

## 2.2. What does the Balaclava stand for? Pussy Riot: just some stupid girls or punk with substance?

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### Abstract

5 punk singers walk into the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, address the Mother of God herself, ask her to free Russia from Putin and “become a feminist”. They are stopped by the security and three members are later arrested. The rest is history... Nevertheless, Pussy Riot have proven to be more complex. This article aims to go beyond the dichotomies and the narratives played out in Western and Russian media. Given the complexity of the affair, this article aims to dissect the political thought, the ideas (or ideology), the philosophy behind their punk direct actions. Focusing on their statements, lyrics and letters and the brechtian way they see “art as a transformative tool”, our aim is to ask what does the balaclava stand for? Are they really just some stupid punk girls or is there some substance to their punk? Who are (politically) the Pussy Riot?

**Keywords:** Pussy Riot; Punk and Direct Action; Political Thought; Critical Discourse Analysis; 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminism

Who are the Pussy Riot? Are they those who have been judged in court and sentenced to prison? Or those anonymous member who have shunned the two persecuted girl? Or maybe it's everyone who puts a balaclava and identifies with the rebellious attitude of the Russian group? Then, are Pussy Riot an “Idea” or are they impossible to separate from the faces of Nadia and Masha? This is the first difficulty of discussing Pussy Riot – defining who their subject is. Hence, we focus on their different “incarnations” to understand of which substance they are made of.

But are their “ideas” easily perceived? Or is the geopolitical context an ever present distorting feature? Is it possible to look at Pussy Riot for what they “truly” are or we can never escape our material position? Are they part of a liberal, a feminist, anti-capitalistic political project or all at once? And are we to look at Pussy Riot from a sort of “void position”, without any knowledge of their social and historical context? How would this change our regard of them?

After all, the greatest question guiding this article is: Do Pussy Riot have a political thought? Or are they, in reality, just some stupid unconscious girls as the prosecutors of Masha, Nadia and Yakaterina would have us believe? But, then again, what would we lose by looking only at these three known member of the group? Isn't anonymity part of Pussy Riot's “Idea”?

Let's take a step back. The history is well known. Three girls were arrested and judged, in 2012, a few weeks after a “performance” at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. Although other members of the group had also taken part of the performance, they were never been found. The three were judged and considered guilty of “hooliganism motivated

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by religious hatred". Ever since they have all been released<sup>2</sup>, and the 2 most famous took part in a global tour to denounce the conditions of prisons in Russia.

This is what transpired to the "global public sphere" (Talanova, 2013:2), a brief and superficial *résumé* of the whole Pussy Riot affair. But our goal as social analysts is, following Foucault's advice, to dig deeper and to retrieve the deeper meanings, the underground motives and to make them emerge.

Our angle of attack will be Pussy Riot's own words and. In the first part, we will look at both narratives of the Pussy Riot affair in the "west" and in Russia, only to see how, in both places, there has been a misrepresentation of Pussy Riot. In the second part, we will take a look at the group's musical and political influences, as well as their social context. Finally, we will study in careful detail and based on their song lyrics, statements in court and interviews, their "Political Thought".

## Misrepresenting the riot?

As stated at the beginning of the article, one of the most difficult tasks of an article devoted to Pussy Riot is to define the "subject" of Pussy Riot. In order to better define the task of studying the narratives of the Pussy Riot affair, we will concurrently refer to *both* Pussy Riot's known members and the group as such (or anonymous who belong to the group) and we will recur to a review of literature of mainly (though not exclusively) Russian authors writing in English (Akulova, 2013; Bernstein, 2013; Chehonadskih, 2012; Talanova, 2013a; Talanova, 2013b).

The results of the research are unanimous in presenting a completely opposite treatment of Pussy Riot in the West and in Russia, as well as the different *dispositifs* through which the collective's message has been downplayed or overemphasized, according to the objectives of the mainstream ideology. Kolesova's (2013:45) statement is illustrative of both narratives:

Though the dominant discourses around the Pussy Riot case in Russia and in the United States were almost opposite in their content, there were some similarities: both of them presented rather flattened versions, demonized or domesticated respectively, of the Pussy Riot collective and largely ignored their political project. Both representations served to protect mainstream ideology.

