

The Radical FEMEN and The New Women's Activism

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We shall march, chest forward,
Into the kingdom of freedom.*

[*From a Russian revolutionary song (1897) "Boldly, comrades, step in"]

In Ukraine, FEMEN is regarded with skepticism. Local intellectuals point out its problematic qualities, such as kitsch and inconsistency.

Western intellectuals are fascinated by FEMEN's vigor and radicalism, and the image of Ukrainian feminism is now associated with FEMEN.

Ukrainian feminists are wary of any associations with FEMEN and prefer to distance themselves from the group: FEMEN, they say, capitalizes on the sexualization of female bodies. How can one understand FEMEN?

The Phenomenology of FEMEN

FEMEN is a radical women's movement that originated in Kyiv about two years ago. National newspapers, magazines, television, and internet sites all beam with childlike exaltation savoring the appealing defiance of FEMEN's street actions: activists protesting topless.

When in the space of two years FEMEN's protests did not stop – in fact, they became more frequent and more daring – when the movement did not join a political party, did not become a mouthpiece for a candidate at the next elections, and did not turn into a business project, then the claims that FEMEN was just a puppet organization somewhat dwindled.

Incessant attempts to uncover FEMEN's financial benefactors dead-end with the evidence of financial asceticism. Three activists, for example, would often share one rented apartment, and it is not unusual for them to suffer from lack of money: "Sasha Shevchenko is pouring tea from a small pan. There isn't a teapot in the small apartment she is sharing with two other girls. There aren't enough cups, either. 'I'll pour you some tea into a jar, ok?' she alerts Ania Hutsol, her friend and comrade-in-arms. 'Good thing the cookies are still around; my parents brought them. I'd been starving for a week before that. At least I lost some weight, which is good for filming.'" [N. Radulova. *Ogoniok*, No. 37 (5146).]

Whatever the outcome of the hunt for the ghost sponsors of the movement, or hidden political agendas, or clandestine projects (such an approach a priori belongs to the patriarchal paradigm), it cannot help find answers to the following questions: *How and why did this movement emerge now – precisely in a period of a neoconservative turn in our history, precisely in this post-Soviet state, and precisely in this form of a topless protest of young women? Is this a feminist movement? Or is it its prototype? Or its antipode? To what extent is this movement a protest movement, and to what extent is it conventional and opportunistic? To what extent is it a sexist practice and*

to what extent does it oppose sexist practices? What message, if any, does FEMEN offer?

The Economics of Protest: Defiance, Popularity, Mass Audience

By 2008, it became obvious that the idea of gender liberalization in post-Soviet Ukraine lost the battle for cultivating mass gender and feminist consciousness. Even the “new left,” for the most part, shied away from feminist ideas and gender politics. The women’s/feminist movement of the last few decades failed to reach a mass audience. Despite its (often super-human) efforts to jump-start the engine of “indoctrination” into gender politics, the movement remained backstage, local, and marginal. However, it did manage to create its own niche (adequate and powerful, but still rather isolated) in the space of civic organizations, along with a loose network among academics. The passing of the law on gender equality should be attributed not so much to pressure from civil society, but rather to the necessity of bringing the legal system up to international standards, and to the desire, on the part of certain political coalitions, to demonstrate their power. In the past few years, although Ukrainian gender politics has become an element of national politics, the faint demand “from below” and the feeble control on the part of civil society have considerably weakened its potentially positive effects and implications. Under these circumstances, the idea of social justice often turns into its own antithesis, deepening instead of overcoming inequalities.

The new forms of the women's movement and activism that have been making their entrance in recent years are interesting because, first, they originate precisely as “grass-roots” organizations; and second, they develop and deploy a different kind of tactic of struggle that is often a response to the lack of success of feminist ideas in Ukraine.

The new FEMEN’s activism is indifferent to academic accuracy and theoretical packaging, to the history of feminism and international practices. They develop their “program,” or position, “in the process,” spontaneously and intuitively during the protests. The marketing of FEMEN’s protests is based on the mechanisms of mass culture, commercial advertising, and the yellow press. FEMEN galvanizes attention with scandalizing imagery – the naked body. Playful connections to a provocative topic flavored with elements of performance and a costumed show all lead the media to pick up and spread the information. This is the way FEMEN reaches a mass audience, mass discussion, and mass popularity.

