

What can Ukrainian women learn from Tunisian women?

A conversation with Eva Schmidt on image and representation in feminist protest

Deluge: Eva, what can Ukrainian women learn from Tunisian women?

*Eva Schmidt:* You are, of course, referring to Femen and the whole issue of how one actually can, and cannot, support Amina (the Tunisian Femen activists). But put like that, the question is of course duplicitous. You're putting me in the position of the white academic who is to then say, completely objectively, what these women are doing wrong in their fight, and thus in an ignorant position of power, which makes feminist solidarity impossible. I think that is also something that can be learned from this whole thing in general: the difficulty of maintaining solidarity with one another from different positioning and perspectives without imposing one's own interpretation or agenda, consciously or not, and taking the prevailing power structures into account.

Femen does make sense in the Ukraine and has its source in protests against forced prostitution in a conservative society – to show up the hypocrisy of being shocked at naked protesting whilst forced prostitution is all around. Also: to find nakedness shocking when not provided as consumption. Amina's protest in Tunisia, however, has a different background. The nakedness protest there was against outside control of women's body *Eva Schmidt:* "my body is my property and not anyone else's honor"

At first glance, then, a similar form of protest and, naturally, an unambiguous reference to Femen. But it is not the same thing; it is, rather, translation. Amina hasn't therefore imitated or learnt from Ukrainian women, but rather transformed and translated from them. The connecting factors could bring about solidarity here, but then there is the problem that the translation work is ignored – mostly, I have to say, by west European women. In any case, I don't see any really meaningful reading of Femen here in Germany. If there is anything to be learned, then it's this: context is important. The work of translation is to be performed by practitioners, but also by observers. Just because it is perhaps formally the same praxis does not mean it has the same meaning. If you ignore your own position and embeddedness in your

context, and don't fathom the translation process, meaningful solidarity is not possible. Amina has now also distanced itself from Femen because, in her eyes, it became too islamophobic and colonialist.

Tunisians themselves debate how they are to interpret the whole thing. There is, then, no such thing as "Tunisian women" that somebody might learn from. There are middle-class feminist women who came out of the leftist student movement. Some of them saw their own work put in danger by the naked protest, because they are already portrayed as "westernised", which is equated with being amoral. At the same time, of course, they stress freedom of expression and show solidarity with a woman who is essentially on the same side. Some activists also show solidarity because they share the form of protest by "artistic" means or using their own body.

*Deluge:* And what does that have to do with Amanda Todd now?

*Eva Schmidt:* Who is Amanda Todd?

*Deluge:* Amanda Todd was a Canadian school pupil who showed her breast in an internet chat with a stranger. He secretly recorded it and blackmailed her, and the photo followed her everywhere. She was bullied and in the end she took her own life. I bring this up because of consumption, as it were. Compare: an 18-year-old Tunisian woman who uses the image of her exposed body politically and a 12-year-old Canadian girl, and her community, who cannot recognise the political character of offering and consuming her markers.

*Eva Schmidt:* I don't see the images as being so similar, although naturally I don't know much about the background story of this girl, and can only say a couple of things I notice here. The picture of Amina is an expression of staking a claim for one's own image, while the picture of Amanda Todd is the opposite, disappropriation. Islamists do indeed see precisely this in Western women's liberality – turning women into goods. But that is not possible with Amina's image, though it does apply in a certain way to Amanda Todd's case. Neither she nor her environment can reframe it, as the humiliation consists in being conned and the loss of control over one's self-image. Of course, it wouldn't be so bad if it didn't take place in the context of a society that is actually scared stiff of this girl's breasts. It also sends out absurdly contradictory signals for a young girl: on the one hand she is evaluated according to her body, on the other she shouldn't show it, certainly not like that.

*Deluge:* These signals, though, are precisely the location where the political can be demonstrated, the faultlines. To change context is to reframe, whether wished or not.

*Eva Schmidt:* Yes, that is also precisely where Femen started off from in Ukraine. To me, it only doesn't appear to work for us. Nakedness as protest only serves here to make the protest additionally effective publicity-wise; it doesn't set any thoughts in train concerning body image, control and availability .

*Deluge:* But why? Of course, self-exposure for attention, work or love pays. Only when this takes place so openly and naively, as with this girl, then it's not allowed. It has to be done as if someone were merely doing it for themselves, not as direct payment, but rather in a completely individual way. Individual = free. And then people consider it normal. Normal here is not religion, or a paternalistic state, but the market. And if you can escape the norm through individualism elsewhere, our norm – the logic of the market – lies right here, in individualism. The political, the standardisation is no longer recognised, because we see it as our individual decision. We are thus an astonishingly long way from anything to do with emancipation.

*Eva Schmidt:* This girl also can't say anything on the subject anymore.

*Deluge:* You shouldn't throw your partial objects down the drain.

*Eva Schmidt:* That's enough now.

*Deluge:* Yes.

*Deluge:* Eva, in your PhD you are researching the differences between feminism in Tunisia before and after the revolution there. Before, feminism was a national objective of the dictatorship, in a manner of speaking. How did feminists operate then?

*Eva Schmidt:* In the proper sense, feminism was not a national objective of the dictatorship, though both presidents did boast of actually having liberated "the Tunisian woman". Tunisian women themselves were given no voice in this, however, and further demands were viewed as ingratitude. This "emancipation from above" served to legitimise [the regime] in the eyes of the populace, and the West. Women were to take part in education and the official labour market, because this was seen as an essential precondition of the country's modernisation, not for women's sake. To

exaggerate a little, “modern women” – educated and with no headscarf – had the same prestigious character as a new railway line.

