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UKRAINIAN FEMINISM AT THE CROSSROAD OF NATIONAL, POSTCOLONIAL, AND (POST)SOVIET: THEORIZING THE MAIDAN EVENTS 2013-2014

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Our study is an endeavor of critical feminist analysis of well-known Ukrainian events in the winter of 2013-2014, called #EuroMaidan protests (further we shall use the shorter title – "Maidan" or "Maidan protests"). We shall also include some reflections on the war in the Eastern part of Ukraine. We would like to discuss how discourses of feminism, nationalism, postcolonialism and (post)Sovietness are intersected in the production of meanings within the Maidan protests and the war that followed.

Euromaidan began on the night of the 21st of November 2013 with public protests in Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in Kiev, demanding closer European integration. Maidan protests lasted for more than two months. It was a dynamic process that concluded with the fall of the Yanukovych regime. What we would like to highlight is the tricky issue of *ultra-right activism* in the Maidan.



There are different interpretations whether the Maidan was led by far-right groups or not. We shall not get much into detail now but would like to describe our perspective on it briefly. Although many different political forces as

well as apolitical masses joined the Maidan protests and although there were people of the right and people of the left, conservatives and liberal democrats, middle class and poor people, city-dwellers and peasants, at a particular moment ultra right groups started dominating the Maidan. In our opinion, this situation was possible also because the Ukrainian society easily accepted the domination of white, normative, military, and tradition-oriented male figures.

To illuminate how aggression and domination were naturalized in militarized male bodies let us refer to an example. During the first week of the protests, several feminist and left performances took place in the streets. They raised issues of social justice and human rights. All of them were physically attacked by ultra-right groups and displaced from the protest venues. And the only verdict of the society was that leftist groups have to be more discreet and careful not to provoke the far right's aggression. It was commonly recognized that this is *the right time* for the right-wings groups.

At the same time, it is important to underscore that the far-right have never been dominant in terms of their numbers during the Maidan protests (as has been proven statistically). Yet in the course of the protests the situation was interpreted as the time for *militant male bodies*, which were glorified as the nation's defenders against the president's criminal government. These bodies attracted much attention from the media and were recognized by the majority of the protesters as heroes.

Not all protesters recognized or supported ultra right-wing groups. However, what is important here is that everyone's silent participation in the same protest without loud public dissociation from the right-wing in the Maidan led to the situation when everyone in the Maidan were involved in the construction of the right-wing superiority. It turned out that for several months the entire revolutionary theater has been deployed around the ultra-right's performance. All protesters, regardless of their will or intention, were involved in maintaining the dominant position of the ultra right. It is important to discuss the reasons and mechanisms of that, and whether it was possible to avoid maintaining that discourse. However, we shall focus here on the issue of how women were involved in that revolutionary theater and what the strategy of feminist groups was.

We shall start from a quite gendered case - the spatial politics of the Maidan. In the Maidan, all protest activities were concentrated around the barricades, located along the perimeter of protest's venue. Barricades were exclusively male locuses, settled by ultra-masculine groups. Barricades were positioned as highly sacral places, thoroughly guarded from women and tourists. *Women were forbidden to attend barricades unless they brought food for men.*

At that time, mainstream feminist activism started criticizing the Maidan for sexism, and women's exclusion from barricades. Feminists demanded women's equal access to barricades and all kinds of military activities. The issue of women's exclusion was successfully illuminated in the media, art projects, activist initiatives, and social networks, and resulted in the general rise of solidarity and the emergence of the Women's Squad (*Zhinocha sotnia*), an all-women self-defense brigade [i]. Within a short time, this organization united a large number of women and became very popular. But its agenda included quite contradictory strategies and goals. On the one hand, they criticized male aggression, but on the other hand they demanded full access to all men loci, especially barricades, and recognition of women as warriors. Women's Squad members shared the values of peaceful protest, but at the same time they actively organized self-defense trainings for women in order to make them better protesters.

