

Pussy Riot's Appeal for Justice

Exclusive: A Russian judge has sentenced three female “punk” rockers from the group “Pussy Riot” to two years in prison for performing a protest song at a Moscow cathedral, what the judge called anti-religious “hooliganism.” But Ray McGovern sees the protest as in the spirit of Mary, mother of Jesus.

By Ray McGovern

The song to which the punk band “Pussy Riot” danced on Feb. 21 in Russia’s iconic Christ the Savior Cathedral ends with a prayer asking Jesus’s mother Mary to “become a feminist,” but Mary always was a feminist through and through, with a voice speaking strongly for justice.

Centuries of saccharine portraits and iconography have obscured a more reality-based appreciation of this gutsy young woman. But recent scripture study throws light on how Mary implanted a vision of inclusive justice into the heart of Jesus.

Though Mary is not given a lot of airtime by the men who wrote the scriptures, it is not hard to figure out where she was coming from. Just give her a brief sound bite and those within earshot would have found her profoundly subversive of a corrupt system not unlike that existing today in the punk band’s Russia.

In Mary’s time, the religious authorities in Palestine were working hand in glove with the Herod-type sycophants of Caesar, and doing quite well, thank you very much. (No invidious comparison with Emperor Putin and the successfully co-opted Russian Orthodox prelates is intended, of course.)

Mary is thought to have been several years younger than the courageous women of “Pussy Riot,” but she clearly shared both their outspoken exuberance and belief that God was, in the end, a God of justice and would deliver. Here’s Mary upon learning she was to be the mother of Jesus, who might just deliver the Jewish people from their oppressors:

I am bursting with God-news; I'm dancing the song ...

God has shown strength,

Scattering the bluffing braggarts.

God knocked tyrants off their high horses,

Pulled victims out of the mud.

*The starving poor sat down to a banquet;
The callous rich were left out in the cold. ...
It's exactly what God promised, beginning
With Abraham and right up to now."*

(Luke 1: 50-55 Eugene Peterson translation)

As the passage shows, Mary was outspoken in her advocacy of inclusive justice, the biblical precondition for Shalom, which can be defined as peace, completeness or the elusive moment when everything is right. For in the biblical perspective, **peace is no more nor less than the experience of justice.**

Mary was in good company. Indeed, her views fit within the tradition of Miriam and other women prophets. Those familiar with the Hebrew scriptures may recall the part of Exodus recording the song and dancing of Miriam right after the Israelites make it to dry land just ahead of the ill-fated "horses and chariots of Pharaoh":

The prophetess Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, while all the women went out after her with tambourines, dancing; and she led them in the refrain:

Sing to God gloriously triumphant;

Horse and chariot he has cast into the sea.

(Exodus 15:20-21 The New American Bible, Saint Joseph Edition)

Bible accounts include a long line of courageous women celebrating freedom, justice and Shalom. These stories of women include what is perhaps the first celebration of highly imaginative, as well as bold, nonviolent civil disobedience.

Who remembers Shiphrah and Puah from the first chapter of Genesis? Okay, here's a brief refresher. They were the two midwives who defied Pharaoh's order to snuff out the lives of all male Hebrew babies at birth. "Despite Pharaoh's command," says Genesis, "they feared God and refused to kill the boy babies."

When Egypt's homeland security operatives told Pharaoh of this defiance, he called Shiphrah and Puah on the carpet. They provided an artful alibi: "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women. Hebrews deliver their babies very quickly, before the midwives can get to them."

Obstetrics at the time being at their infancy, so to speak, it is possible that

Pharaoh's physicians concurred. I am no biblical exegete and have read no biographies of that particular Pharaoh, but it seems to me equally possible that he was so bemused by their grit and imagination, and perhaps even by their instinctive rejection of infanticide, that he decided to let them off the hook.

In any case, without the fabled courage of Shiphrah and Puah, as the story goes, Moses and his big brother Aaron would never have gotten anywhere near the Red Sea. It strikes me as of a kind with the example set not only by "Pussy Riot," but also strong American women witnesses for justice, in the Catholic Worker movement, for example, and in Code Pink.