The role in the family of mother and wife remained explicitly untouched and, as the first president stressed, women’s public role was, when in doubt, a subordinate one. Besides, measuring modernisation in terms of the role of women is a worldwide phenomenon. Even the French occupiers believed women were the key to societal transformation. Moreover, women’s rights were used more and more as a measure to counter democratic and human rights discourses. For one thing, women without a headscarf come across to us as more Westernised, and we are then more inclined to believe a President talking about freedom and human rights. For another, they were able to point to enhanced women’s right if anyone ever demanded any improvement in the human rights situation. At the same time, the threat to women’s rights from Islamic fundamentalism was always a good argument for saying that, without the dictatorship, everything would be far worse.

The feminists who tried to independently pursue politics at that time therefore had a two-pronged problem. On the one hand, they were used by the state as a fig leaf and in pursuit of anti-islamic politics. On the other, it was constantly being said that everything had already been achieved and you would have to be really crazy and very ungrateful to want more. The established autonomous feminist organisations came out of a series of debates within a cultural institution, and many of their members are women lawyers, social scientists etc. An essential part of their activism was research, alternative human and women’s rights reports, and lobbying. But also practical activities like women’s shelters etc. The press were kept almost completely in line, communiqués and reports could not be printed in Tunisia, conferences and demonstrations in one way or another were sabotaged, and Tunisian feminists were prevented from operating outside the capital. Despite all this, they were able to put pressure on the government in some areas. They were able to do this through their contact with international organisations and networks on the one hand, and via their connection to other leftwing opposition parties, human rights groups and, above all, the powerful Tunisian General Labour Union, which protected all these groups.

*Deluge:* With the change from dictatorship to democracy, completely new forms of protests arose and new players appeared. Can you describe this contrast?

*Eva Schmidt:* With democratisation and the euphoria over the potential changes, activists now have totally different possibilities and more individual forms of protest “art” are flourishing – flashmobs, performances, selfies with political messages etc. This group of activists have little desire to grapple with conferences and papers, and they see their goal less in changing legislation than in trying, through their public performances, to provoke thought on the societal level. Of course, that’s quite a sweeping statement; the activist scene is more diverse than that, and also constantly changing. Because the Islamic project is aimed at building a “community” that activists interpret as conforming, fascist even, some of these protest “artists” see resistance in every individual act and artwork, in that they maintain individuality and set themselves against subjection and integration into an Islamic community.

*Deluge:* Where were they before? I mean, the same people were already there before the revolution. Did such protest forms not exist at all?

*Eva Schmidt:* The Tunisian surveillance regime was simply frighteningly all-pervasive. Many young Tunisians were already active on the internet and also politicised, via some brave individual bloggers and musicians etc. But there was hardly any other public space. The media was by and large controlled by the government and the few independent activists were monitored and intimidated. Autonomous feminists told me, for example, how their demonstration was stopped before they’d left their own front garden.

*Deluge:* So the repression is no longer as bad?

*Eva Schmidt:* Yes, the repression has certainly abated. You can already see this in how much more politics is now discussed in public, even with strangers. The old police tactics are still always being used, though, for example against social unrest. It also seems to me that liberalisation applies more for “conventional” protest forms such as conferences and demos, while art and individual forms of protest are less accepted. So musicians are given prison sentences and art exhibitions destroyed. The latter not by the state itself, but rather by religious fundamentalists; the minister of religion shows understanding for the culprits, though.

Through their protest and lobbying work, the established activists are able to aim for a direct impact on the legislative programme. Because of their societal status, they are better protected, but at the same time, taking part in the system also means

being somewhat bound by it. The young activists move outside established areas and are therefore more shocking, but they also have a less specific intended effect.

*Deluge:* The Islamists are also very politically strong in Tunisia. Are there also feminists in their ranks?

*Eva Schmidt:* Depends who you ask. There are women who look for the best possible interpretation of Islamic law for women. They term themselves women's rights activists or feminists, some also as conservative feminists. It is possible to view such a project as emancipatory, because women claim authority in the interpretation of Islamic law and see themselves as obeying God rather than men. And they improve women's status in their community. From a left or liberal perspective, however, the whole thing is merely reactionary and anti-feminist, as equality policies are also measured against religious interpretations.

*Deluge:* In view of the joy of the protest there and a supposed post-feminism here, is the aesthetic of feminism too insipid to stir anyone these days, or is taste too refined to take content seriously?

*Eva Schmidt:* The question is too open.

*Deluge:* Unfortunately, last year I missed visiting the *Barbie Dreamhouse Experience*, so I had to look it up afterwards on the net. There was an amusing report where some activists were filmed, very colourful and individual, but they didn't stand a chance against the Barbie House. Basically they said they wanted to protect authentic children from unrealistic playthings. And then of course the thing about sexism. An Austrian woman, a tourist, perhaps twenty, came stepping right out of the Barbie house, for all intents and purposes 100% freshly experienced, and was asked if there wasn't anything a bit sexist inside. She reckoned she didn't find it sexist at all, it was all sweet and nice, only a little bit at times with the beach and bikini, but nothing bad.

*Eva Schmidt:* She didn't understand the term at all.

*Deluge:* She certainly thought it had something to do with sex.

*Eva Schmidt:* Yes, of course. And, at the same time, feminism has become a complex, many-layered discourse, so that it is really a lot of work to engage with it.

What then comes out of it sometimes and lands in the mainstream – all the aspects and particular problems – it all often seems absurd and especially forbidding for outsiders. Thus feminists do indeed go over the basics for the “new generation” again and again. I also see the further development in all its specific forms as important, though. We can’t just stay stuck at the beginning and wait for everyone to come along. But then, discrimination is not just something abstract, the existence of which people only read about in books. They experience it again and again, they just have to recognise precisely this: that it is not their personal problem, but rather a societal one.

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