### In the West

How were then the Pussy Riot perceived in the West? Kolesova (2013:vi) argues that the case has been generally read in the West through the frame of "Human Rights and the Cold War", whereby Pussy Riot's political content became that of "martyrs for western values", in an idealized struggle of good versus the "evil" Putin (see also Bernstein, 2013:234)..

Hence the interrelated narratives on Pussy Riot seemed to be mainly focused on: 1. the case of a liberal collective fighting for freedom of expression in the cultural "Other" 2. the myth of the Pussy Riot heroes versus an oppressive dictator 3. a cultural approach whereby their feminism and their representation as women takes precedence over their political content 4. all of which leading to the negation or ignorance of the political message of the collective.

### Rioting in Russia, the oppressive dark-age "Other"?

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<sup>2</sup>Yakaterina was found not guilty sooner than the other 2.

In the article where she critically analyses the media discourses around Pussy Riot, Talanova (2013b:11) notes that the BBC referred to the trial of the 3 *rioters* as a “return to the dark ages” and that the Russian political system was “attacked...for its authoritarian nature”. This seems to be the main trend of the whole affair, where other (geopolitical) factors have taken precedence.

Russia<sup>3</sup> has been considered a strongly conservative and despotic country not fitting “the paradigm of western democracies” (Kolesova, 2013:40). Several deficiencies related to freedom of speech, the role of church in society – thus ignoring the “tradition of atheist culture in Russian and Soviet history” (*ibid.*:40) – or other cases of state coercion have been presented, thus reinforcing the broader *orientalist* portrait of oppression and conservatism.

References to the Soviet era and/or the Stalinist regime have also not been absent (*ibid.*:41-2) and as other recent political manifestations, e.g. the so-called Arab spring or the Ukrainian stand-off, the demands or issues have been reduced to a call for democracy and more liberty, seen as the standard western values.

While Pussy Riot have, in some occasions, reinforced these aspects themselves – using western references in clothing, type of music and their name or in their speeches in court (*ibid.*:34)<sup>4</sup> - another important feature supporting this production of an oppressive “Other” has been the massive support campaign by western celebrities - who also ignored other similar protests in Russia (Chehonadskih, 2012:2).

### **Putin, the “Oriental dictator” and villain?**

A similar script followed the discourses around the affair, although centered around Pussy Riot as the David of contemporaneity to the Goliath Vladimir Putin, or as Kolesova (2013:10) states “in Western media...an idealized and oversimplified historical narrative of individualized resistance to the tyrant government” has been constructed. Although in some contexts, the Russian Orthodox Church also has played the role of Goliath, the main antagonist of Pussy Riot has been, without a doubt, Putin.

Once again, this description was emphasized in some of the 3 *rioters* declarations and mostly in their songs (Bernstein, 2013:16). But the media have been important in capitalizing this “standard Hollywood format” where a “hero stands against the dark forces of evil...and the result (is) a moral victory and ethical supremacy” (Talanova, 2013b:24).

This account is problematic, not only due to its simplification, but specially because it obscures “the importance of mass protest that conditioned the emergence of the Pussy Riot collective” (Kolesova, 2013:41) and reinforces the liberal ideology of individual resistance over the collective struggle –especially if the main focus of the collective Pussy Riot is anonymity. It also simplified the whole trial making it seem that sometimes it as Putin himself who was manipulating every single outcome.

### **The women question**

Even if they’re seen, most of the times, as the heroes of the story, the three members of Pussy Riot on trial have also been pictured as victims (Talanova, 2013b:14; Talanova, 2013a:8; Kolesova, 2013:43) of an all-powerful malevolent regime. Thus, BBC and others tried to

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<sup>3</sup> But specially its president Putin, as we will see.

<sup>4</sup> And especially after their release and subsequent “tour” to see the conditions in prisons abroad.

produce what Talanova (2013b:11) describes as a “human touch story”, where the age and the fact that 2 defendants had children was prioritized<sup>5</sup>.

