

Maternal Politics



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Notes:

1. See the following works by Foucault, where he develops the notion of 'governmentality': Michel Foucault. *Dits et écrits 1954-1988, IV 1980-1988*. Edition établie sous la direction de Daniel Defert et François Ewald avec la collaboration de Jacques Lagrange. Gallimard, 1994. P. 582-583, Préface à l' "Histoire de la sexualité", English translation: Rabinow. *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984. P. 333-339; also see Pp. 728-729, from *L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté*, *Concordia: Revista internacional de filosofia*, n. 6, july-december, 1984, 99-116; p. 785, from *Les techniques de soi*; université du Vermont, octobre 1982. Published in English as "Technologies of the Self. A Seminar with Michel Foucault", the University of Massachusetts Press, 1988, 16-49; p. 213-218. *Subjectivité et vérité*, *Annuaire du Collège de France*, 81 année. *Histoire des systèmes de pensée*, année 1980-81, 1981. P. 385-389.

2. Here I mean by "ideology" a number of ideas and convictions that are written in Party Programmes, manifestos or Codes. It is a "party ideology" and not a Marxist notion of ideology or its derivatives.

3. It would be interesting to mention Maxim Gorky's novel "Mother" (written before 1917 Russian Revolution) that was elevated to the first and best "Bolshevik/Soviet" literature by Lenin. Mother is positioned there as a 'foundation' of Bolshevik party that has to be left behind or even sacrificed if party needs it. In some sense, mother is passing her children to another mother – Party, after her role is fulfilled.

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In this essay I think through the possibilities of alternative ways to carry out effective and ethical political struggle to go beyond the current crisis in party politics, group affiliations with their reliance on the old political structures and methods. For reformulating it I will be using conceptual means developed by Levinas, Irigaray, Derrida and Kornell. Traditional idea of party politics is based on belonging to and differentiation, separation from; hence, we have a problem of representation (whom, who, when and how).

One of the alternatives to this crisis can be found in the phenomenon that I call "Maternal Politics", examples of which exist, though varied considerably and necessarily, around the world. I will focus on the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers (CSM) – an example of Russian organization. I will try to show how CSM transforms theory and practice of traditional political struggle in post-Soviet Russia and near-by states through finding a way out of the current political crisis of representation and political activism.

1. Governmental Crisis

Traditionally the notion of state has been defined through opposition to the civil society. Foucault, among others, has shown that this opposition does not serve us anymore methodologically, for carrying out effective political struggle. When it is maintained, we have to be careful what are the reasons and claims behind such activist foundation – what does it serve and whom, politically. Exclusive importance and central position of the state are presented through a variety of metaphors – "cold monster", impersonal and distant from 'the people', or 'system / machine' which operation can be reduced to economic and other conditions (like the state of productive forces and industrial relations). As it's well-discussed, Foucault's position differed from such framing of the state, and he stressed that today "state no more than in any other moment of its history, does not have such unity, individuality, strong functionality, and, frankly speaking, importance; at the end, the state may be nothing more than an imagined reality, mystified abstraction, which importance is

much more limited than many of us think" (Foucault, 1991a:103). His notion of "Governmentality" serves as an alternative to state in the analysis of political sphere. And indeed governmentalization of the state is probably more significant today, than 'state-zation' of society. (Foucault, 1991a:103)¹

Another widely used point from Foucault's political analysis is that power cannot be presented anymore in repressive terms only, as something that comes from above down. This makes master/slave and oppressed / oppressors paradigms unproductive (Foucault, 1996:111-152). Today politics is characterized by a situation in which distribution and articulation (or exercise) of power undermines survival and growth of large and stable political bodies – for examples, as the recent case with Russian political movement called "Russia, Our Home".

Another example of shift towards a governmentalization of Russian state was Martin Vacuum's presidential campaign (Russia, June, 1996). One of his main campaign slogans was: "Russia is in need of government, not crown" (One must govern Russia, not be on its throne). We see more and more of move to this new governmental direction in Putin's government. This shift – from sovereign framing of power to governmentalization of Russian state does not mean, certainly, that the problematics of ruling or law disappears altogether. Moreover, the state becomes a part of a complex system of the problem of government and governing. Or, in Foucault's terms, of "how one enacts tactics, and not laws, or even the use of laws as tactics, in order to distribute things so as to achieve such and such results with such and such means" (Foucault, 1991a:95).