According to FEMEN, a successful way is a *popular* way. Popularity implies more effective publicity and turning attention to a problem; it is a way of escaping the shadow of invisibility and futile efforts: “I worked in show business for a year, and all this time I was curious why is it that the work of civic organizations and civic movements is virtually unknown. Nobody knows about it. I mean, on the mass scale. But every one knows that, say, Tina Karol ripped her dress. And everyone is excited to look at that. The news of, I don’t know, say, Ani Lorak losing her panties is exciting. And every one is terribly excited about it.” (Anna Hutsol)

The rationale behind FEMEN’s actions takes on the following trajectory: if the female body is so well-suited to marketing purposes, why not use it to benefit women themselves? If the patriarchal consciousness is unsophisticated enough to consume any product accompanied with women’s breasts, then here are some breasts for you, and now listen to us carefully. The body in this case becomes a vehicle, a carrier of social/political ideas, which the FEMEN activists intend to deliver to the society. “I

think that if one can sell a cookie this way then why not push some social issues. I see nothing bad in that.” (Anna Hutsol)

What sets FEMEN apart from commercial projects is the fact that its every action promotes a social or political issue. At the same time, FEMEN’s cheerful and playful tone, easily digestible message, provocative behavior, and the appeal of presentation distinguish the movement from typical political/ ideological manifestations: “It seems to me that feminism should stop being marginal. It has to be popular. It must be cool and fun. That’s why I’m FEMEN. I want feminism to be popular and light, ever so light.” (Anna Hutsol)

And here are the results: often with zero budget, the activists achieve a publicity comparable to that of successful show business celebrities and state leaders.

FEMEN monitor media and the internet meticulously, tracking their success ratings: “Ukrainian wreaths and bare breasts of FEMEN activists have been featured in all global mass media giants, such as the German *Der Spiegel*, *Deutsche Welle* and *Die Welt*, the British *BBC*, the French *L’express* and *France24*, the Polish *Newsweek* and *Jezebel*, the Italian *Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica*, and many others.”

The query “ФЕМЕН” (in cyrillic letters) in the Google search engine returns eighty-six thousand results, while the Latin spelling "FEMEN" fetches 3.5 million.

The Radical FEMEN

FEMEN calls itself a radical movement. Until very recently, FEMEN had viewed its own radicalism mostly as provocative behavior: “In general, we believe that if we must act radically at this point, then radically means topless” (Anna Hutsol).

However their radicalism has evolved into a much more sophisticated forms over time.

The current political situation in the country has given rise and prominence to the paradigm of “moral and ethical” awareness. This paradigm has clerical correlates, often ethically one-sided evaluations of the domain of civic protests and civil liberties, yet with no attempt to identify the social background, genesis, or the intentions of dissent.

The rhetoric of ethics and morality rapidly spreads and reproduces itself in the public and political discourse. One can recall the establishment of the state commission for ethics and morality (The National Expert Commission for the Protection of Public Morals), the introduction of codes of conduct at post-Soviet universities, or the infiltration of high politics by the discourse of sanctimonious ethics (for example, the Patriarch’s blessing of presidential candidates). In the context of these processes, one shouldn’t look at FEMEN’s disrobing as a form of striptease for shock value or just for kicks; nor is it productive to view it through the prism of sexism. At a certain point, these performances turn into a brilliant form of resistance.

FEMEN’s activity is becoming a consistent, powerful female response to the rapid empowerment of the rightist discourse that considers the woman an important agent of retransmission of conservative ideas. It is a response to the attempts to limit woman’s roles to conventional “berehynia”, virginity, family values, and motherhood.

It is the act of public disrobing (baring of the breasts) that desacralizes and un.masks all kinds of “breast-centered” interpretations of femininity (from breastfeeding to erotic implications). Exposed in public and often painted, these breasts, (which could be nurturing the nation) in combination with the Ukrainian wreath (a symbol of purity and virtue) and radical slogans, unleash irony and compel

the public to hear the voice of the “Other”: “Because there is no shame in coming out and getting topless. It’s a sort of public stance. I mean our society hasn’t yet arrived at a kind of mutual respect that would allow an individual to reach her potential in whatever area. Why is it that a woman who comes out and bears her chest gets to be called a prostitute? Or they would come up with all sorts of assumptions. Why? It’s just a public stance. I protest against something and I show my breasts to draw attention...” (Anna Diedo).

