

## **Analysing 'Sextremism' – FEMEN encounter with the West. Beatrice Papapietro**

### **Abstract:**

- *Background of the problem:* FEMEN is a women/feminist group born in Ukraine in 2008 as reaction against the increasing exploitation of women in the sex industry. Since their inception FEMEN has managed to gain attention thanks to their style of semi-naked street performances. In 2012 the group gained considerable attention in the media because of their protests against an increase in prostitution to satisfy tourists demand in the wake of the UEFA European Championship in Ukraine. Due to threats to their lives three of the founding members of FEMEN had to leave Ukraine and set up their HQ in Paris, but there are branches in Germany, Spain, Netherlands, Denmark, Canada, Brazil, Greece etc.. Since then FEMEN has gained a lot of media attention and criticism. Western feminists have often been quick in dismissing FEMEN performances and arguments both in the media and in academia. However FEMEN responded by saying that feminism has lost touch with women and the general public. This produced an even stronger wave of criticism that accuses FEMEN of offering an outdated form feminism, of cultural appropriating black women interpretation of struggle as well as working for the media machinery by objectifying women's bodies even further. The discussion is on-going and often the interpretation given of FEMEN do not take into account their cultural past and the Eastern European socio-historical development. Moreover often the cultural glass through which western media and public interprets FEMEN is not something that has been engaged with. Furthermore, as stated by Peggy Levitt, in transnational literature often the sites of encounters between moving cultures is not properly investigated.
- *Research question:* **What are the consequences of the encounter between FEMEN concept of sextremism and Western feminism?** The sub-questions are: What power structure are shaping contemporary feminist practices and are these power structured revealed when culture travels? Is FEMEN really challenging capitalist patriarchal structures in any way?
- *Background theories and concepts:* I will be using existing feminist literature on women's bodies and feminist analysis women's representation in the media, both contemporary and non. (Luce Irigaray, Nancy Hartstock, Rosi Braidotti, Stacey Alamo, Nancy Fraser, Peggy Phelan). Also I will discuss the socio-historical development of CEE feminism in its relation to Western feminism, i.e. analysis of the East-West divide, to provide a framework of analysis (Funk, Ferree, Zychowicz, Bystydzienski, Arkhipenko, Cerwonka, Blagojevic, Frunza and Vačarescu etc..). Here a particular effort will be made to use literature that comes directly from CEE scholars. Then transnational literature will be used to explore examples of de-territorialization and re-territorialization of transnational social movements. All of this will try to have a strong critical perspective, in search for a true anti-hegemonic feminist motive.
- *Hypothesis, main argument:* my hypothesis develops around the sites of encounters of 'sextremism' with feminism. I want to argue that on one hand FEMEN protesting model has not been hybridized but rather it has fit into an already existing space in Western media and on the other hand it clashes with the Western interpretation of feminism and of feminist struggle. My main hypothesis is that even though sextremism is a packageable and marketized version of feminism it still has the power of what Luce Irigaray calls mimesis; that is to reverse a situation which is oppressive for women in a strategic way while challenging the same structures of oppression that produced it.
- *Preliminary structure of the paper:* The starting point will be the encounter between Western feminism and Eastern women in the post-socialist transition period. Then I will be tracing the trajectory that has brought Eastern feminism, under the form of 'sextremism', back to the West. Then this specific site of encounter will be analysed taking into account on the one hand the power structures shaping it, and on the other hand the interpretation of the symbolic elements that have been travelling West.