Another feminist demand aimed at recognizing women's contribution to the "revolution," making women visible within the protests. Several big photo exhibitions informed about women's participation in the protests. Many documentary videos were made and presented. Ukrainian feminists rephrased one of the major Maidan's greeting "Glory to Heroes!" – a typical salute of Ukrainian right nationalists - with "Glory to Heroines!"

What is the theoretical underpinning of such feminist politics? Evidently, it is a sort of "feminism of equality," a call to women's agency, i.e. 'recognition and redistribution', in Nancy Fraser's terms [ii]. It works well in a time of peace as the background of different gender politics, but wartime reveals the internal inconsistency of this approach. Does equal participation of women and men in acts of violence resolve the problem of gender injustice? If feminists have joined the right-wing groups for street fighting, could it be interpreted as the progress of gender equality?

Does another feminist solution, beyond just equal access to military actions and weapons, exist?

Let us be clear: we do recognize gender segregation and exclusion as a political problem. But segregation is rather the indicator of how the power regime works. A strategy of inclusion of some group into the power structures does not abolish the hierarchy and injustice as such. Although we agree that progressive transformations of segregated social institutions are helpful and necessary, our point is that a discussion about women's agency and participation in military actions in fact replaces potential feminist critique of two months military parade in the Maidan protests.

In the course of the Maidan protests and the growth of far-right groups' dominance and recognition, the entire Ukrainian society shifted to the right. The growing women's activism on the Maidan was also shaped according to the "right" nationalist agenda. We propose to view it as a revival of "national feminism" (a term established by Tetiana Zhurzhenko on basis of analysis of Marta Bohachevska-Homiak's works).

"National feminism" representatives deny the idea that nationalism and feminism are incompatible because, they argue, Ukrainian feminism is in fact a "postcolonial feminist struggle". But is Ukrainian feminism really postcolonial?

First, we would like to underline that the postcolonial status of a given country does not by itself create the postcolonial critique, as Edward Said keenly argued: the intellectual potential of anti-colonialism can only be properly realized when nationalism becomes more "critical of itself" [iii]. Or, in Leela Gandhi's words, "despite the force of Said's appeal, it is difficult for postcolonialism to entirely withdraw its loyalties from anti-colonial nationalism. Accordingly, it has always been troubled by the conflicting claims of nationalism and feminism" [iv].

We assume that the label of postcoloniality was appropriated by the mainstream Ukrainian feminist community today in terms of the geopolitical status of the country, or postcolonial consequences - but hardly as an epistemological framework. Ukrainian feminism indeed lacks postcolonial thinking in terms of critical reflections, and it especially lacks a *self-critique of its own nationalism*.

Seeking an alternative feminist project we reflect on two "Western" conceptual frameworks and their applicability to Ukrainian situation. The first is Judith Butler's concept of precarity and precariousness. Precarity is the social order of particular vulnerability imposed on a part of the population and "distributed unequally" [v]; precariousness could be defined as the corporeal vulnerability shared by all mortals. But legitimized state violence (like war) is the direct consequence of disavowing vulnerability, when the national subject tries to "immunize itself against the thought of its own precariousness" [vi]. As Butler stated elsewhere, "denial of this vulnerability through a fantasy of mastery... can fuel the instruments of war" [vii].

Rhetoric strategies around the Ukrainian events illustrated the quoted idea very well. The slogan "Heroes do not die!" emerged after the first deaths on the Maidan and became extremely popular and widely broadcasted. The whole corpus of revolutionary and war rhetoric discursively constructs the idea of the *heroes' superhumanity and immortality* - for example, the Ukrainian defenders of Donetsk airport are called "cyborgs." Forced draft into the army affected mainly poor people from the countryside, who could not hide away or bail themselves out by paying a bribe, but the rhetoric of heroic immortality did not leave any room in the public space for doubts in the expediency of going to the war and dying.