These actions also resist the attempts of post-Soviet capitalism to relegate the woman to the position of a matrimonially and financially troubled bimbo, a Barbie out of a glossy magazine: “At this moment, we realize that the main thing we want is a woman that is active, a woman that is politically and socially active. I understand that our ways may look perhaps strange and wild to our society. But actually, by way of precipitating the situation and showing just this kind of wild woman, we try to showcase the active woman. What we find most satisfying at the moment is the fact that we have already trained our society and the press to accept the fact that women come out and protest.” (Anna Hutsol)

Yet another aspect of FEMEN’s radicalism is the young women’s use of street space. According to some experts from the Center of Social Research who have analyzed the status of the struggle for women’s rights in Ukraine, it is precisely street protest activities that “demonstrate the readiness (and in this case non-readiness) to publicly fight for one’s own rights. At the same time, the number of women’s civic organizations has been continuously growing (the record shows 575 organizations in 1997, and already more than a thousand in 2004). The correlation between the growing number of organizations and their very subdued public activity suggests that the organizations are either not ready or unable to mobilize their social resources to advance the public discussion of women’s issues and to urge the state to take real measures addressing these issues. Thus far, the collective protest for women’s rights is a rare exception in Ukraine.”

FEMEN began on the streets: “So, I guess, we are like a fighting squad; we are on the streets. [...] I believe for now we have to act on the streets, on the barricades. And when everything will be good, we will be able to change our image” (Anna Hutsol).

The invasion of the street space is effective not only because of its publicness. The gender component plays a role here as well. Traditionally, the street is a domain reserved for groups of young men (juxtaposed to the female home space). It is quite telling that internet commentators charge FEMEN with promiscuity, or propagandizing prostitution. There is a taste of historical heritage in such critiques. Women who dared transgress the boundaries of the male domain (street, university, profession, politics, bar, club, etc.) were considered dissolute, whores, impure. This traditional stigma is now a sign of FEMEN’s steadfast progress towards its goal, as it gradually penetrates realms still hostile to women.

The Predicament of Feminism

In the post-Soviet space mass consciousness has received the feminist political idea (and its extensions in the guise of gender theory and politics) as a stranger, an imported Western treacherous attempt to yet again (after the liberation from Soviet “state feminism”) enslave women, and as a threat to aspirations and triumphs of glitzy femininity. As an alien, the feminist idea has been demonized in a number of ways, in particular in Ukraine despite its local predominantly liberal and placid character.

Over the last decade, feminism has acquired an exclusively negative image in mass consciousness.

FEMEN's self-positioning vis-a-vis feminism most probably occurs under the influence of the aforementioned social bias and public intolerance. Perhaps that is why the activists have been so inconsistent in their articulations of any affiliation with feminism. Various interviews, internet comments, and blogs create a pastiche of contradictory assertions: now they are, now they are not.

When interviewed by us, the FEMEN activists were not so erratic in their opinions. They have been searching for their own interpretation of feminism while experimenting with neologisms and precariously maneuvering between antifeminist stereotypes; they strive to distance themselves from the "bad" old kind of feminism and to develop their own kind that is new and "just": "We, as a group, never actually spoke or decided for everyone whether we are feminists or not feminists. It seems to me that we are neo-feminists, i.e. new feminists who want the same thing as the old ones but act in a slightly different way. [We are] the new feminists." (Sasha Shevchenko)

"... Well, I'm against the trivial feminism, and ... I don't like the feminists that are like the ones we see in history. I don't really care for the conventional feminism. I'm even against it. Why? Because those feminists somehow simply destroyed the woman as such. Because they simply decided to be someone else. That someone else is the man. [...] I support the idea that the woman must preserve herself as a creation that was truly created by God or nature. [...] Perhaps that's feminism, but a new feminism. It's the feminism for a democratic society, for contemporaries, yes..." (Inna Shevchenko)

"I call myself not a feminist but an ultra-feminist. Because for me, the classical feminism is American feminism, which came to us. For me, that was a bit strange because of this equal-rights thing. What I care for are not equal rights but a shift of ideas inside your head. I mean a woman shouldn't think that she is equal to men but rather that she is just different. I mean, no uniformity." (Anna Deda)

In as much as one can judge FEMEN's strategy, the activists are attempting not to change the stereotypical post-Soviet glitzy stylistics of femininity, but rather use them, harnessing their marketing potential; they do not intend to question these stylistics, but rather change the social evaluations of the feminine, by increasing their weight.

The FEMENists themselves refer to this tactic as preservation of something like "true feminine essence." Thus, they clearly essentialize the feminine, by interpreting it as something inborn, instilled (in the brain structure, genes, and hormones), natural, inherent, something that makes up the essence of the woman and is completely absent from XY-bodies.

From a theoretical point of view, it becomes obvious that such a narrative is ridden with hidden contradictions. It is by singling out "the essential feminine qualities" (such as gentleness, readiness to compromise, tolerance, etc.) and explaining these qualities through biology, the present divide of gender roles and professions is rationalized and justified. And it is this divide that leaves the woman with unpaid house work, low-paying and marginal positions, and limited access to politics.