The ambiguity of this account is very much present because the “cost” of their political act is both portrayed as heroic and sacrificial. Their victimization or their heroism served as a simplified portrait, denying the subtleties of their actions. In other accounts, their feminism/ty also served to disregard their political points and by “giving them a voice”, the commentators seemed to be also taking out “their” voice and agency, ignoring or overlooking their statements (Kolesova, 2013:43).

Still, the most problematic description was the portrayal of Pussy Riot as the “beautiful rebels” (Talanova, 2013a:22; Kolesova, 2013:42). In her article, Talanova shows the different treatment and sensations transmitted by the trial photos in Russian and western newspapers, with the “Independent” presenting “artistic portrait photography...highlight(ing) the youth and the good looks of the convicted girls”, quite apart from the caged girls “like monkeys in a cage”, in the Russian newspaper Trud.

Finally, there has been a clear differentiation of the attention given to the three women. Nadja Tolokonnikova was and still is the “face” of the band, with her facial features being overemphasized, concealing not only their other 2 comrades (Akulova, 2013:282), but also their political gesture and specially the “idea” of anonymity of the band. The media has thus presented an image of Pussy Riot in profound contradiction with the values of the collective.

Therefore it’s easily understandable that the media has not given the full picture of Pussy Riot and ignored some of their messages – e.g. their anti-capitalist stance. Still, this is by no means unique of the western media and also in Russia, many of their motives have been snubbed and/or manipulated.

## In Russia

Whether or not one agrees, Russia is our “cultural other”. Our lack of knowledge of specific cultural particularities (or simply of the language) does impede the access to the discussion and lived realities of the case. Regardless and trusting again the review of the literature and the author’s insights, we can easily conclude that, as in the West, the case has also been depoliticized.

During the trial, Russians could have been introduced to their political views, but that has hardly been the case. Both the prosecution as well as Putin and most of the political class denied their explicitly political act in the Cathedral and turned it into a moralistic matter (Bernstein, 2013:230-234).

One such example is the accusation of “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred” for which the accused were sentenced to jail. But also Putin rejected the gesture as political and mentioned that they only tried “to desecrate a sacred space” (*Ibid.*:232). He recalled a previous action by the group “Voina” – “Fuck for the Heir Puppy Bear” - claiming it as amoral and “describ(ing) th(e) performance as an act of group sex...[for] personal gratification” (Talanova, 2013a:36).

Finally, similarly to the western accounts, the fact that the defendants were women served to further diminish their actions – for some it even seemed impossible that they did not have a man behind guiding their deeds. For others, their feminism was a further indication of their will to “desecrate” the altar and the Church. Their agency and speech were denied and the

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<sup>5</sup> This also happened in Russia, although with completely opposite aims.

fact that Nadja and Masha are mothers caused further indignation and incomprehensibility of their acts (Bernstein, 2013:234).

## Influencing the riot

In order to be able to make the case that they are not “just some stupid girls”, we will take a look at their influences, inspirations and previous belongings to grasp how the group emerged. Distinguishing from other more casual inspirations, there seem to be 2 undeniable sources of what the Pussy Riot “mean”: the Riot Grrl and the *Voina* group.

### Riot Grrl, Guerrilla Girls and the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminism

Pussy Riot members acknowledge their “tribute” and inspiration from the Riot Grrl movement (Schwartzman & Maillet, 2013:180), a DIY punk girl movement, which emerged on the in the early 1990s, part of the as the so-called “3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminism” (Kolesova, 2013:3). A movement opposing our patriarchal society and breaking gender barriers (Tancons, 2012:4), while also placing “an emphasis on the multiplicity of feminisms” and “replac(ing) attempts at unity with a dynamic and welcoming politics of coalition” (Kolesova, 2013:15:183).