And so back to the witness of the three women of "Pussy Riot," sentenced to two years of prison for "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred." The facts strongly suggest that it was not "religious hatred," but rather hatred of the undisguised, pandering role to which the Russian Orthodox Church has reverted in giving unqualified political support for President Vladimir Putin, as it did for the Tsars.

This can be seen in the following verses of their offending song, which clearly refer to Tsar Putin, formerly a senior official in the KGB and later head of the FSB, a successor agency to the KGB:

"Black robe, golden epaulettes

All parishioners crawl to bow

The phantom of liberty is in heaven ...

The head of the KGB, their chief saint.

Leads protesters to prison under escort

In order not to offend his Holiness ..."

The punk musician JD Samson, interviewed on "Democracy Now," shared this word of praise for the courage of the young Russian women in standing up to the highly authoritarian Russian government:

"One of the things that's really strong for everyone is that they are staying so incredibly confident and strong. They're standing there in handcuffs in a cage smiling, because they know that what they've done is ignite a fire in the rest of the world, and they're extremely happy to have done so. And, yeah."

And yeah.

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Forgetting the Why of the New Deal

Until the Great Crash of 1929, the federal government did little to regulate the power of Wall Street as it precipitated cycles of boom and bust that ruined the lives of many Americans. That history is now being forgotten as Republicans move to dismantle what's left of the New Deal, says Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

In the 132 years between 1797 and 1929, there was no effective regulation of the U.S. economy. No federal agencies existed to control corruption, fraud and exploitation on the part of the business class. Even during the Civil War, economic management on a national level was minimal and war profiteering common.

As a result the country experienced 33 major economic downturns which impacted roughly 60 of the years in question. These included 22 recessions, four depressions, and seven economic "panics" (bank runs and failures).

Then came the Great Depression starting with the crash of the New York stock market in 1929. This soon became a worldwide affair which lasted until the onset of World War II. Millions were thrown out of work, agricultural production partially collapsed, and the fear of rebellion and revolution was palpable both in the U.S. and Europe.

It is to be noted that the way capitalism worked over these 132 years was a function of ideology. This was (and still is) the so-called free-market ideology which taught that if the government was kept as small as possible (basically having responsibility for internal order, external defense, and the enforcement of contracts), the citizenry would have to pay very low taxes and be left alone to pursue their own prosperity.

Thus, as the ideology goes, everyone would be free to maximize their own wealth and in doing so also maximize the wealth of the community as a whole.

The Great Depression was a real moment of truth for the capitalist West because it suggested to the open-minded that the free-market ideology was seriously flawed. Free-market practices had brought the economic system to the brink of

collapse, and Russia's newly triumphant communists represented serious competition. So the question that had to be answered was how best to modify the capitalist system so as to preserve the position of the ruling elite.

It was President Franklin Delano Roosevelt who came up with an answer, at least for the United States. Through a series of economic and social experiments he crafted the New Deal and promoted the notion of the welfare state.

It should be emphasized that this was not socialism. In essence, the New Deal was capitalism with safety nets and subsidies. It meant that some entrepreneurs – in areas such as agriculture, defense and other businesses – actually got money from the government to produce their products.

On the other end of the spectrum, government money was made available to keep the really poor people from starving and the unemployed solvent while they sought new employment. A national pension plan was devised in the form of Social Security, and bank deposits up to a certain amount were insured.

In addition, new agencies were created to monitor business activities, particularly the stock market and the banks, to prevent the sort of activities that had brought on many of the economic downturns of the past. This was a major step away from the ideal of a wholly free market but most of the citizenry, with the Great Depression at their backs, understood the necessity of the New Deal. Of course, taxes would eventually have to go up to help pay for it all.

How Quickly We Forget

Essentially, Roosevelt and the New Deal saved capitalism from itself. Left to those, such as Herbert Hoover, who could not escape the paradigm of free-market ideology, capitalism in the U.S. may well have followed much of Europe in succumbing to the revolutionary movements of the Right or the Left.

