Pussy Riot and Feminist Cultural Criminology: A New ‘Femininity in Dissent’?

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Abstract

In her landmark study of press discourses of women peace protestors at Greenham Common in the 1980s,[[1]](#endnote-1) Young (1990: 150) predicted that ‘the generation of condemnatory coverage will be entrenched and naturalised as a response to the feminist political protestor’. She based this prediction on the sedimentation of negativity that had occurred around ‘the figure of the protesting woman’ as deviant (Young, 1990). She also referred to historical media representations that censured and undermined women’s political protest, such as the coverage of the suffragette movement in the early twentieth-century. Central to the construction of the female protestor as deviant was the attribution of wildness – of unruly and disruptive femininity, which made a spectacle of itself in public space and therefore violated norms of womanhood as passive and private.

Fast forward 22 years from the publication of Young's book to 2012, and Russian feminist punk band, Pussy Riot, is lauded in the Western news media for their dissent. Clad in brightly coloured clothes, with equally brightly coloured balaclavas covering their faces, the band performed a ‘punk prayer’ in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow in February, which asked the Virgin Mary to help unseat President Putin from power and exhorted her to ‘become a feminist, become a feminist, become a feminist’ (Free Pussy Riot!, 2012a). On 17 August, three of the five women who protested in the Cathedral were convicted of ‘hooliganism motivated by religious hatred’ and were sentenced to two years in a penal colony. The verdict was condemned around the world (see BBC, 2012a) as an attack on free speech and symbol of Russia’s deepening authoritarianism, drawing criticism from politicians, human rights activists and celebrities alike. Alongside this condemnation of the verdict was a casting of Pussy Riot as a ‘global brand of protest and dissent’ (CNN, 2012).

Pussy Riot, and the news media coverage the conviction of Nadezhda Tolokonnikova (Nadia), Maria Alyokhina (Masha) and Yekaterina Samutsevich (Katya) received, is significant for feminist cultural criminologists for two reasons. One is the style of feminist protest that the women engaged in and its subsequent criminalisation. The other is the largely supportive reaction of the Western, mainstream news media. Although criticism of the three Pussy Riot women can be found, the dominant representation after the verdict was positive, decrying their perceived unfair and disproportionate treatment and constructing them as symbols of dissent, as demonstrated by the CNN quote above. Contrary to Young’s prediction, they were not portrayed as ‘wild’ or ‘deviant’, despite the potential for this as a response to some of their ideas and styles of protest. This short paper is an immediate response to the Western news media’s coverage of the verdict and sentence. It considers Pussy Riot’s style of feminist political protest and explores reasons for their largely affirmative representation in mainstream news media at this time, including the relevance of post-Cold War Western perceptions of Russia as a 'deviant', authoritarian regime.

Pussy Riot and Feminist Political Protest

In addition to being high profile female political dissidents, Pussy Riot’s members are expressly feminist protestors. As quoted above, ‘Punk-Prayer: Virgin Mary Put Putin Away’, the performance of which led to the conviction of three members, calls on the Virgin Mary to help get rid of Putin and asks her to become a feminist (Free Pussy Riot!, 2012a). Another song, ‘Death to Prison, Freedom to Protest’ invites ‘LGBT, feminists, defend the nation!’ and ‘Kropotkin-Vodka’ demands ‘The fucking end to sexist putinists!’ (Ibid.). In their public statements and performances, Pussy Riot have framed Putin’s authoritarianism as a form of patriarchal oppression (Cadwalladr & Narizhnaya, 2012). In interviews, members have stated, '[t]here's a deep tradition in Russia of gender and revolution – we've had amazing women revolutionaries' (Elder, 2012a) and also that Russia 'needs a militant, punk-feminist, street band that will rip through Moscow's streets and squares' (Langston, 2012). The band have cited a range of feminist influences, including 'Firestone and her crazy reproduction theories, Millett, Braidotti's nomadic thought, Judith Butler's Artful Parody', as well as early 1990s riot grrrl bands like Bikini Kill (Langston, 2012). In a letter from prison, Nadia contextualised Pussy Riot's actions with reference to second wave feminism's maxim 'the personal is political' (Free Pussy Riot!, 2012b).[[2]](#endnote-2) Therefore, Pussy Riot have highlighted issues of political authoritarianism in Russia, whilst also bringing feminist inspired activism to global attention.