Butler suggests that, though social institutions today are aimed at securing populations' life, "[w]ar is precisely an effort to minimize precariousness for some and to maximize it for others" [viii]. As a result of the war in Ukraine, precarity is applied to a newly constructed group of people. These are the Donbas civilian population. The lives of inhabitants of the zones of military operations are the most vulnerable, and their deaths are "ungrievable." The strategy of the Ukrainian state is much more aimed at the *defence of its territories than the preservation of human lives*. No evacuation of the civilian population from the war zone was organized by the government, and internally displaced people that left the warzone have got none or minimum support from the state.

This new precarity has been ideologically legitimized by a new rhetoric of Othering as a product of the political right's semantic structures, which divide the population into more valuable and less worthy groups on the basis of national consciousness. People from Donbas are constructed as "improper Ukrainians": their so-called *lack of national identity* is associated today with the label of Soviet, as if this part of population did not "grow up," "developed," "emancipated" from the Soviet past. They are contrasted with the apparently "nationally conscious" citizens of the other parts of Ukraine, whose national consciousness makes them valuable for the state and the nation in contrast to the people from Donbas.

Thus, a reading of Butler's texts can show an alternative target for feminist critique in the Ukrainian war situation: the strategy of the state to create a new regime of precarity for particular part of the population by means of Othering and blaming them within the public (intellectual) discourse.

The second conceptual framework could be designed around Victoria Hesford's idea to problematize temporality from the feminist perspective and to juxtapose "feminist time" against "nation time" (and its corollary, wartime). Hesford argues that contemporary nation-states are closely bound with the logic of "emergency time" [ix] of nation and war in the urgency of "the now" and "the real" [x].

In our opinion, this angle of analysis can create a new theoretical space for feminist critique of the war and nationalism issues in Ukraine. Precisely this "nation time" temporality caused the domination of gender equality's rhetoric on the Maidan and the feminists' fall into nationalist excitement. Hesford's conception could be a good explanation for the junction of Ukrainian feminism and nationalism. In her paper, published in 2008, she shows that the feminist demands of equality and representation correspond to the temporality of a nation at war. That is, feminist politics becomes "indivisible from those of the nation state" [xi].

But how a feminism that operates in a different temporality from that of the nation, is possible, what does it look like? Hesford proposed an answer, arguing that "feminists should promote and articulate an anti-citizen, anti-nationalist platform that resists the potential fruits of short-term political gains in favor of the much more difficult, less possible, less secure, but ultimately more transformative long-term gains of a feminism that is resolutely anti-normative and anti-mainstream" [xii].

We can conclude that dynamic amalgamation of feminist, nationalist, and postcolonial discourses resulted in a specific configuration of mainstream feminist activism in Ukraine in a form of "national feminism." Discourse of Sovietness, which draws its meaning from opposition to "proper Ukrainianness," becomes embedded into new precarity politics and rhetoric of Othering.

As an alternative Utopia, we propose to problematize temporality from the feminist perspective. In line with Victoria Hesford, we believe that "thinking matters, especially in a war time. Speculative, non-instrumental thought, experimental approaches to the present, and a skeptical, historicizing self-critique become acts of resistance in the emergency time of war..." [xiii].

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Notes

[i] The Zhinocha Sotnia; the literal translation is "Women's Hundred," "hundred" refers to the common grouping of soldiers into squads of 100.

[ii] Fraser, N. 1997. *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Post-socialist' Condition*. London and New York, NY: Routledge.

[iii] Said, E. W. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, p.264.

[iv] Gandhi, L. 1998. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Columbia University Press, p.82.

[v] Butler, J. 2004. *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. New York; London: Verso, pp.xvii, xxv, 25-26.

[vi] Butler, J. 2010. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso), p.48.

[vii] Butler, J. 2004. *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. (New York; London: Verso), p. 29.

[viii] Butler, J. 2010. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso), p.54.

[ix] This term of Binde is also consonant to Anderson's "homogeneous empty time" of late capitalism.

[x] Hesford, V. 2008. 'Securing a Future: Feminist Futures in a Time of War'. In: *Feminist Time Against Nation Time: Gender, Politics, and the Nation-State in an Age of Permanent War*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

[xi] Ibid., p.175.

[xii] Ibid., p.170.

[xiii] Ibid., p.181.