It’s therefore a feminism more focused on the individual(ity) (Schwartzman & Maillet, 2013:184) and open to the new media, exploring the possibilities of “cheap and accessible modes of production” (Kolesova, 2013: 12). The exploration of other means of communication is also related to their anti-commodification stance, as well as, paradoxically, a claim for ownership (Mcmichael, 2013:100), as if, by rejecting their commodification and allowing for the free dissemination of their content, they can own it more.

Thus through their defiant and atypical gestures, political stance, “artistic protests and punk music”, Pussy Riot are considered as continuing the tradition of female empowerment which emerged with the Riot Grrls (Schwartzman & Maillet, 2013:180) while also winking at western audiences familiarized with this kind of performances (Talanova, 2013b:16).

Other very important feature of the Riot Grrls, especially of the so-called “Guerrilla Girls”, which Pussy Riot has replicated, is anonymity. Much like the Guerrilla Girls, who wear gorilla masks in every public appearance to “expose the hypocrisy and blatant sexism throughout the art world” (Akulova, 2013:12), Pussy Riot adopted the balaclava to emphasize the same point and to demonstrate that more importantly than their selves is an “Idea” (Zizek, 2012).

The only big difference to the Riot Grrls movement is that, contrary to them, Pussy Riot do not hold sanctioned concerts, opting for illegal and unannounced “in your face” appearances in public places, more close to the direct action style of actionists and, in Russia, the *Voina* (meaning “war”) group, of which Nadja and Yakaterina were members.

### The Voina group and the actionist tradition

One of the most known performances of the group Voina has been the “Fuck for the Heir Puppy Bear...sexual acts that took place in...the Biological Museum in Moscow in front of a taxidermy display of a bear... a pun of Russian President...Medvedev’s last name” (Kolesova, 2013:4), after the “farcical and pornographic elections’ in which Medvedev was to inherit Vladimir Putin’s ‘throne’” (Talanova, 2013b:20-21).

Although the character of this performance, as we argued before, has been dismissed by Putin as an act of pleasure, this and other Voina performances are inherently political. Among

other performances criticizing the Russian political and juridical regime, have been the "Palace Revolution" in 2011, where 2 members of the group overturned seven empty police vehicles (Chehonadskih, 2012:7).

Another example of their direct actions was the "Cock held captive by the FSB", the FSB standing for the Russian secret services, with an image of a penis was drawn in front of the FSB building. Finally, some of the girls in the group took part in another polemic action called "Kissing a cop", during which they "forcibly kissed police women in the Moscow Metro". Although the aggressive content and "sexual violence" has been rightly problematized by Akulova (2013:281), this constitutes an exemplary performance of the Voina collective.

In fact, one could argue that the political substance of these direct actions have been transfigured into the words of the Pussy Riot album "Kill the sexist" and into their illegal performances. With some slight differences, the rebellious spirit of Voina has migrated to Pussy Riot, after the separation of some members of the group (Chehonadskih, 2012:3) and has without a doubt influenced Pussy Riot's political thought.

## Political stupidity, political action, or political thought?

Pussy Riot seem to tread along three political lines – that of apparent "stupidity", that of aggressive action and that related to thinking of and about themselves and society as a whole. After accounting for the diverse narratives about the "Pussy Riot affair" and their self-claimed influences in the first part of the article, we will now focus on what we see as their political thought.

In order to do that, we will firstly analyze their songs' lyrics, their statements in court and interviews, to end with the exchange of letters between the philosopher Slavoj Žižek and Nadja. Departing from their anti-Putin<sup>6</sup> and feminist stance, we will dissect among Pussy Riot's philosophical influences, as Kolesova (2013:3) cites "poststructuralist philosophy, anti-capitalist theory...and LGBT movements" combined with a libertarian anti-authoritarian posture and historical references to political dissidence – the dimensions most often overlooked.

### Anti-capitalist stance

#### No money for art!

One of the lesser known aspects ignored on both sides has been Pussy Riot's anti-capitalist stance. One of the most important aspects of this posture is the refusal to commercialize the band (Masyuk, 2013:2) and to hold for-profit concerts, a practice that would lead to the dismissal of both Nadja and Masha of the group.