For cultural criminologists, the 'common ground [...] between collective behavior organized around imagery, style, and symbolic meaning, and that categorized by legal and political authorities as criminal' (Ferrell & Sanders, 1995: 3) is of deep interest. The criminalization of Nadia, Masha and Katya for a cultural performance which self-consciously employed imagery, style and symbolic meaning makes their case an irresistible one for cultural criminological analysis. It is a clear example of culture reconstructed as crime (Ferrell, 1995). As Goldman (2012) notes in an entry in the *New York Times’* fashion blog, Pussy Riot’s style ‘is a big part of their effectiveness’. The brightly colored dresses, tights and balaclavas are visually arresting and now immediately identifiable with the band. In the same piece, Pussy Riot member, Bullet, is quoted as explaining that putting together the outfits is a ‘feminine punk game’. The anonymity of the balaclavas is influenced by a punk aesthetic based on emphasising collective identity, which is achieved through wearing easily accessible items and therefore open to all. Bullet also cites as an influence feminist artists, the Guerilla Girls, who achieve anonymity through wearing gorilla masks. This distinctive style means that Pussy Riot create strong imagery, especially as wearing the balaclavas has been adopted by supporters protesting against their sentences. The ‘inappropriateness’ for church of the women’s attire was highlighted by witnesses and the judge during the trial – this was based on the shortness of their dresses and covering their faces (Lally & Englund, 2012; Smith-Spark, 2012;).

Unlike many of the subcultures researched by cultural criminologists, Pussy Riot actively sought to be categorized as criminal by staging a challenging political protest, and their style was deliberately politicized as feminist and in opposition to the government. Their use of symbolic meaning – young women calling on the Virgin Mary, in church, to save Russia from Putin – intentionally mobilized religious, political and gender-based meanings to challenge social and political boundaries. Their protest can be understood as carnivalesque (Presdee, 2000), in that it turned the world upside down (young women occupying sacred space that is symbolic of patriarchal religious power and authority) and did so in an actively performative way. The worldwide reporting of their case and actions taken across several countries in their support demonstrates a globalised response. As discussed, the Western news media’s reaction was not one of censure. To explain this, it is necessary to consider the intersection of gender, protest and international relations in relation to Pussy Riot (Cunneen & Stubbs, 2004). The post-Cold War context is of course crucial in making Pussy Riot palatable to the Western mainstream news media in ways they might not otherwise have been.

The nature of the news media response to the Pussy Riot verdict is explored in the next section via comparison with Young’s (1990) findings about the press coverage of the Greenham Common women in *Femininity in Dissent*. The comparison is made because Young's book remains the only major text that brings a criminologically informed analysis to the portrayal of feminist protest as feminine deviance. She surveyed the nature of the press discourse over time, whereas this analysis offers a snapshot of coverage and commentary on the Pussy Riot verdict straight after it happened. It largely focuses on articles and commentary from 17 and 18 August 2012 from the most visited English language news websites.[[3]](#endnote-3) Online news has been chosen as this is increasingly how news is accessed, especially via smartphone and tablet devices (Mitchell & Rosentiel, 2012).

Media Reactions to the Pussy Riot Verdict

Young (1990) highlighted how, in the British tabloid press, the Greenham Common women were associated with the hard left through the use of binary oppositions such as West/East and democracy/communism. This allied them with the Soviet Union, the ‘terrifying Other’, who might strike first with nuclear war (p. 46). Binaries of West/East and democracy/authoritarianism are relevant to the positive coverage that Pussy Riot have received in the Western news media, although this time the women were placed on the ‘approved’ side of the binaries. The right to ‘freedom of speech’, and therefore to artistic expression and protest without persecution, are regarded as axiomatic values of Western liberal democracy (on this concept, see Parekh, 1992). Of course, these are not always upheld in Western liberal democracies and, in fact, often are not. However, Pussy Riot’s colorful protest, made in the Western cultural idiom of punk rock, could be placed in news stories on the ‘right’ side of the West/East and democracy/authoritarianism binaries.

The *New York Times* website reported that ‘Human rights groups and Western governments, including the United States, immediately criticized the verdict as unjust and the sentence as unduly severe’ (Herszenhorn, 2012) and the *LA Times* website quoted US State Department spokeswoman, Victoria Nuland, that the verdict and sentence would ‘impact on freedom of expression in Russia. We urge Russian authorities to review this case and ensure the right to freedom of expression is upheld’ (Brown, 2012). CNN quoted the European Union foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, who stated that the verdict was ‘deeply troubling’ (Smith-Spark, 2012). Several stories quoted Amnesty International’s condemnation of the verdict as ‘a bitter blow for freedom of expression in the country’ (BBC, 2012b; Loiko & Williams, 2012; Pawlak & Sinha-Roy, 2012; Smith-Spark, 2012; Stewart, 2012) and the CNN website published opinion pieces on the Pussy Riot case by senior representatives of Amnesty International (Ringuette, 2012) and Human Rights Watch (Denber, 2012). Values of freedom of speech and expression were therefore framed as expressly Western values, endorsed by the US government and the EU. Human rights discourse was mobilized as emblematic of the ‘West’ and ‘democracy’ sides of the West/East, democracy/authoritarianism binaries (on human rights discourse in relation to Russia, see Le, 2002).

