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What are you reading?

Majewska, E. (2021). *Feminist Antifascism: Counterpublics of the Common*. London: Verso Books.

Review by Jonas Vanderschueren

Postdoctoral Researcher and Lecturer at KU Leuven

jonas.vanderschueren@gmail.com

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‘If there is an eight-year-old girl somewhere who is desperately willing to kick some patriarchal, neo-Nazi ass. This book was written for her.’ (Majewska, 2021, p. 30). This dedication is an excellent summary of the stated aim of Polish feminist philosopher Ewa Majewska’s book *Feminist Antifascism: Counterpublics of the Common*. It sets out to theoretically ground a series of activist tactics and strategies that have emerged in the face of creeping authoritarianism and the rise of the fascist alt-right movement in the 2010s and 2020s. The book tries to counterpose to this conservative turn, a more militant and assertive transnational feminist movement, which finds itself at the heart of contemporary anti-fascist politics. The result is a convincing theoretical framework, not merely aimed at resisting fascism, but also filled to the brim with potentiality to effect radical emancipatory change.

Central to the *Feminist Antifascism* is the assertion that feminism is ‘a core position against fascism’ (p. 24), as the latter relies heavily on ‘[...] the Schmittian doctrine of the state of exception, on many levels, including the subjugation of justice by the executive powers of the state. Women’s subjugation seems like a parallel transition’ (p. 74). Majewska develops this thesis through an extensive analysis of the situation in her home country of Poland, where between 2015 and 2023 a right-wing conservative government not only undermined the independence of the judiciary (most prominently the Constitutional Court), but also stacked the state apparatus with party loyalists and systematically restricted access to reproductive healthcare. These shifts in government policy were accompanied by a rapid shift in public discourse, where simultaneously migrants, women, and queer people, have all functioned as enemies of the nation whose very existence supposedly threatens the fabric of society. While this othering of non-masculine and/or demasculinized minority groups has inflicted (and continues to inflict) terrific symbolic, physical, and material violence upon those targeted, those inflicting the violence portray themselves as the true victims.

This absurd contradiction, where the perpetrator can portray themselves as the victim, has according to Majewska its roots in the ‘imposition of heroic subjectivity’ (p. 25), a discursive tool to further the Schmittian state of exception. This, allows right-wing conservatives to stabilize identity formations around the triad of ‘state, church, and family’ (p. 25), an ethno-nationalist vision which rejects multiplicity and violently seeks to impose its “imagined community”¹ (Anderson, 2006). Part and parcel of these acts of violence is the imposition of a stable gender binary and heteronormativity (p. 86), where:

[b]oth men and women are forced to embrace the heroic role of a mother, a soldier, against costs and risks. This points to the assumption, at least in Poland, that women should constitute themselves as subjects by confronting death. (p. 76)

Majewska posits that in this nationalist imaginary the act of reproduction through the nuclear family becomes a form of heroic resistance against the presupposed nefarious and decadent influence of migrants, women who refuse their primary patriotic duty (child-rearing), and anyone not conforming to the gender binary. It naturalizes the violence that these discourses effect upon subjectivities that it minoritizes, while simultaneously legitimizing this through a reappropriation of the Habermasian public sphere.

While the danger of this heroic model of agency can be seen most clearly in the right-wing conservative worldview outline above, Majewska argues that it has also dominated liberal and left-wing conceptions of resistance, which, as a result, have been over reliant on ‘predominantly straight and masculine notions of heroic activism’ (p. 15). She rejects the

¹ Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.

heroic model of agency as a viable tool for radical emancipatory change, as it per definition erases the experiences of women and minorities. At the same time, she also refuses, the Habermasian dichotomy between public/private, and instead replaces it with the notion of ‘counterpublics of the common’ (p. 111), alternative political subjectivities that reject their banishment to the private sphere and instead seek to reclaim the notion of the public as a multiplicity that does not privilege masculinity and patriarchy. Building on Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt’s conceptualization of ‘counterpublics’ (p. 34), in addition to Michael Warner’s writing about queer and Black ‘counterpublics’ (p. 35), Majewska sees these counterpublics as firmly working-class spaces that reject the classist elitism of liberal feminism and its rhetoric of choice.

Instead of heroic agency, Majewska argues in favour of the notion of *weak* resistance, which she defines as ‘the unheroic and common forms of protest and persistence that led to a redefinition of the most general notions of political agency in feminist and minoritarian ways’ (p. 15). This can mean many things, such as the 2016 International Women’s Strike, which established transnational solidarity between women in places as diverse as Poland, Argentina, and Italy, or the radical calls for workers’ democracy during the 1980 Gdańsk Shipyard Strike. Her embrace of everyday and common forms of resistance also includes the concept of failure, an insight that she has borrowed from the radical thought of Rosa Luxemburg, but also more recent writing by Jack Halberstam (p. 116), which, instead of seeing failure as a missed opportunity, reframes it as a rehearsal for the radical democratic change that the counterpublics of the common seek to effect.

These notions have been crucial for my own research, as they have interrogated the artistic and political strategies of contemporary Polish theatre makers as they seek to queer Polishness. Her theoretical grounding of weakness and failure provided me with several invaluable tools to tease out what queering can mean when it is understood as a radical rejection of the normative power of heteronormativity as one of the central strategies of resistance to late capitalism. This has allowed me to create additional theoretical bridges between the fields of Cultural Studies and Theatre and Performance Studies. As a result, the work of Majewska has been one of the major inspirations for me to coin the term ‘Polish normativity’, a concept that I developed in my PhD dissertation to describe the complex and inextricable intertwining of heteronormativity and Polish (ethnic) nationalism. The performative power of Polish normativity, which has substantially increased in the last two decades, can at times seem so hegemonic that it can appear as if it is impossible to subvert, but the concepts of weak resistance and failure allow us to resist through our very existence. As long as there are women in Poland who continue to have abortions and exercise their reproductive rights, as long as there are queer communities who organize against their suppression, as long as there are people migrating to Poland, and as long as there is labour organizing against the dead hand of the free market, it involves an assertion that alternative subjectivities exist and will continue to exist. While at times it can feel as if living in Poland centers entirely around the act of survival, the work of Majewska shows that even surviving can be a sign of defiance which portends a better tomorrow. *Feminist Antifascism* is a radical call for an alternative, socialist feminist and queer future, whose complex theoretical framework has been invaluable not only to my own academic research, but also for my sanity as a human being.

Jonas Vanderschueren

Jonas Vanderschueren (he/they) is a Postdoctoral Researcher and Lecturer at the Cultural Studies research unit of KU Leuven, where they research contemporary Polish culture, politics, theatre, and queer theory. They have conducted research stays at the Polish Academy of Sciences – Institute of the Arts (PAN – IS) in Warsaw and were previously attached to the Department of Central and Eastern European Languages at Ghent University. They continue to be active as an essayist and freelance journalist.