It has been 67 years since the end of WWII and during that time there have been 11 recessions impacting only 10 years of that time span. Most of these recessions have been mild affairs compared to the 33 that came prior to the onset of the Great Depression, and the welfare safety net has helped the hardest hit to survive. However, since the 1980s, the U.S. economy has become more unstable and some of the downturns more severe.

What of the steadfast adherents to the free market ideology? It would have been nice for the world if the Great Depression had put an end to them all but that was not to be. For those who can understand things only with the help of rigid and all inclusive paradigms, ideology is what makes sense of an otherwise chaotic world.

Ideology is also what defines good and evil for such minds. So it stood to reason that many committed free marketeers would retreat into a temporary silence and wait for a time to reassert their beliefs.

It did not take long. In fact, counting from 1939 and the outbreak of the World War II (the event that finally marked the end of the Great Depression), it took only until 1980 or 41 years. That is two generations which is actually just about right.

Unless purposefully passed on from one generation to the next, both skills and memories tend to dim and lose their meaning. So it has been with the memories of what unregulated capitalism cost the nation in the years before the New Deal.

Why did things change for the worse in 1980? That was the year Ronald Reagan, a B-grade actor and man of little intelligence, surrounded by neoconservatives and free marketeer ideologues, was elected president. Working within the context of generational forgetfulness, he set us all on a path toward deregulation and a resurgence of the free-market ideology.

It is to be noted that the country's most recent recession (2007-2009) has been the worst of the post-war era and a direct result of prior deregulation.

We are still on that path and the living proof of this fact is that the Republican presidential candidate, Mitt Romney has just selected Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin as his running mate. Ryan is the Chairman of the Budget Committee in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives and author of a proposed federal budget that would slash social spending (and those safety nets) by some \$3.3 trillion, ditch Medicare and Medicaid, while simultaneously cutting taxes for the wealthy.

Ryan is no less than the reincarnation of a free marketeer who wants to recreate the circumstances that brought us all 33 major economic downturns crowned by the Great Depression. How quickly people forget.

Social Darwinism

It was University of California Professor Robert Reich who recently explained what Paul Ryan in a position of real power would mean. "More than any other politician today, Paul Ryan exemplifies the Social Darwinism at the core of the today's Republican Party."

And what is Social Darwinism? It is a belief in the necessity of a struggle for survival where only the "fittest" survive. Here is how William Graham Sumner, the 19th Century's leading American spokesman for this outlook, put it. "Civilization has a simple choice. It is either liberty, inequality, survival of

the fittest or not-liberty, equality, survival of the unfittest. The former carries society forward and favors all its best members; the latter carries society downwards and favors all its worst members.”

This may well be Paul Ryan’s version of the struggle between good and evil. By the way, liberty here is defined as the freedom of individuals to pursue wealth in an unfettered way.

Following this ideology, a Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan presidency would most likely increase the pace of deregulation and destroy what is left of the country’s safety nets. It would ultimately devastate the middle class, greatly increase the ranks of the poor and unemployed, do away with union rights, and reserve prosperity for the upper class alone. All of this will be done in the name of liberty. And, it will be guided by an ideological paradigm that has already been historically proven to be disastrous.

We can speculate about popular reaction to these policies as time goes on. There will probably be eventual protest in the streets. Those in power will respond with red-baiting tactics and repression against the protesting victims of their policies. Also, keep in mind that these ideologues will almost certainly bring us a new set of wars. And, as we already know, in wartime repression comes easier.

All in all it is a pretty grim picture. It was George Santayana (1863-1952), a philosopher with both Spanish and American roots who said that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” We in the United States – so thoroughly attached to our local here and now – are certainly candidates for this fate.

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Dick Cheney: Son of the New Deal

From the Archive: As Republicans and the Tea Party seek to dismantle the New Deal’s social contract, one of their heroes, Dick Cheney, concedes that his personal success traces back to the federal government’s intervention against the depredations inflicted on Americans by “free-market” capitalism, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry (Originally published Sept. 16, 2011)

Former Vice President Dick Cheney would agree that he is about as right-wing as an American politician can be, openly hostile to the federal government's intervention in society. But one surprise from his memoir, *In My Time*, is that Cheney recognizes that his personal success was made possible by Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and the fact that Cheney's father managed to land a steady job with the federal government.