Tying in with these binaries and the mobilization of human rights discourse as an expression of ‘Western’ values was attention to the celebrity support that Pussy Riot received. The addition of celebrity enhances the newsworthiness of a story (Wykes, 2007), and the three imprisoned members of Pussy Riot gained a welter of celebrity endorsements. Alongside reporting politicians’ and human rights campaigners’ condemnation of their treatment, news stories detailed which celebrities had added their voice to calls for the three women’s release. A blog entry from the *LA Times* website prioritized this celebrity support in order of importance, stating ‘Paul McCartney, Madonna, Sting, Bjork […] were joined by the US government, the European Union, [and] Human Rights Watch […] in expressing concern for the fate of freedom of speech in Russia’ (Williams, 2012). The *MailOnline* similarly gave primacy to celebrity in claiming ‘Western campaigners were led by Sir Paul McCartney and Madonna in the run up to the trial’ (Stewart, 2012). Linking the stories to celebrity names in this way increased the likelihood that they would generate hits from online searches and enabled bridging to stories about these celebrities, such as Madonna performing in Moscow on 8 August with ‘Pussy Riot’ written on her back (Smith-Spark, 2012). However, it also furthered the representation of Pussy Riot as a manifestation of Western popular culture and values.

In contrast with the Greenham Common protestors, Nadia, Katya and Masha received approval in news coverage as offering opposition to a non-Western state, which was the enemy of the United States and Britain during the Cold War and has not transformed into an ally. News stories did create a discourse of deviance, but of Russia as a deviant state and Putin as its deviant leader – Russia remained the ‘terrifying Other’ and was the Western news media’s object of censure. In further support of the West/East and democracy/authoritarianism binaries, Russian public opinion on Pussy Riot was reported as being negative. In Russia, ‘many people were offended’ (Reuters, 2012) and ‘genuinely outraged’ (Sandford, 2012a) by the punk prayer, indicating that the verdict could be popular with the public and therefore beneficial to Putin (Sandford, 2012b). Representation of the verdict in the Western news media was therefore shaped by geopolitical concerns, and by established discourses of Russia as unlike the Europe and the United States.

Coupled with this is the fact that Russian approaches to freedom of speech are different from Western ones at the level of aspiration. The Russian media are organizationally independent from the state but have low levels of freedom of speech due to editorially imposed censorship. This is to conform to the post-Putin emphasis on a unified national identity with shared values across internal ethnicities and regions (Vartanova, 2012). Vartanova (2012) draws on De Smaele (1991) to argue that Russia can be understood as Eurasian - influenced by European and Southeast Asian norms. Western influence can be identified in relation to the deregulation of the market area, whereas it is largely missing from the 'social demand' in the form of a developed public sphere or free press. Instead, there is a predominant belief in the legitimate, decisive role of the state.

Women as Political Animals

In *Femininity in Dissent* (1990), Young examines how the women at Greenham Common were portrayed in terms of being women speaking unequivocally as women. The press frequently represented them as trivial or ‘unimportant political animals’ (p. 64). The consideration of the Pussy Riot women as political animals exposed some ambivalence within the news coverage. The dominant portrayal was of Pussy Riot, and the three convicted women, as contemporary symbols of protest and dissent. According to the *LA Times* website, Russia’s previous dissenters were intellectuals and then oligarchs, but after the verdict ‘the torch was passed’ (Loiko & Williams, 2012). Taking Pussy Riot seriously as dissenters led to discussion of the intolerance of protest in Russia. Treatment of the band was interpreted as ‘a symbol of reinvigorated Kremlin repression of dissent and artistic expression’ (Williams, 2012) and protestors outside the court ‘showed Putin was cracking down on dissent’ (Heritage & Tsvetkova, 2012). In some stories, the wider context of anti-Putin demonstrations in Russia since the winter was introduced (Herszenhorn, 2012; Radia, 2012).