2. Crisis of Representation

Crisis of the State manifests itself also in proliferation of NGOs, or so-called "Third Sector" organizations. This kind of social formations seek to fill the space freed as a result of the process of governmentalization of state, and they promote group interests. Such

they successfully and innovatively have embodied in post-Soviet Russia what Foucault called "specific intellectual" as they go into the most protected social spaces, undermining its claims – the social institution of army that serves as a training ground for our societies. It is clear that idea of affiliation and party / group politics has to re-incarnate itself, and members of CSM have mothered new politics where kin heterogeneity not only grounds everything, but also survives and mutates. This is a positive and not nihilist or nostalgic alternative to contemporary crisis in party politics. It is not an alternative of "brotherhood" that still borrows from the mother without acknowledging her – that is, there is no ethics to be born. This is not a "Third Way" either. "Third" usually conceals that there have never been "two", but only the one like me, and the one who is not like me, and right now I do not feel I can do this anymore. CSM shows we can be brave to try "not one" as well, innovate in political activism positively, corresponding to the most difficult, ethical issues.

political activism and its practices. Only then we can radicalize the process of building up alternatives to existing political crisis grounded in friend/enemy paradigm.

No doubt, it is possible to pose other criticisms to CSM and its activity, and to my notion of "Maternal Politics" born out of their work. One can claim that their actions reproduce sacrificial norms of motherhood, when mother is defined through altruism and self-denial. One might also claim the opposite – their work reveals that motherhood has always been sadistic and egoistic, as mothers need their children to validate themselves, using them as property or exchange value. It is possible to claim that it is political reactionism and such organizations are not stable. Certainly, what they do is unique and cannot be seen as a simple exercise of a few people. What's important for me that it has worked effectively and ethically for a decade in a situation of political stagnation and crisis of Russian political system, and Western party politics as well. While many activists resort to old types of representational politics or "no exit" pessimism, act of political innovation and success of Soldiers' Mothers allows us to widen our horizon of political resistance, both practically and conceptually. There is nothing safe in the field of political activism. However, Soldiers' Mothers are not struggling to be taken into custody to bring attention to themselves or to exercise their human rights of protest and free assembly and that's all. They have managed to slowly dismantle Soviet military machine, with the help of others, both within and outside it, and have been productive in this sense. I am writing this short essay not to moralize, but with a feeling that there is a lot to learn from them, and to learn about possible alternatives in the field of political activism.

Soldiers' Mothers did not simply adapt traditional political structures and methodology as many other women's organizations have done. They use specificity of post-Soviet context to engender maternal politics, without leaving behind embodied experience of motherhood (their own or by another mother), but putting it in the center of their struggle for radically others than themselves. I think

organizations usually face the same problem as the state or political parties based on it – the problem of representation. If state 'represents' interests of the people, of the working class, of the capital, etc. – as in classical political discourse, weakening of the state shakes the ground of the notion of representation as such. Representation was the function of the state proper, and when state becomes just another member of government, NGOs find themselves in urgent need to respond to crisis of representation – even though they might participate in and grow as a result of weakening of the state, they also need it to carry on filling in its withdrawal. For many non-state political formations the issue of representing – working class, women, animals, minorities, the poor, - becomes a constant head-ache and a struggle for grounding oneself. State crisis leads to representation crisis, one goes hand in hand with another one, depending for the other to exist and justify its existence.

Representation, especially in its current political form, implies homogeneity of shared values, goals, or convictions. Often it is based on claims that not every one has an opportunity to express and fight for their convictions, needs and interests, and therefore they need to be represented by "someone on their behalf, for them". However, after a short while a problem occurs as different and uncompromising needs and convictions by separate individuals cannot ground political programmes and struggles, and get subsumed under one leading ideology that levels difference by a few means². Ideology cements party politics. Fixed and written into a programme or main manifesto, it provides a basis for a principal upon which to choose strategy, tactics, actions and borders of the party – who belongs to it and who is not, and upon which parameters.