This happened after their appearance as "Pussy Riot" together with Madonna and others for an Amnesty International benefit concert on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May of 2014, which led to an open letter where anonymous members remembered that "selling tickets 'is highly contradictory to the principles of Pussy Riot' " and that they "never accept money for our performances". While the commercial concert with Madonna is contradictory to the principles of Pussy Riot, it's important to note that both Nadja and Masha stopped being members, maybe even before

<sup>6</sup> And the regime as a whole, including the close connections between the church and the state, a dimension of their protest often ignored (Akulova, 2013:281)

that concert. Thus the contradiction is their acceptance of being referred to as Pussy Riot, not in appearing in a “for-profit” concert.

Together with this artistic and political position, as some authors noted, Pussy Riot (as a group), by holding concerts in “unpredictable locations and public places not designed for traditional entertainment” seemed to demand, as other collectives which emerged recently, a return to the public common. A demand of “transforming private spaces into a public ones open for participation and discussion” (Kolesova, 2013:4) and to make “art...accessible to everyone” (Tolokonnikov, 2012a:3).

### **The black gold, the “regime” and western complacency**

In order to spark a discussion about the nature of the “regime” in Russia, its usage of oil and the connections between elites, especially businesspeople and criticizing also the repression in the country, four Pussy Riot held a “performance” in an oil platform and called the song “Gruel-Propaganda”.

In it, they not only criticize president Putin who has “distributed the countries’ richness to his friends” in important companies and in “high places” – “Federal Penitentiary Service, Interior Ministry, Emergency Situations Ministry, and Rosnano, LUKoil, TNK, Rosneft, and Gazprom”, but also compare Russia to the Arab and Persian authoritarian regime:

*You have a president like Iran’s ayatollah,  
And your church is like it is in the U.A.E.  
So, let everything be like it is in Qatar,  
Evildoers at the oil towers,  
Pumping till its dry  
A physics university teaches theology.*

Although this is a very raw but also very aggressive denunciation of regimes that function based almost on “exporting nature” while repressing most of its citizens, in personal declarations and in her letters to Žizek, Nadja goes a step further and argues that such regimes, especially Russia would not be allowed to do that, if it weren’t for western buyers, denouncing the hypocrisy of clamming high values, while doing business with the countries’ elites and leaders.

I call for a boycott, I call for honesty, I call for not buying oil and gas which Russia may offer. I call for applying all the humanitarian standards, traditions and rules which Europe speaks about. That would be really honest. I am for truth and honesty.

Les pays ‘développés’ font preuve d’un conformisme...et loyauté...vis-à-vis des gouvernements qui oppriment leurs citoyens...Les pays européens et les États-Unis collaborent volontiers avec la Russie qui adopte des lois moyenâgeuses et jette en prison les opposants politiques...La question se pose: quelles sont les limites admissibles de la tolérance ? Et à quel moment la tolérance se transforme-t-elle en collaborationnisme, en conformisme et en complicité?...Voici la justification...typique du cynisme: Qu’ils fassent ce qu’ils veulent dans leur pays. Mais cela ne fonctionne pas. Car les pays tels que la Russie et la Chine sont inclus, en tant que partenaires...dans le système du capitalisme global

### **Perver capitalism?**

Why does Nadja make this point about Russia and western “collaborationism” and “tacit approval” of the regime? In the exchange with Žizek, she’s refusing both the anti-hierarchical and emancipatory character of capitalism, as well as the universalization these characteristics to all countries and regions of the world. Taking the example of her own country, she claims

that “the anti-hierarchical aspect of capitalism isn’t more than successful publicity” (Zizek, Tolokonnikovoy, 2013).

If on the consumer side, every wish seems possible – a point to which Zizek would agree – on the producer side of capitalism “the logic of totalizing normalcy still functions on the regions that assure the material basis of every creative, new and mobile things in late capitalism”. Therefore, in these regions “workers are entitled to no eccentricity, only unification and static rule”.