"I've often reflected on how different was the utterly stable environment he provided for his family and wondered if because of that I have been able to take risks, to change directions, and to leave one career path for another with hardly a second thought," Cheney writes.

In that sense, Cheney's self-assuredness may be as much a product of the New Deal as the many bridges, dams and other public works that Roosevelt commissioned in the 1930s to get Americans back to work. By contrast, the insecurity that afflicted Cheney's father was a byproduct of the vicissitudes from laissez-faire capitalism.

So, it is ironic that as an adult, Cheney has contributed as much as almost anyone to dismantling the New Deal, the social compact that pulled his family into the American middle class and opened extraordinary opportunities for him.

In sketching his family's history, Cheney depicts the hard-scrabble life of farmers and small businessmen scratching out a living in the American Midwest and suffering financial reversals whenever the titans of Wall Street stumbled into a financial crisis and the bankers cut off credit.

After his ancestors would make some modest headway from their hard work, they would find themselves back at square one, again and again, because of some "market" crisis or a negative weather pattern. Whenever there was a financial panic or a drought, everything was lost.

"In 1883, as the country struggled through a long economic depression, the sash and door factory that [Civil War veteran Samuel Fletcher Cheney] co-owned [in Defiance, Ohio] had to be sold to pay its debts," Cheney writes. "At the age of fifty-four, Samuel Cheney had to start over," moving to Nebraska.

There, Samuel Cheney built a sod house and began a farm, enjoying some success until a drought hit, again forcing him to the edge. Despite a solid credit record, he noted that "the banks will not loan to anyone at present" and, in 1896, he had to watch all his possessions auctioned off at the Kearney County Courthouse.

Samuel Cheney started another homestead in 1904 and kept working until he died in 1911 at the age of 82.

His third son, Thomas, who was nicknamed Bert (and who would become Dick Cheney's grandfather), tried to build a different life as a cashier and part owner of a Sumner, Kansas, bank, named Farmers and Merchants Bank. But he still suffered when the economy crashed.

"Despite all his plans and success, Bert Cheney found that, like his father, he couldn't escape the terrible power of nature," Dick Cheney writes. "When drought struck in the early 1930s, farmers couldn't pay their debts, storekeepers had to close their doors, and Farmers and Merchants Bank went under. My grandparents lost everything except for the house in which they lived."

Bert Cheney's son, Richard, ventured off in a different direction, working his way through Kearney State Teachers College and taking the civil service exam. He landed a job as a typist with the Veterans Administration in Lincoln, Nebraska.

"After scraping by for so long, he found the prospect of a \$120 monthly salary and the security of a government job too good to turn down," his son, Dick Cheney, writes. "Before long he was offered a job with another federal agency, the Soil Conservation Service.

"The SCS taught farmers about crop rotation, terraced planting, contour plowing, and using 'shelter belts' of trees as windbreaks techniques that would prevent the soil from blowing away, as it had in the dust storms of the Great Depression. My dad stayed with the SCS for more than thirty years, doing work of which he was immensely proud.

"He was also proud of the pension that came with federal employment a pride that I didn't understand until as an adult I learned about the economic catastrophes that his parents and grandparents had experienced and that had shadowed his own youth."

Like many Americans, the Cheney family felt it had been pulled from the depths of the Great Depression by the New Deal efforts of Franklin Roosevelt, cementing the family's support for the Democratic president and his party.

"When I was born [on Jan. 30, 1941] my granddad wanted to send a telegram to the president," Cheney writes in his memoir. "Both sides of my family were staunch New Deal Democrats, and Granddad was sure that FDR would want to know about the 'little stranger' with whom he now had a birthday in common."

After growing up in the relative comfort of middle-class, post-World War II America, Dick Cheney would take advantage of the many opportunities that

presented themselves, attaching himself to powerful Republican politicians, most notably an ambitious congressman from Illinois named Donald Rumsfeld.

