

POSTMODERN SUBJECT AND POLITICAL ACTION

Yuliya Martinavichene¹

Abstract

Since the downfall of the idea of a unitary subject, discussions of what a postmodern subject is have taken many different turns. However, most of them agree on one particular trait of postmodern subject – it has become the site of an «uncontrollable adventure» (Lefort 1986). All we can safely say about the postmodern subject is paradoxically that we can hardly be certain about what a postmodern subject is (or appears to be). At the same time a subject that is considered nowadays to be heterogeneous, decentered, and detotalized² has serious implications on both social and political domains. I argue that in a 'radically new epoch, characterized by drift, dissemination, and by the uncontrollable play of significations' the characteristics that postmodern subject is usually credited has become the scenario for a new mode of political action. The two politically driven groups – that of Femen and Pussy Riot – appear to be highly symptomatic and can function as an empirical example of the case.

Keywords: postmodern subject, political action, radical democracy, postmodernity, *Pussy Riot*, *Femen*.

Reconsidering the subject in postmodern times

As we are often taught, postmodernism challenges the foundational status of certain narratives (that are called metanarratives)³, deconstructing the great myths of modernism⁴. Among others, it does away with a modern myth of a subject as a homogeneous and unified entity with a fixed and stable identity.⁵ As Douglas Kellner puts it,

«post-structuralists ... have launched an attack on the very notions of the subject and identity claiming that subjective identity is itself a myth, a construct of language and society, an overdetermined il-

¹ Yuliya Martinavichene – MA in Sociology, Doctoral candidate at European Humanities University.

² Mouffe C., Holdengräber P. Radical Democracy: Modern or Postmodern?, *Politics and the Limits of Modernity. Social Text, № 21, Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), 31–45.

³ Laclau E. Politics and the Limits of Modernity, *Social Text, № 21, Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), 63.

⁴ Aronowitz S. Postmodernism and Politics, *Politics and the Limits of Modernity*, op. cit., 46.

⁵ See Mouffe, Holdengräber, op. cit., 31–45, also Kellner D. *Media Culture*, Routledge, 2003.

lusion that one is really a substantial subject, that one really has a fixed identity»⁶.

Anti-essentialist view of subject dates back to psychoanalysis which proves that «the history of the subject is the history of his/her identifications and there is no concealed identity to be rescued beyond the latter»⁷. This brake with the rationalist concept of a unitary subject lies within a more general postmodern trend – a dissolution of the landmarks of certainty (often associated with the unfixed character of the signifier/signified relation)⁸ that brings forward such characteristics of postmodern condition as drift, dissemination, playfulness, and schizophrenia.

The postmodern condition, characterized by a radical plurality, brings forward new (or reconsidered and rearticulated into a new reality) cultural and social forms that presuppose the practices of juxtaposing diverse and discordant elements resulting in a multilayered collage, pastiche, and palimpsest, that allow for discrete readings, ambiguous interpretations, and language games. All this forms obey a general logic of *heterotopia* in Foucauldian sense, meaning a number of fragmentary worlds that are superimposed upon each other.⁹

Such liberating heterogeneity had its effects on a new mode of subjectivity. As Harvey puts it, «preoccupation with the fragmentation and instability of language and discourse carries over directly ... into a certain conception of personality»¹⁰. The stability of *life* has been replaced with a flexibility, ephemerality, and unsettledness of a *lifestyle*. The subject has been thought as erratic and dispersed, which has opened the way to paratactic fashion of forming identities.

A radical relationism of identities has inspired researchers to avoid the discredited term 'subject' in favor of a more cautious 'subject position' as constituting a single agent, which is deliberately ambiguous. A social agent is thus seen as «the articulation of subject positions, corresponding to the multiplicity of social relations in which it is inscribed»¹¹.

It is also quite trendy to speak about the death of the subject, or «the fragmented and schizophrenic decentering and dispersion of this last»¹². This brand new heterogeneous subject (if we are allowed to still use this term) is seen as part and parcel of a multiplicity of atomized narratives, language games, and plurality of context in a deliberately opened system.¹³

⁶ Kellner, op. cit., 233.