FEMEN as a "Post- " Phenomenon

For the post-Soviet feminism (which is itself not free from essentialism), the issue of FEMEN's reception has become truly revealing. Because of the use of sexualized images and objectified sexist stylistics, academic feminism outright rejects FEMEN's activity as a conceptual distortion. The paradox of this situation culminates in the fact that the opinions of the Left and of the Right find a common ground by tagging FEMEN as "Other." The Left showers accusations in discrediting feminism and social activism, while the Right accuses them of besmirching national traditions and values.

The female sociologist Larissa Belzer-Lissjutkina of the Freie Universität Berlin comments: "The criticism directed at FEMEN for its alleged bastardization of concepts seems to me particularly unconvincing: mass consciousness, due to its nature, would twist any ideological concept. One just has to wait patiently for a reaction from mass consciousness. Only then can we see what gets corrupted and how it gets so."

We believe that FEMEN is a local, post-Soviet, postcolonial project. If we hazard a comparison with Western feminists trends, FEMEN's activity and perspectives do not make a perfect match with any of them. FEMEN employs both the tools of street activism (just like the radical feminists of the first and second "wave" did) and the instruments of pop-culture and consumerism, which seem to be entirely post-feminist (the "icons" of post-feminism include, for example, Madonna, Lady Gaga, and the stars of the cult TV series *Sex and the City*). Moreover, by articulating their intentions as to participation in elections or creating a political party, FEMEN aspires to become part of political power as liberal feminists.

FEMEN is also a product of the post-Soviet system: the generation of 20-25-year-olds, who were already growing up during the time of independence, hit the streets. In their interviews, the young women keep repeating that they are taking a stand against social apathy, which in Ukraine is a consequence of the "sovok" phenomenon [Soviet life-style and mentality. *Translator*]. It is for this reason that the generation of their parents is neither capable of street protest, nor prepared to embrace the activists' endeavors. The parents are scared and prefer that their daughters should quit "all that silliness" and switch to the typical scenario of "female happiness."

FEMEN could also be a post-revolutionary phenomenon, if we keep in mind the Orange Revolution, where the possibility of street protest showed its power.

In the end, it is obvious that we should have expected to see the feminism from below reach us in the form of young "blondes," whose gender stylistics got brutally trampled by post-Soviet misogynism.

Larissa Belzer-Lissjutkina asserts that FEMEN's activity "contains a considerable part of feminist ideas, albeit not in classical but rather post-classical feminist understanding. In actuality they make use of that sole language (the nude and sexualized women's body) that is universal in the patriarchal market system because it can 'sell anything.' Unfortunately, such strategies from below barely find access to the professional circles of gender research and/or political feminism. Since these [FEMEN's] actions don't fit into strict theoretical frames, the intellectual community, while 'clutching onto' theory, dismisses the activity in lower circles as insufficiently enlightened."

It's more productive to view FEMEN as a postmodern phenomenon, because it's usually described through such essentially postmodern categories as irony, performance, play, kitsch, secondariness, etc. Thus, the subject-object dialectics of classical philosophy loses its relevance at this point.

Nude Protests

To what extent is mass consciousness ready to take seriously a protest expressed through the sexualized female body? How effective is such a protest? It makes sense to look at the reactions of a certain groups of people, predominantly males, or of individuals who actively comment in FEMEN's blog under male names.

Rather than actually *criticizing* FEMEN's actions, these commentators attempt, whether consciously or not, to *neutralize the pathos of the protest* and to *denying its seriousness*. To accomplish this, they constantly and aggressively shift focus from the level of protest to that of a sexual performance, a peepshow, striptease, or promiscuity.

Here are a few characteristic posts (with original orthography): “On my way to Kiev. I wonder: 1. what do chicks from the FEMEN salon charge? 2. if they do out-calls” (ans24128), “You want a good pimp” (sexkiev), “Fail, just two boobs for the whole performance, and those were so freaking small” (rederer). Those who comment get especially bitter when there is an echo of politics in the slogans:

- commenting on the action for the preservation of the Ukrainian language – khokholkin: “Would you ever get fucking dressed; I love boobs, but please don’t do politics with naked boobs; walk the streets, or post photos, but without politics”;
- commenting on the action during a fashion show – ok_or_ok: “Nice tiny tits! But those posters are out of control” (Posters: “Model don’t join the brothel,” “The catwalk is a butcher shop”);
- commenting on the one-person protest “Begging for alms. Ukraine’s external debt to IMF tops 32 billion dollars” – Anonymous: “The tits are worthless.”