When Rumsfeld left Congress for posts in the Nixon administration, he brought the hard-working Cheney along. Eventually Rumsfeld became White House chief of staff to President Gerald Ford and when Rumsfeld was tapped to become Defense Secretary in 1975 he recommended his young aide, Dick Cheney, to succeed him.

Cheney's career path through the ranks of Republican national politics, with occasional trips through the revolving door into lucrative private-sector jobs, was set. He would become a major player within the GOP Establishment, establishing for himself a reputation as one of the most conservative members of Congress and a foreign policy hawk.

Now in his 70s, Cheney is widely recognized as a right-wing Republican icon, inspiring a new generation of conservatives to dismantle what's left of Roosevelt's New Deal and shrink the federal government.

It doesn't seem to matter that those were the two social factors that created "the utterly stable environment" which gave Dick Cheney his chance in life.

To read more of Robert Parry's writings, you can now order his last two books, *Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, at the discount price of only \$16 for both. For details on the special offer, [click here.](#)]

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.


Squeezing a London Bank on Iran

The U.S. squeeze on Iran over its nuclear program caught London-based Standard Chartered Bank, forcing it to pay penalties to a New York regulator for allegedly handling money from Iran. But Danny Schechter asks if the action was partly to settle a grudge.

By Danny Schechter

On the surface, it looked like a simple game of "Gotcha," when New York bank

regulators blew the whistle on London's Standard Chartered Bank for laundering money. The fact that the money was allegedly tied to Iran cast a major shadow on the allegations, given the Islamic Republic's "bad guy" image in American policy circles.

Big money was said to be involved when a New York State regulator, Benjamin Lawskey, who is considered a publicity-seeking cowboy in banking circles, made the explosive charge that Standard Chartered bank abetted \$250 billion of money-laundering transactions with Iran. 

On the surface the case was open and shut – and headline-making – even though other federal regulators didn't immediately jump in with guns blazing. Then, as Reuters reported, it all became even murkier when Britain's Central Bank governor portrayed Lawskey as marching to his own tune and out of step with federal regulators in Washington.

"One regulator, but not the others, has gone public while the investigation is still going on," the Bank of England's Mervyn King said at a news conference in London.

Suddenly, the plot thickened, even as the media tide carried with it the assumption that the bank was guilty as sin. With the regulator calling Standard Chartered a "Rogue Institution," its shares began dropping in value.

In one morning's trading, on the basis of accusations in a press release and untested legal charges, the bank lost \$16 billion. Bank officials initially contested the scale of the transgression, indicating that only a small part of its business with Iran was involved, no more than \$14 million.

Federal regulators also implied that New York State was exaggerating the scale of any potential problem and that Lawskey's language was unnecessarily "strident." But it is strident language that gets attention in a media that rarely bothers to investigate issues like these.

Not mentioned in the first stories was that Standard Chartered had met Lawskey's regulators months earlier, but nothing was said then about any high crimes and misdemeanors. That would change when the opportunity for a big media story materialized.

Now, Lawskey was treating this case as a major violation of national security, saying: "This is a case about Iran, money laundering, and national security. We will continue to work closely with our law enforcement partners, both federal and state, in this effort. No bank, big or small, foreign or domestic, is above the law."

Sounds dramatic, doesn't it? But the British were furious because their investigation was not complete. Yet, whatever the truth, the perception of wrongdoing began killing the bank's stock price. An auditing firm accused of fudging the numbers also adamantly denied it.

Bank critics in the United States lashed out at the British regulators who criticized a lack of protocol by the New York regulator. Wrote James Kwak on BaselineScenario.com, a leading economics blog:

"Standard Chartered almost certainly conspired to evade U. S. sanctions? Why are they mad at Benjamin Lawsky instead of at Standard Chartered? And when you think a violation of inter-regulator 'protocol' is worse than a systematic plan to defraud the U. S. government and break sanctions against Iran, of all countries, it's hard to imagine how you could be more captured, without knowing it."

Is this true? No court has agreed with the accusation, and now none will because there has been a settlement with no admission of guilt,

Standard Chartered initially said they would fight back. CEO Peter Sands issued this statement, "[We] fundamentally reject the overall picture and believe there are no grounds for them to take this action. The threat to cancel the bank's license to operate in New York would be "wholly disproportionate," he said.