⁷ Mouffe C. *Politics and Passions: The Stakes of Democracy*, *Ethical Perspectives* 7 (2000), 2–3, 147.

⁸ Lefort C., Thompson J.B. *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1986, 23.

⁹ Harvey D. *The Condition of Postmodernity: an Enquiry into the Origin of Cultural Change*, Blackwell: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992, 48.

¹⁰ Ibid., 53.

¹¹ Mouffe C. *The Return of the Political*, Verso: London, 2005, 82.

¹² Harvey, op. cit., 305.

¹³ Laclau, *Politics and the Limits of Modernity*, op. cit., 63–82.

Political agency in a postmodern fashion

For some theorists (Rancière, Laclau and Mouffe as some examples) this all means emergence of an entirely new perspective for a political action – and a new sort of political actor.¹⁴ However, some others are less optimistic and tend to argue for a zero political agency as soon as it is hardly possible «to preserve a consistent political commitment if one adopts poststructuralist fantasies of pure contingency and non-relation»¹⁵. This zero political agency means withdrawal of participation in political life and freeing from its obligations that are just a simulacrum of citizenship.¹⁶

Let us leave, however, the case of this total political silence for future theoretical intervention and concentrate on the questions of democratic participation and deliberation as a part of the project of radical democracy. A free flow and exchange of political actors and opinions is seen as a necessary prerequisite for a new project of postmodern politics. The idea of *homonoiia*, which was so important for Greek philosophical thought, doesn't satisfy a current search for a participatory democracy organized around such terms as 'heterogeneous', 'unstable', and 'unpredictable'.

Rancière formulates a purely postmodern project of «the return of politics» as presupposing (a) «polemical space of shared meaning», (b) participation, (c) continual renewal.¹⁷

A necessary requirement for participation, as Rancière puts it, is «the invention of that unpredictable subject which momentarily occupies the street»¹⁸. Consequently, the political subject should be reinterpreted as a fleeting one, i.e. the one that is always unstable, heterogeneous, and constantly rearticulating itself (which is quite symptomatic of an epoch where the tempo of life has increased to a considerable extent).

In this context we may speak of a situation where a new political actor emerges at the crossroads of radically contrasting discursive flows, interests, and intentions.

However, the mode of postmodern political action consists not only in an 'always-different' manner of action. It is also no more a matter of pure rhetoric: if in modern societies «political participation is enacted through the medium of talk»¹⁹, nowadays the paradigm of political agency often consists in practice (or even *praxis* in a Castoriadian sense). Currently it is not enough to speak rhetorically or performatively, rearticulating enunciation into an actual action (a classical «I declare

¹⁴ Mouffe, Holdengräber, op. cit., 35.

¹⁵ Stephanson A., Jameson F. Regarding Postmodernism – A Conversation with Fredric Jameson, *Politics and the Limits of Modernity*, op. cit., 10.

¹⁶ Aronowitz S. Postmodernism and Politics, *Politics and the Limits of Modernity*, op. cit., 53.

¹⁷ Ibid., 60.

¹⁸ Rancière J. *On the Shores of Politics*, London, New York: Verso, 1995, 61.

¹⁹ Fraser N. 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy'. In: C. Calhoun (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1992, 110.

war on your country» as one example). A political actor weaves his/her discourse of performing (and not simply enunciating) his/her claims, thus *producing* himself/herself as a series of politically significant interventions. Accordingly, this new political actor is not *worked* but *made to happen* in a series of multifaceted metonymical recombinations. The way a political actor *acts* and *appears* becomes of pivotal importance for legitimizing his/her claims. Moreover, as Nancy Frazer and Linda Nicholson put it, «legitimation descends to the level of practice and becomes immanent in it»²⁰.

However, such mode of political existence is often reduced to the signs that it produces, and that evince its very being, thus becoming a pure simulation and mediated abstraction.