3. Crisis of party membership and party belonging.

The crisis of representation and ideology leads to the crisis of party politics as they are interdependent. Common goals and principals

are failing, dissent is spreading and still seen as something dangerous to ruling ideology; representatives encounter serious objections to their representational claims. Foucault's call for micro-practices to substitute meta-ideology meets considerable fear and anxiety of identity loss and even dissolution of political action as such (The Ticklish Subject by Žižek is to a certain extent revealing this fear of a loss of a political action if it's not ground in common shared principals).

Of course, we can carry on and mourn subject, party and its politics, feel abyss when we leave the party, immediately having an identity crisis and presenting it as everyone else's crisis. However, it does not seem to be a virile act – to fear losing a party, isn't it?

"Political parties, after everything is said and done, take upon only those common principals that fit into the Programme, enforcing unity and agreement, or those that suit one or another tactical moment.

But how can we agree that some of the problems are defined as local or distractive only because they do not pass a filter of common goals, accepted and coded into imperatives of political parties".

(Foucault, 1991b:166)

Issues of representation and ideology in turn must be supported by the situation of 'political affiliation' – that is, of acceptance of some ideology as a basis to become a part of, or on the side of, a party, a group, etc. Sometimes it is phrased as a 'giving oneself' to the party, giving all energy to struggle with fellow party members for the same ideals and goals. Of course, affiliation is directly related to the notion of 'philia' – love and friendship that would divide the world into party friends and party enemies.

"Tradition of politics that is rooted in differentiation and careful search for friends and enemies can be traced to Aristotle. Following this tradition, Schmidt makes a conclusion that: 'Special political distinction (die spezifisch politische Unterscheidung), to which we can reduce all political action and notion, is a distinction (Unterscheidung) between friend and enemy". (Schmidt, cited in Derrida, 1997:85)

brings as much to the result as full understanding of its limitations and dangers, and preparation to face them.

In order to be effective, maternal politics comes from the specific context, and to be extremely mobile and flexible to respond to it. As a result, their political actions questioned universalist sweeping generalizations in discussions of maternal practices in Western and Russian theories of motherhood – be they psychoanalytic post-Lacanian, post-structuralist, Marxist or Russian Orthodox. In post-Soviet predominantly Orthodox context, that is still blind to its own ethnic and religious heterogeneity, CSM is not de-subjectivizing mothers (alternative suggested by Irigaray and others within Catholic context), but re-subjectivizing them (since they were already made into subjects by Soviet government). Embodying motherhood with its body politics, Soldiers' Mothers unsettle the force of reproductive and maternal metaphors used within political sphere (especially in Russia where reproductive terminology of Marxism with its laws and spirals of reproduction and self-birth is so wide-spread). They enact and use structures traditionally positioned far away from embodied motherhood, though based on it (for example, army and economy have always been in need of the "young").

CSM actions place the problem of position and place of mother/hood at the center of legal and ethical questions, shifting it from family planning issues into the questions of government, military practices and the law itself. By putting themselves into the center of these spheres, displacing attention from "mothers" onto "children – all citizens", they avoid family / community dualism radically and productively. Without question, CSM creates new forms of political subjectivity that opens up a possibility of the ethical relation to the maternal from others and the maternal towards others. It is well known that Irigaray, Cornell and others work on re-formulating the notion of mother/hood in terms of maternal ethics and in law. However Maternal embodied Politics in form of CSM forces us, theorists, to constantly localize our conceptions and negotiate them with existing innovations of

differ from those whom they represent in any socially and culturally meaningful aspect – ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender, age, etc. Kin relations usually are not even included into political realm proper as they belong to "family law", but in any case most of the time they represent "someone else's children". That's why in their case the question and problem of representation and its crisis does not undermine their struggle and activism (though it has to be negotiated every other day, it is not something that comes with the name, but through embodied action, and adjustment of its tactics and strategies).

Maternal politics seems to take upon itself traditionally "passive maternal function", through dissolving itself actively in maternal love, making it a source of its political struggle. Mother's Love as a political origin for activism.