Contrary to the “fable” of “crazy dynamism”, the old and worn off mechanisms of exploitation are present and still rule, if not only in Russia, where “old friends of...Putin get the most important benefits of the Russian economy...(with whom) he studied...(or) was in the KGB...Aren’t this frozen and rusty social relations? Isn’t this a feudal system?”

If capitalism is a perverted form of social ordering, Nadja’s answer is not to “reject it all together” (*Ibid.*). According to her, is more productive to “play with it, and in playing it, to pervert it, to turn it towards us, our beliefs and ideas, to recruit it”. Thus, although she criticizes the Eurocentric and colonial approach of some thinkers, in an interview, she mentions that while being disturbed by the “shortcomings of the consumer society”:

“we’re not looking to destroy consumer society. Freedom is at the core of our ideology, and our concept of freedom is a Western one. This is a fight for the right definition of freedom.” (Alexander, 2013)

### **Libertarian and anti-authoritarian struggle**

More than a rejection of capitalism altogether, Pussy Riot claim the “right definition of freedom”, thus their support – here, of Nadja and Masha – for the “oil tycoon and Kremlin critic...Khodorkovsky” (RFE, 2014) must be understood more in the sense of a fight against authority than “capitalism”. This seems to be the true fight of Pussy Riot, if their punk attitude is any indication (Mcmichael, 2013:103; Parker, 2012:2).

Thus, if the band itself is led by “anti-hierarchy” principles and “doesn’t have any leaders or faces”, the true test of their libertarian posture is their songs, such as “Death to Prison” and “Raze the Pavement”. In the latter they appeal for “a Tahrir on the Red Square”, a claim for both revolt and internationalism (Kolesova, 2013:5), a similar message to that of “Putin has pissed himself”. As Kolesova (*Ibid.*) suggests, more than songs, these are “manifestos”, and more than performances, they’re discourse in action. (Mcmichael, 2013:105).

One could argue that this revolt is the true aim of Pussy Riot, as showed by the song “Death to Prison” where they profess anarchist principles: “the will to everyone’s power, without damn leaders/ Direct action – the future of mankind!”. Their rejection of an oppressive information state is also evident “The fucking end to informant bosses!” and, after the imprisonment of their 3 comrades, the denunciation of the “prison institution” is more than evident:

*Death to prison, freedom to protest (...)*  
*Make the cops serve freedom (...)*  
*Take away the guns from all the cops*  
*Taste the smell of freedom together with us.*

This is a fight that both Nadja and Masha, even after their separation from the collective, are pursuing, a struggle that other intellectuals, such as Foucault or Angela Davis have



pursued. Since they carry the belief that “the state of prisons reflects the state of society”, they see prison as a:

“little totalitarian machine...Russia is really built on the model of the colony. Therefore it is...important to change the colony now, so as to change Russia along with the colony.”

According to Nadja, the aim of prison is to make the prisoner become “an automate” and to maintain them in a “state of stupidity” but also that this is the way “the system works... (and) forms the slave-like mentality in people”. Thus, one could argue that there really isn’t a distinction between their fight as “Pussy Riot” and their struggle in a NGO against prisons – it’s all about unjustified and unruly authoritarianism (Oliphant, 2013:4).

### **History of dissent**

During their trial, the three (ex-)Pussy Riot mentioned several times important and historical figures of dissent, especially of the former Soviet Union, but also of philosophers, political, religious and artistic activists. These allusions were made not only to state their case, but to position themselves in “a genealogy of dissenters (who) cannot be silenced in a Siberian gulag” (Carrick, 2014:278) and have the “support (of the) people and the flow of history” (Kolesova, 2013:34).

### **Russian dissenters**

There’s a long line of Russian or Soviet dissenters. Pussy Riot may remember them to demonstrate that, unlike the human rights narratives, “the change will be done by fellow citizens, who already succeeded in making several unfair regimes fall” (*Ibid.*:35).

But they also do it to make the case that History is dangerous to any regime. Nadja, for example, asked, during her trial: “who could have imagined that history, especially Stalin’s still-recent Great Terror, could fail to teach us anything?” To strengthen their argument, they made further references to “Stalin’s troikas or Khrushchev’s trial on the poet Josef Brodsky” (*Ibid.*:34).