It is also important that political actors are *made to happen* not only by their scriptors-performers but also by their audience that actively participates in the process thus resisting an authoritative logic of the formation of political subject positions.

At the same time such radically fluid mode of political existence doesn't allow for long-term projects and programs that can be pursued only by a force that recognizes itself (and is recognized) as possessing a centered and well-defined sense of its identity: «volatility and ephemerality ... make it hard to maintain any firm sense of continuity»²¹. Moreover, an experience of discontinuous interventions that often fail to form a logically comprehensible sequence corresponds to a schizophrenic experience that doesn't know tenacious self-identity but such lack is compensated with an extremely intense present where meaning is often lost in an endless play of surfaces and empty signifiers. On a broader scale, this also leads to a profound lack of certainty about the terms that become increasingly important in politics. They are often used in a performative fashion thus participating in the act of labeling and denominating, but their constative plane is too vague and equivocal to denote some distinctive features.

«Our political discourse is now choked with enormous, thought-stopping abstractions, from terrorism, Communism, Islamic fundamentalism, and instability, to moderation, freedom, stability and strategic alliances, all of them as unclear as they are both potent and unrefined in their appeal».²²

Outside of a well-structured/organized entity the processes flow much more rapidly, but are destined to instantaneous impact and 'contrived depthlessness'. Its preoccupation with surfaces often produces *event as such*, but is stripped of the very logic of political action (at least, pragmatically thought) – that of producing change. Here «postmod-

²⁰ Fraser N., Nicholson L. Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism, *Politics and the Limits of Modernity*, op. cit., 87.

²¹ Harvey, op. cit., 291.

²² Said E.W. 'Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community'. In: H. Foster (ed.) *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1987, 136.

ernism comes dangerously close to complicity with the aestheticizing of politics upon which it is based»²³.

Following the logic of the development of every semiosphere, in order to switch to the mode of consistency and long-term effectiveness such political actors should necessarily move toward a more centralized and structured profile retranslating a dynamic and adaptable but generally stable image. One of the scenarios of postmodern political engagement has become a charismatic politics employing a figure of a beguiling leader with a well-articulated identity. Another option (proposed by Jameson²⁴ is a collective subject as an agent of a decentered but not schizophrenic action. Exercising politics as an *always-changeable* happening may have its effects in a short-term perspective but will hardly function as a continuously effective exercise of power «that influences people to pursue particular objectives or adopt particular norms that direct or order their collective lives»²⁵.

Make the Political Happen: the Case of *Pussy Riot* and *Femen*

In this context an example of the two quite scandalous political actors in a post-Soviet context – that of Russian-based *Pussy Riot* and Ukrainian (or increasingly international) *Femen* – is quite symptomatic as soon as they incorporate the contemporary emphasis on events, spectacles, happenings, and media images into the very concept of their activities – and at the same are actively engaged into this inevitable movement towards institutionalization.

*Pussy Riot*²⁶ openly state that they reject the very idea of a fully present and fixed personal identity by hiding their faces, using pseudonyms and even interchanging them (though it well may be a form of concealing). Being faceless also helps to be unpredictable. The participants argue that everyone can join their initiative or use their name for performative actions. At the same time they recently decided to register their name thus joining a general tendency of incorporating the production of politics into commodity production. *Femen* is also a part of this general trend managing an online shop with souvenirs dedicated to their activities.

²³ Harvey, op. cit., 117.

²⁴ Stephanson, Jameson, op. cit., 3–30.

²⁵ Thiele L. P. *Thinking Politics: Perspectives in Ancient, Modern and Postmodern Political Theory*, New York: Chatham House/Seven Bridges Press, 2002, 69.

²⁶ «Pussy Riot is an anonymous Russian feminist performance art group formed in October 2011. Through a series of peaceful public performances that voiced how basic rights under threat in Russia today, while expressing the values and principles of gender equality, democracy and freedom of expression that are contained in the Russian constitution, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the CEDAW Convention»; see <http://freepussyriot.org>.

