy Riot to other victims of Putin's repression and I wish he had focused his writing on that effort.

Pussy Riot are part of a larger movement within Russia to demand political freedom, one that Putin's regime thugs are literally, physically beating back. American celebrities are right to be outraged about Pussy Riot's treatment, but it's a shame that so few seem to have investigated what happens to the activists who *aren't* Western media darlings for their all-women punk bands with sexually suggestive names.

But I think his obsession with the celebrities involved (something I don't remember being a big part of Kony 2012) obscures the multiple kinds of agencies here. First, he dismisses (and has been, on Twitter) those who have responded to Pussy Riot's story independent of Madonna's or Sting's or Seigney's interventions. If people respond to the spectacle Pussy Riot create directly, do the things celebrities have said that piss Foust off so much matter? And if they do, does insulting them for following Pussy Riot but not necessarily these celebrities encourage or discourage them from learning more?

On Pussy Riot and Plastic People of the Universe

When Foust and I first argued about this on Twitter, I argued (and he conceded) that an apt analogy was the Plastic People of the Universe trial in Czechoslovakia in 1976 that led

directly to the formation of Charter 77 and the renewal of the Czech opposition. Foust claimed,

People thought they mattered but they never really catalyzed opinion

Without engaging too much in the historical accuracy of that statement, several things clearly arose out of that moment: the dissidents from the Prague Spring became active again, found a new way to conceive of their movement, which led to a practice that continued until such time as one of the people who reacted most directly to the trial became President of a free country. Moreover, the moment generated the same kind of celebrity focus—led by authors rather than actors, but also by rock stars—that helped raise the profile of the dissidents, probably making them somewhat safer from state repression. The focus also made it easier for these dissidents to use Radio Free Europe to find ways around censorship in their own country. And that celebrity focus created a Czech dissident sub-industry that, if nothing else, made Czech literature and culture fashionable which in turn led to people who weren't celebrities at all engaging in the Czech cause (even if many of them came in through the problematic gateway drug of Milan Kundera).

The celebrities who were a part of that movement, though, were just a part of it—a catalyst, perhaps. Ultimately they may have made the dissidents inside Czechoslovakia stronger, but that was a mere tool the dissidents themselves used to persist for the next 13 years.

Now, the time is not 1976 anymore. There are many things, both positive and negative, that make media environment in which Pussy Riot works different from Plastic People and the dissidents who responded to their trial. And Putin is far stronger both domestically and internationally than the Czechoslovak client state was in then 1970s; the West, too, is in a far weaker position to criticize. So—like all contingent

historical events—there's no telling how Pussy Riot will play out.

But what has happened here is that some dissidents in Russia chose to use spectacle as a tool to criticize Putin, a spectacle they and their supporters successfully magnified when he then prosecuted them for the underlying spectacle. Spectacle is a tool these women have chosen and used successfully. There's no telling whether it will be more successful than the efforts of individuals exposing corruption who die in secret. Most optimistically, it will become one moment in the larger protest movement Pussy Riot is very much a part of, like a bunch of activists chaining themselves to the White House were just one element of the movement that successfully repealed DADT. Perhaps it will make some in Russia more courageous. Perhaps it will mobilize more activists internationally.

But ultimately this spectacle came not from an NGO in San Diego, it came from dissidents in Russia who are paying the price for creating it. So I'm not sure why criticizing Americans for responding to spectacle in the way the people who created it might have wished really helps Russians.