Many have criticized this engagement of motherhood as a source of any kind of politics. Much of feminist political writings, especially Western ones, considered motherhood to be an obstacle to a woman's political activism, especially in its current social and cultural forms. CSM in this case undermines the view, under which traditional notion of motherhood is rejected as social, religious, or cultural construct or stereotype. Even for French feminists to become socially and politically subjectivized would mean to reject current notions of motherhood. While CSM actually does the opposite – it puts it into the center of its political agenda without defining it or discussing it. What does it bring – to put traditional notion of motherhood, that has been stripped of all communal meanings and confined to the silence of the pre-oedipal, Home, Heimat, house, dwelling, intimacy as such – to place it right in the middle of political struggle within military machine? Indeed, Soldiers' Mothers ground their politics in the embodiment of maternal experience, and they place such 'reductive' singular function upon their action. They take the risk. They show how effective this tactic is, as a new political strategy, if it is used in a situationist manner. By trial and error they are constantly fine-tuning their tactics. Who, when, and how is doing maternal politics

Logically it comes that the loss of enemy means the loss of any political struggle. This classic Schmidt's idea has been critically analyzed by Derrida in the book "The Politics of Friendship", where he is deconstructing a split fraternal / polemic basis of political sphere. After Schmidt, "...the loss of enemy would imply the loss of political 'I'. ...Today it is possible to give a few examples of this disorientation of political field, where the main enemy already seems unclear". (Derrida, 1997:84)

While Derrida offers political alternative based on reformulation of the notion "fraternal friendship" beyond opposition friend / enemy, I would like to trace an alternative that is far from 'brotherhood' (though not unrelated). I call this phenomenon "maternal politics". It is a phenomenon and not a notion or an idea as my analysis is based on the work of existing mothers' organization, my personal observations of their work, and especially on the impact of their work on Russian government and Russian military complex.

4. Committee of Soldiers' Mothers (CSM)

"Political analysis and critique must still be invented to a large extent", together with strategies to modify lines of force and power relations, transformation of the existing ones into something different. That's why instead of self-identification in old political terms it is necessary to "imagine and incorporate new schemas of politicization" (Foucault, 1996:211).

Answering a call to such new political inventions, I would argue that Soldiers' Mothers are exactly such innovative organization that transcends the crisis of representation, ideology and politics of party affiliation. Founded in 1989, CSM works in several directions, more or less connected to army reforms and military practices. It provides legal support and finds financial help to families of dead soldiers; consults on legal aspects of compulsory national military service, does publications on death cases in the army, and lobbies parliamentary hearings of amnesty laws and military reforms. CSM was one of the very few organizations, and the most active and visible one to oppose recent Russian wars in Chechnya. Soldiers'

Mothers carried out direct actions in Chechnya to bring attention to the war and stop certain military offences. In 1995 they were awarded Sean MacBride Peace Prize for their actions during the war.

5. Maternal Politics.

What makes them so unique as political organization, and their "maternal politics" often so effective? First of all, it is political implications and ethical force of the notion of "mother" and "motherhood" in Russia.

The most effective part that Soldiers' Mothers absorbed is that that notion of motherhood plays on and breaks apart the logic of separation on "us" and "them". The tradition insists that mother comes from "caring and intimate" sphere (ideally, of course). Therefore, for Mother any Other is a potential friend before and after it is other. Through this interesting extrapolation of the intimate, (homely) into public (community), Soldiers' Mothers surpass the problem of collaboration with other groups and organizations that are based on manifestos and codes of affiliation. The loss of "enemy" does not limit or produce their political activism as the notion of mother is ambivalent towards such dilemmas – every enemy has (had) a mother. Maternity and motherhood (though not necessarily connected) allow to care for others without any proof, or need of any confirmation of one's sincerity, one's care, one's *philia*. The issue of affiliation does not make any sense when one is a mother. Correspondingly, validity of mother's interests and convictions do not need a Programme, a Code, or a Law. By definition in our communal and philosophical tradition, mother is 'a being for the other, and not for oneself' (Levinas, quoted in Chalier, 1991:126). What matters in motherhood is responsibility for the other (Levinas quoted in Chanter, 1991:135). Though there is no place here to elaborate further, I would note that even when motherhood is about signing a legal paper on "becoming a mother", it is always about 'care / responsibility' for the other(s), that is assumed or clearly defined in such legal papers. Fact that Levinas discussed this at length – how other is a potential

transformational for political activism. Chalier claims that for Levinas "maternal body knows subjectivity by its blood and flash". However, ethics for women, if exists at all, could only be "being mother" and nothing more (Chalier, 1991:127). Mothers from CSM made this 'nothing more' into the resource to politicize maternal position, finding a way out of political crisis of representation and affiliation.