Young (1990) identified as significant to its trivialization in the press refusal to acknowledge the Greenham Common peace protest as a feminist movement. Pussy Riot’s feminism, which, as discussed above, was an important aspect of their punk-prayer protest, was mentioned in stories on major news websites, and discussion of its implications took place in comment and opinion pieces. Pussy Riot was identified as a ‘feminist collective’ in a story for the *Washington Post* (Lally & Englund, 2012). Many articles did not explicitly define Pussy Riot as feminist, describing them instead as a ‘Russian punk band’ (for example, Reuters, 2012), but endorsement of Pussy Riot’s feminism did appear on mainstream news websites. The *New York Times* website covered an arts show held in solidarity with Pussy Riot in New York. It quoted poet, Eileen Myles, as stating that ‘they’re standing up to patriarchy’ and described Pussy Riot’s fans as expressing ‘slivers of hope for progressive politics, for feminism and for global change’ (Ryzik, 2012).

The relative acceptance of the band’s feminism could be interpreted as the news media's equation of feminism with ‘West’ and ‘democracy’ in the West/East and democracy/authoritarianism binaries, with feminism subsumed under Western ‘progressive values’ (on an East/West divide in feminism, see Cerwonka, 2008). The trial judge was reported as criticizing Pussy Riot for ‘embracing feminism’ but ‘noted that “belonging to feminism in the Russian Federation is not a legal violation or a crime”’ (Herszenhorn, 2012). This is not to disparage journalists for highlighting the important issue of denunciation of feminism during the trial, but to suggest that this tacit backing of feminism was relatively easily incorporated into the dominant narrative on the trial and verdict. That gender equality, tolerance and freedom of expression are not always upheld in the West, or always characteristic of ‘Western values’, was highlighted in a *Washington Post* blog entry by writer Suzi Parker (2012). She described the Pussy Riot women as ‘brazen, smart feminists’ and unsettled the West/East, democracy/authoritarianism binaries by drawing attention to the arrest for wearing balaclavas of women protesting outside the Russian consulate in Marseille. She reminded readers ‘[u]nder a 2011 French law designed to ban burqas, such face coverings are prohibited’.

The Greenham Common women were represented through their capacity for motherhood, and incurred criticism if they were perceived to have abandoned or neglected their children in order to participate in the protest (Young, 1990). Two of the imprisoned Pussy Riot women, Masha and Nadia, are mothers. This was infrequently mentioned in the news media coverage of the verdict and, when it was, was to explain why they had been viewed sympathetically (Herzsenhorn, 2012), or as in a blog entry on the *CNN* website by the Chief of Campaigns and Programs for Amnesty International USA, to emphasize their normality (Ringuette, 2012). A discourse of bad or irresponsible motherhood was completely absent. This can perhaps be explained by the incorporation of elements of feminism and postfeminism into the discourse of the Western news media in the two decades since Young published her study (see Dean, 2010, and Mendes, 2012 for critical analyses of this). This is not to argue that women are never stereotyped or represented negatively in terms of their femininity, including their identities as mothers, in contemporary media. Clearly, this does happen (see for example, Tyler, 2008). However, women can be represented in roles apart from motherhood, and these other roles, such as dissident, do not have to be reduced back to motherhood.

News opinion and commentary on the Pussy Riot verdict was not universally supportive of the punk-prayer protest itself. Gendered criticism of the women’s style of protest trivialized them as ‘young, foolish, and highly insensitive to the religious feelings of others’ (Sandford, 2012). In an opinion piece on *MailOnline*, Harding (2012) described the punk prayer as ‘crass’ and ‘little more than a sixth form stunt’.[[4]](#endnote-4) Putin had brought ‘the full force of the state down upon them – three giggling, embarrassed and helpless young women’. This portrayal of Pussy Riot as silly girls, seemingly unaware of the full meaning of their actions, patronized and trivialized them. It also denied that any bravery was needed on their part by assuming that they did not understand the protest could be construed as blasphemous. On the same website, Dooley (2012) criticized, although did not trivialize, Pussy Riot, describing the punk prayer as ‘a gross act of desecration’ and arguing that it was right that they had been jailed. Although the conservative leaning *MailOnline* would seem to be an obvious place to find commentary unsympathetic to Pussy Riot, it also published an article by Russian news magnate, Alexander Lebedev (2012), criticizing the sentence given to the three women and the intolerance of dissent displayed in Russian courtrooms. The balance of reporting of the verdict across news websites, however, was supportive of Pussy Riot and their protest.