It turns out that the pressure to punish the bank was partly due to fury at a colorful comment allegedly made by a Standard Chartered executive who challenged the arrogance of New York regulators in a conversation way back in 2006.

Bank executive Richard Meddings allegedly said then: "You f--ing Americans. Who are you to tell us, the rest of the world that we're not going to deal with Iranians?"

Daring to criticize the self-righteousness of U.S. regulators and U.S. policy in a off-the-record comment (not even in a document) apparently marked the bank for retaliation by flag-waving and thin-skinned American regulators.

What was Standard Chartered to do? Stand on principles and its "facts" and possibly lose its license in New York, or try to settle without admitting wrongdoing. At the same time, more investigations are underway in connection with its alleged violations of U.S. sanctions laws.

What do you think happened? The bank did a quick calculation and decided to pay up rather than be shut down. They coughed up \$340 million in a case that smacks of official extortion dressed up as high principles.

The New York regulator has the power to close the bank if it believes the bank

is untrustworthy, even if the bank is not guilty of any particular transgression. The bank says the accusations deal with only 1 percent of some 60,000 Iranian wire transfers that the New York regulator claims were involved.

Naked Capitalism (NC) reports that the regulator tried to shake Standard Chartered down for even more money. "The amount agreed was less than he was initially rumored to be seeking, which was in the \$500 (million) to \$700 million range. However, as we also indicated, in a 'good' settlement, neither side gets what it wants.

"And given that the Federal authorities were roused by the New York action and are also reported to be negotiating settlements, they will likely have to secure decent dollar amounts so as not to be perceived to be completely incompetent, which would have cut into what SCB would pay to New York." The NC website also explains, "SCB was handling Iran's foreign oil sale related payments."

Meanwhile in London, according to Fortune, "Money managers' reacted to the U.S. allegations that Standard Chartered hid money tied to Iran with these words: Everyone does it."

The U.S. business magazine added, "Talk that the bank could lose its ability to work and trade in the state is being dismissed as simply 'loony.' Meanwhile, money managers in the City believe that the bank's credit looks solid and its equity value is now cheap compared to its peers even ones that have their plates full with their own scandals ranging from the Libor fixing to insider trading.

"Nevertheless, the company's stock and bonds are expected to trade at a discount to its peers until the bank either resolves the issue or sets aside the cash to deal with it. It wasn't too long ago that the big European banks actually flaunted their close relationship with entities connected to Iran."

The Guardian seemed sympathetic to Standard Chartered too, reporting that the bank called its decision "pragmatic in the best interest of shareholders and customers."

The newspaper explained, "The loss of its banking licence would be more damaging than the fine, although Sands on Tuesday told the Business Standard paper in India where the bank has a high street banking operation that he did not believe the bank would be stripped of its ability to conduct business directly in the US."

Ian Gordon, banks analyst at Investec, said: "It has taken the nuclear option off the table and suggests the total settlement will be manageable."

Maybe Richard Meddings was right, even though the exercise of his "freedom" of

speech has proven very costly. Ironic isn't it, that sanctions are supposedly in place to stop Iran from going nuclear, just as fact-challenged regulators use the "nuclear option" to get their way.

And so it goes, another day in the world of banking where hypocrisy reigns and trillions in global money laundering are ignored. Prosecution of wrongdoers are few and far between because officials get more pats on the back from their bosses for bringing in money rather than putting wrongdoers in jail.

Government regulators who have dragged their feet in prosecuting crimes committed by the likes of Bank of America or Goldman Sachs have no problem going after small fry like Standard Chartered to show that they are "doing something" – with Iran as the pretext. This tale of regulatory complicity feels like all the stories we read about the police shaking down the mafia so they can be cut in to the rackets.

Wall Street has become a place where real financial fraudsters go unpunished while inflated cases like this get the attention especially when a demonized "evil doer" like Iran is said to be involved. Real crimes like the way sanctions hurt ordinary Iranians go unreported.

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