This radical and explicitly intentional absence of the centered sense of personal identity doesn't allow to pursue effective projects over time²⁷ and this loss of temporality results in fixation with short-term effects and orientation towards playing with surfaces avoiding in-depth projects.

Accordingly, political action takes the form of 'here and now' performative interventions that often cover a variety of themes which may differ to a considerable extent from performance to performance. Thus, *Pussy Riot* perform on the themes of sexism, LGBT rights, links between church and state, non-fair elections, etc. *Femen* covers a wide range of topics beginning from fighting sex tourism to Islam (though they present it under a vague umbrella of fighting patriarchy).

Indeterminacy is another typically postmodern feature that is incorporated in many present day politically driven activities. We often cannot be sure of a true status of many contemporary politicians and political activists. Thus, *Pussy Riot* see themselves both as radical art performers and political activists, thus reassuring a postmodern trend of aestheticizing of politics. In the case of *Femen* one can wonder whether their activities should be interpreted as a political sextremism or as a mass radicalized form of exhibitionism. Surely they are both and even more, constantly superimposing their images and identities. Such volatility of self-images and parameters of action – as well as inscription in advance in the decoding and orchestration rituals of the media makes it extremely difficult for an official order to verify it as soon as it can only exert itself on the real and the rational and can do nothing about the indefinite recurrence of simulation.²⁸

It is also quite difficult to fight such postmodern forms (or we should better call them antiforms) of political resistance due to their emphasis on processual forms of presenting their claims that perfectly fits into the postmodern attention to play, processuality, performance, and event. A radical preoccupation with the fragmentation and instability opens the emancipatory possibilities for political action. Thus, *Pussy Riot* insists on an unsanctioned character of their guerilla performances: they openly refuse 'to perform as a part of the capitalist system' and usually organize their interventions as immediate happenings in an urban space. Presupposing that current democratic states deliver merely an ersatz or imitation of public life, they propose their own version of a possibility of being seen and heard, performing on the streets, and employing media in disseminating videos of their two-minute concerts.

A postmodern preoccupation with surfaces is also quite evident in the activities of both groups. For both *Pussy Riot* and *Femen* appearances play a crucial role. The members of *Pussy Riot* wear balaclavas and bright dresses in order to construct their distinctive image that is dynamic and at the same time stable in order to be recognizable and reproducible. The hallmark of *Femen* is their toplessness, jeans and wreath

²⁷ Harvey, op. cit., 53.

²⁸ Baudrillard J. 'Simulations', Transl. P. Foss, P. Patton, Ph. Beitchman, *Semiotext[e]*, 1983, 41.

that appears to be an empty citation of the Ukrainian culture. It is quite symptomatic that those who want somehow relate themselves with both groups just need to rearrange their look in a more general preoccupation with appearances and surfaces. Moreover, both groups have made any attempt of citation of their activities quite an easy task, thus following a general trend in consumer culture and power relations in general: everyone values «a stable (though dynamic) image as part of their aura of authority and power»²⁹. Their play with appearances proves that they are there in order to be looked at and consumed as an image.

However, the mode of the recent criticism of both groups³⁰ (quite harsh as applied to *Femen* and a much more mild one (usually in a form of wishes) of the Pussy Riot) shows that the majority of critics are preoccupied with surfaces (the form that the groups' political claims take) and rarely make an attempt to analyze any long-term effects of the activities under consideration. It thus seems that aiming at some socially and politically important long-term effects is simply not the case here: both groups do exercise their political appearance here and now, employing some politically loaded claims as empty signifiers functioning as a ticket into the world of publicity, media attention, popularity, and money.

Thus we see that a general postmodern suspicion towards the concept of a unitary rationalized subject has brought the new forms of political participation characterized by instability, multi-directionality, heterogeneity, and medialization. At the same time more traditional modes of political agency are still viable and – as a rule – have more chances to result in long-term effects.

²⁹ Harvey, op. cit., 288.

³⁰ For example, recent publications in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, *The Guardian* use in the description of *Femen* activities such unflattering epithets as 'fast-food feminism', and 'obsession with nudity'.