Furthermore, they have identified themselves with the “Oberiu poets”, exponents of Russian absurdism, who liked “what can’t be understood” and claimed that “what can’t be explained is our friend.” Nadja also presented Pussy Riot as “Vvedensky’s disciples”, who died on a train for unknown causes, possibly “a bullet from a guard”, having “led art into the realm of history”.

Other point of support, stated in an interview from Nadja (Masyuk, 2013:3), were the “Russian religious philosophy...of the early XX century”, who back then demanded the “modernization of the Orthodox Church”, rejected by the “Church people”. Why does she make this analogy? She is, at the same time, explaining that she does not have any religious hatred, but again, inscribing their struggle into History itself.

### **Philosophers and political dissenters**

Deleuze said that philosophy is “engaged in a ‘guerilla campaign’ against public opinion and other powers that be such as religions and laws” – isn’t this a good way to describe the actions of Pussy Riot? Aren’t they though in action? Contrary to what some might think, the 3 convicted *rioters* have studied – philosophy, journalism and photography – and they are keen to knowing their philosophers. Furthermore, their balaclavas are a powerful sign that ideas do matter (Zizek, 2012).

They have been influenced by feminist theorists, such as “be De Beauvoir with the Second Sex, Dvorkin, Pankhurst with her brave suffragist actions, Firestone and her crazy reproduction theories, Millett, Braidotti's nomadic thought, Judith Butler's Artful Parody” (Langston, 2012) or “Judith Butler of ‘queer theory’” and “Alexandra Kollontai” (Penny, 2012), a Russian feminist. Pussy Riot's “mission” may be to open doors to other feminisms, and as Yakaterina affirmed “Most Russian women are interested when you...talk to them about queer theory and international women's studies”.

In prison, Masha Alyekhina (2012) revealed that she also talked to other inmates “about Orwell, Kafka and the governmental structure”, as well as “quotes from Foucault”. She also “read the Bible and the works of Slovenian philosopher and Marxist Slavoj Žižek”. Yakaterina had, in her home, a “book about Chinese concept artist Ai Weiwei, a book by Russian dissident and winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature Joseph Brodsky, as well as ‘The Strategy of Conflict’...by American economist Thomas Schelling”.

Their dissent is broader than the “regime” or Putin, although it might not have seemed so. During the trial, they referred often to Marx's famous maxim “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it” (Tolokonnikovoy, 2012b). As Zizek (2012) stated “Pussy Riot are anti-cynicism embodied. Their message is: IDEAS MATTER. They are conceptual artists in the noblest sense of the word: artists who embody an Idea.”

## What the Balaclava did not hid...

Whether one agrees with Zizek or not, or one thinks he's overoptimistic or even naïve about Pussy Riot, it's impossible to deny that the balaclava *means* something. They are the key to unravel Pussy Riot's thought and for Zizek (*ibid.*), they're “masks of de-individualization, of liberating anonymity” and an anonymous member of the group agrees “(we) choose to always wear balaclavas—new members can join the bunch and it does not really matter who takes part”(…). Other stated that “(our) goal is to move away from personalities and towards symbols and pure protest” (Langston, 2012).

One can get stuck in their “stupid” costumes and attitudes, but that's not what they're for: “Pussy Riot does not want to focus attention on girl's appearances, but creates characters who express ideas”. Or as Zizek claims “they're not individuals, they're an Idea”. Even though Pussy Riot ended up becoming the “individuals” Nadja, Masha and Yakaterina, in this article we argued that they are not – in any sense - stupid girls (the collective or those 3) but furthermore that their political message was hid and distorted.

Therefore in the first part we studied both narratives about Pussy Riot in the west and in Russia to see the different ways they depoliticized their actions and words. In the second part, we referred to their political and artistic influences - the Riot Grrls and *Voina*. Finally, in the third part, we devoted to the study of their political and philosophical thought in detail. Our aim was to argue that, although fluid and shaky, it's possible – from every angle of interpretation – to learn from Pussy Riot.

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