Conclusion

Pussy Riot are of clear interest to cultural feminist criminologists due to the cultural mode of their political protest and the harsh response it received. Also significant is the worldwide media attention that the band has garnered. This appears to confound Young’s (1990) predictions that feminist political protest will always be undermined and that the female dissident will always be represented negatively. By drawing on Young’s analysis of the press coverage of the Greenham Common peace protest, it is possible to appreciate how the Pussy Riot case differs and to provide explanations for why the women received supportive attention in the Western news media. The crucial intersection between responses to the verdict, views on Pussy Riot and international relations in part explains the positive reaction the women received. Russia, a foe of America and Britain during the Cold War, is regarded with suspicion as a corrupt, authoritarian regime, led by a vain, former KGB officer with designs on the expansion of Russian influence. Whilst agreeing that the reasons to criticize Putin's Russia are legion, media reporting of the Pussy Riot case is not typical of the usually muted reaction to intolerance of dissent in Russia and elsewhere.

Some media commentators, both left and right-leaning, have highlighted what they perceive as the Western news media's hypocrisy in relation to the Pussy Riot verdict and sentence. Firstly, it is questionable whether the websites that approved of the punk prayer would endorse or fully understand all of Pussy Riot's views and the dissident Russian milieu out of which they emerged (Fitzgerald, 2012; Foust, 2012). Secondly, the three women are only the tip of the iceberg in terms of imprisoned political prisoners around the world, most of whom received no coverage from mainstream Western news sources (Hitchens, 2012). Thirdly, the intolerance of cultural expression that the Pussy Riot verdict was taken to symbolize is mirrored in nations such as America and Britain, where certain culturally-based 'deviant' behaviors are criminalized (Jenkins, 2012). The Pussy Riot case fits a particular post-Cold War narrative, in which the West can embody progressive freedom and democracy, and Russia can be castigated for old fashioned repression and authoritarianism.

These arguments go a long way to explaining why, in this instance, three young, female dissidents have received such positive and copious mainstream news media attention. However, they overlook other, more optimistic explanations. One is the success of Pussy Riot in promoting their cause and mobilizing media and activist support. Interviews given by members of the band have been a means of communicating their ideas, as have interviews given to the Western news media by Pyotr Verzilov, husband of Nadia and also an activist. Pussy Riot’s supporters have an online presence that does not rely on the mainstream news media, such as the website Free Pussy Riot!, YouTube clips of the band's songs and performances, Facebook pages and a Twitter account. Without arrest and imprisonment, Pussy Riot's performance-based protest probably would not have received the international media attention that it has, leading commentators to view the women's convictions as somewhat self-defeating if the aim was to minimize the political damage that Pussy Riot could do (Elder, 2012b). However, the band's media savvy meant that they had gained some coverage beyond Russia for previous statements, such as their January 2012 performance of 'Putin Pissed Himself' outside the Kremlin (Elder, 2012a; 2012c; Heritage, 2012), which was filmed and uploaded to YouTube. As suggested in a *Guardian* (2012) editorial from before the women's conviction, Pussy Riot's effective use of the internet and the 'flexible form' of their protest meant that they posed a genuine challenge to Putin.

News reports on the Pussy Riot women's guilty verdicts and prison sentences have given worldwide, mainstream attention to an instance of feminist social and political action - not something which happens every day. And, whilst recognizing that Russia is not the only country to stifle protest, there are urgent reasons to deplore Nadia, Masha and Katya’s imprisonment in a penal colony and the wider use of repressive measures in Russia of which it is an example. Feminist cultural criminologists should be fans of Pussy Riot.

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1. Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp was established by a group of feminist women in 1981 outside the perimeter fence of the RAF Greenham Common Airbase in Berkshire, England. The women were protesting against the housing of 96 Cruise nuclear missiles at the base. The camp lasted until 2000, although was at its most high profile in the mid 1980s. At its peak, thirty thousand women lived in the camp. They staged anti-nuclear protest actions, such as cutting the airbase's fence and lying down in front of arriving lorries. They also decorated the fence with artwork and slogans for peace. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Translated on the Free Pussy Riot! website as 'the private is political'. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Searches for stories and commentary specifically in response to the verdict were performed of the following news websites: CNN, MSNBC, New York Times, Fox News, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, MailOnline, Reuters, ABC News, USA Today and BBC News. These were identified from the 15 most popular news websites in August 2012 listed on eBizMBA (2012), excluding news aggregation sites such as Yahoo News and Google News. This was so that a sense of the tenor of particular news sources could be gained. USA Today, Fox News and MSNBC websites carried Associated Press stories on the Pussy Riot verdict. Although the Fox and MSNBC cable news channels are avowedly conservative and liberal respectively, their websites contained the same reports on the Pussy Riot verdict [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. 'Sixth form' is an old fashioned term for the final stages of English secondary schooling. It is equivalent to the American eleventh and twelfth grades of High School. To describe something as 'sixth form' implies it is juvenile and immature. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)