Maternal politics does not rely on acceptance and faith into party ideology or "party line", as the notion of mother allows "some mothers" to enact corporeal identification with each other without elimination of their differences. It provides a platform for their political activism without a need to sign or claim anything common "through conviction". Mothers do not need to sign "Law of being Mother" or "Maternal Programme". Therefore the question of affiliation is not an issue, it is only a question of embodied politics. Who would ask mother about her "code" or "Programme" of being one? Their code is "ideal" and "beyond" political ideology, since most ideologies try to reach the impossible – ethical force and justification of motivations as only mothers have (by definition – love and care FOR OTHERS, not one self). It is common for political parties and groups to mimic caring, sacrificial image of the pre-oedipal fantasy (like in Soviet slogans "party cares for you as mother").

When one represents another one, he (!) positions himself on the same level as another one, as the same as him, similar to him. Sameness is the basis of representation so far, and the situation of difference usually undermines representational politics. More one is the same as those whom one represents (in class, sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, disability, age, etc), more he assumes the right to represent others. It all changes when Soldier's Mothers come in. They do not represent other mothers who love their children, they represent those who are radically different from them, but whom they are connected to through the symbol of motherhood – any actual or potential soldier (who has ever had a mother)³. They claim all of them as their potential children, though they might

politics, forms "unbearably effective" phenomenon. Especially it works well in post-Soviet Russia, where it is possible to capitalize on and incorporate fragments of two strong, albeit competitive, formations that used image of the Mother: Old Orthodox Christian and Soviet.

7. CSM Political Innovations and Effects.

On the one hand, success of Maternal Politics is boosted by a particular socio-cultural importance that "motherhood" and "mother" enjoy within Russian Orthodoxy (I would stress here that CSM is hijacking these formulations for their own political struggle rather than taking it uncritically as valid definitions of motherhood. It is one of the many tactics they employ from existing cultural context, and the question whether participants actually believe it or not is irrelevant to their action). On the other hand, "governmentalization" of women's position in Soviet times introduced the formulation of the Soviet woman as an active political subject. For example, Kristeva noted that Eastern European socialist countries recognized women as social-political subjects, that allowed women there 'to grow up without slave mentality and a sense of submission and rejection' (Kristeva, 1987:117). Despite of the problems with Kristeva's statement (any political recognition in Soviet times was a problematic concept and could be treated rather as a wish, not to mention that being named subjects, on par with male subjects, does not really change status quo of sexual indifference), it is clear that no more no less but symbolically, on paper, Soviet female citizens (*grazdanki*), were assumed to be active political subjects under this process of governmentalization (I have argued elsewhere that this process started long before Perestroika, under Bolshevik rule - Aristarkhova, 1995, chapter 3). And indeed, Soldiers' Mothers borrowed heavily from their Soviet female predecessors in many ways. At the same time, we also inherited forces that insist "mother should remain silent" (Irigaray), that makes CSM's injection of maternal articulated experience into the political activist sphere

friend and not an enemy as such, is supposed to come from his interest in Jewish, pre-Christian discourses. However, what might have been omitted or overlooked (and by Levinas probably too), and that could be offered here as plight of my Russian imagination, is relation between Levinasian "other-as-friend" couple and his Russo-linguistic connections. Russian imperial roots (Levinas lived under the rule of Russian empire and Russian language till his tertiary studies in Germany) could have contributed to his ethical philosophy, where "face of the other" is seen as a situation of potential friendship and love. In Russian language "other" and "friend" are almost the same word, in any case, they flow one into another seamlessly. Idea of care, developed by a friend and early mentor of Levinas – Heidegger (especially in *Being and Time*), was taken up with negative anxious implications by Sartre (in *Being and Nothingness*), though for Levinas care, based on the maternal, has always been a possibility, a welcoming of positive ethics, of the ethics as such. Obviously, this connection between friend and other without implying other as a potential enemy first, is a possibility of a different kind of politics, that has been developed by Soldiers' Mothers in a radically activist and embodied form, and without 'forgetting the mother' (as it is in case of writings by Levinas).