This type of response is also revealing because it is possible only from men towards women. At the end of 2009, there was another “nude protest” action in Ukraine: Near the Verkhovna Rada (Supreme Council) of Ukraine building, Oleksandr Volodars’kyi and his girlfriend staged a mock sexual act to protest the activity of the National Expert Commission for the Protection of Public Morals.

The government got the message and responded to the conspicuous and caustic gesture with repression: the protesters’ actions, allegedly posing a social threat, were classified as criminal; after the arrest, Oleksandr Volodars’kyi spent a few months in jail; his trial went on for a year; every hearing would gather his supporters (the Left) and opponents (the Orthodox). In the end, the court made a decision, but it is being appealed.

There was an animated internet discussion of the female participant’s appearance: is she pretty or not? Are her breasts good enough? Would it be embarrassing to display such breasts to the public? The male participant’s body generated no such exchange. It was recognized as a means of dissent, defiance, an expression of an attitude that the actionists had tried to impress upon the state; whereas the female body, as it turned out, was a less convincing vehicle of defiance: it is perpetually disarmed by such comments as “what a pretty little mouth,” “I would fondle those breasts,” “and when will you show the rest?” As a matter of fact, the female body has in some way been deprived of potential for dissent; it becomes immediately consumed and relegated to

the erotic/prostituting domain. The more radical FEMEN's message grows, the more active, aggressive, and even invasive becomes the shift of focus in the internet community from politics to erotic.

In the space of two years the FEMEN activists have succeeded in breaking through this “plush” veil by making their voice heard and perceived as a challenge. One of the actions that caused much commotion on the internet was the protest in front of the Iranian embassy (and then later at the inauguration of the Week of Iranian Culture at the Ukrainian House) against the death sentence for an Iranian mother of two children whom the Iranian legal system had sentenced to be stoned to death for alleged adultery. The response was truly overwhelming: hundreds of open thank you letters from Muslim women, thousands of internet commentaries, video news reports featuring FEMEN all over the world, live Skype interviews with the movement's activists on Iranian television. As a side note, the court's ruling has been suspended, and the sentence still has not been executed.

Vladimir Putin's visit to Kyiv occasioned yet another “hot” action, “Ukraine is not Alina.” Now this action caused quite a commotion in other parts of the world. Law enforcement agencies attempted to detain the FEMENists a number of times.

One can hardly call their present activity innocuous and unpunished. Administrative citations (and, as of recently, beatings) have become almost part of the activists' everyday life. Meanwhile, Inna Shevchenko, who had worked at the press center of Kyiv City Administration, was fired. In her own words, it happened “virtually the next day after the action [...]. When I came to work in the morning, everybody knew everything; well, of course these are journalists, and this is the press service, i.e., all information gets monitored. I just came in and, sure enough, I got this morning greeting: ‘Ah, the celebrity. Well, hello!’ I sat at the computer and began to work. [...] And in the evening I got a call from a girl at the HR department [...]: ‘Don't come to work tomorrow’ [...]. I'd been trying to get that job for a year – well, I really wanted to work as a journalist at Kyiv City Administration. I worked for the press service. I had worked for nine months and left my job because of FEMEN.”

In Lieu of an Epilogue

The new women's social activism is in existence in Ukraine. Perhaps it is not as auspiciously effective as it may seem from the numerous news reports about FEMEN in Europe. But it is also not as forlorn as it comes across from the same reports. Over the past few years, there have appeared a network of youth groups in Ukraine whose ideology reserves an important (if not central) place for feminism.

On September 20, 2010, the Fourth National Congress on Bioethics opened in Kyiv under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, the National Academy of Medical Sciences, the Ministry of Health, and in association with representatives of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations.

It had been known in advance that within the framework of the congress a symposium would take place with the theme, “Moral and Ethical Aspects of the Artificial Termination of Pregnancy,” with the objective of “investigating practical ways and effective measures for the prevention of abortions in Ukraine.”

In actuality, anti-abortion hysteria (that has been steadily on the rise in Ukraine in recent years) has emboldened the Academy of Sciences and the Ministry of Health to work in to launch an assault on the Ukrainian legislature pushing the idea of a complete ban on abortions.

Almost all women's and feminist organization had been aware of the Congress' agenda. Nonetheless, it was only FEMEN, "Insight," and the anarcho-feminists who expressed disagreement and indignation and drew attention to this dangerous turn in women policy. Despite the differences in stylistics and ideological grounding, these organizations confirm the arrival of the new female activism in Ukraine.

"My Body Is My Business." The slogan of the semi-naked FEMEN activists resonated from the stage of the plenary session, which gave the gray-haired gentlemen a chance to hear a voice from the streets, the voice of those for whom they solemnly prepare constitutional changes in high offices.