6. Pre-Oedipal definitions of motherhood, its critique and its use

For the past few decades these notions (mother and motherhood) have been actively discussed in feminist literature, especially in the works of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. Ethical implications of the maternity and motherhood have been explored by Cornell and Levinas, among many others. In addition to the fact that their ideas are meant to transform the contemporary discourse on ethics and subjectivity, they have direct relation to engendering alternative political strategies and concepts. Unfortunately this political dimension (that relates to direct political action), often remains unexplored, producing all too sanitized split between theory and practice, rendering both of them unproductive and frustrated. To a

certain extent this relation is what I am trying to trace in this essay. Levinas uses relation to the mother as a door that opens onto ethical and religious dimensions. However, maternal relation is only a passive possibility, though the one that opens itself up to allow the appearance of the realm of the social and cultural. The same for Kristeva – the experience of motherhood is pre-Oedipal, that is, it exists outside the establishment of culture and society, though finds itself in the foundation. It is only an origin of the ethics and politics, both of which come ‘after’, as a result, leaving a mother behind. Just like for Kristeva, maternal is pre-social and pre-cultural for Levinas too, it is also pre-natural.

Main function that mother serves for Levinas, and that is fundamental to our political analysis, is its alternative relation to others. With mother’s help, Levinas can relate to others outside enemy/friend dialectics, making impossible possible – overcoming ontological situation of singular Being thrown into the world by no one. Earlier we discussed political implications of this split, according to Schmidt. In case of Levinas, it becomes even more general – mother is placed such so as to highlight that ethical relation is prior to ontological. Though mother herself is not placed anywhere within the realm of the ethical.

When the maternal is left, in order to touch the ethical highs, we ask ourselves – why? Why is mother left behind, why ‘home’ has to be guarded to keep it locked? And why mother is positioned within home in the first place? Maternal function, as Irigaray puts it, serves as a basis of social and political order, the same for the order of desire, but mother herself is always limited by the necessity. As soon as necessity – individual or collective - is fulfilled, often there is nothing left from the maternal function. There is also nothing left from this mother’s energy to fulfill her own desires and needs, especially in its religious and political, social dimensions. (Irigaray, 1987)

It is clear that in some sense (re)claiming the political as maternal and vice versa is to go against the grain of all traditions, political and philosophical, as ‘tradition’ itself is based on leaving the mother

(fundament) behind in the first place. I will come to this point later in relation to the activity of CSM.

Since ‘traditionally’ mothers are asked "out" of civil and military societies, from culture as such: what must be left of them is an idea of mother, translatable into Motherland and Homeland. She herself is only welcomed as a metaphor. Thus, in Levinas writings from late years, the notions of the feminine and the maternal merge: they incorporate private sphere, intimacy and home. "Woman is a condition for a recollection, interiority of the house and habitation...It is a figure whose presence is almost an absence, that provides the first welcoming within the field of intimacy – this is woman..." (Levinas, 1980:128, 155).

Rendered as interiority, mother must remain outside the social and religious fields, and cannot be (simply cannot be - by all definitions) a political activist herself, without references to masculine political subjectivity. Mother represents ‘the unspoken’ and ‘the pre-cultural’. Everything that is ‘before’ - before Self is articulated in (body) language. This Levinasian position undermines his claim to achieve new ethics of difference (against the ontological tradition of sameness), since it starts from acknowledging and then subsuming the difference of the mother. It exiles mother from the realm of political, social and cultural, and especially theological. It appropriates maternal experience to go onto another level – the level of the ethics and proper relation to the other and his face. Many have argued that Western tradition is a matricidal tradition (Irigaray especially, and after her Kornell, 1991; Oliver, 1998, and others). Mother is symbolically annihilated for reproduction of our cultures, where reproduction becomes a political metaphor (e.g., in Marxist terminology). Therefore, active embodied presence of mothers simultaneously as mothers and political activists is indigestible by political realm that is based on metaphors or ideas of ‘care for all’ – earth, productive forces, working class, motherland, that are taken from its own conceptions of motherhood, just to leave it behind. This coming back of mothers into the political, and not as literary or philosophical genres, but also as embodied activist