



NEW GENERATION FEMINISM

THIRD INDIGO ARENA

Indigo Arenas aim to gather citizens, who are engaged and eager to share their visions and propositions to improve the life together about cross-disciplinary themes such as education, culture, economy, urbanization... They are under the supervision of Edouard Hannezo and Alexis Bergès (founding fathers of the lectures "Les ERNEST" in L'École Normale Supérieure <http://www.les-ernest.fr/>) and Antoine Jardin (professor in the European Studies Center of Sciences Po). For every Arena, a small group of contributors is invited to take part in an open debate, animated by one or two people playing a moderating role about a specific problematic. Those debates are taking place behind closed doors, they are meant to improve the thoughts of the Indigo Cooperative and offer to the ones taking part to the debate an opportunity to meet and exchange with other activists, professionals, researchers, artists... about the themes supported by the Cooperative.

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What is feminism nowadays and what are its issues? Is it still difficult to call one's self a feminist in 2014 and for what reasons? What are the modes of action of the new wave and what use is made of social networks?

FEMINISM IN 2014?

The word feminist appeared first thanks to the writer Alexandre Dumas in 1872. It was used to qualify men who were too effeminate before taking the meaning, since the beginning of the XXth century, that we give to this word nowadays. The definitions of feminism are numerous and we should talk about "feminismS" but the important point is that feminism has a long history as a social and political movement which put down its roots during the XVIIIth century. Feminism is a part of humanism and can't be claimed by a political group or by someone particularly. Because feminism is plural, it can be defended by various actors with different positions and profiles. Despite the multiple conceptions of feminism and the divisions that are part of it, the pursuit of men and women equality, the self-determination of the latter, their political involvement and the respect of their rights are the federative elements of contemporary feminism.

Nevertheless, for one's self to assume being a feminist isn't trivial and implies some consequences that have an impact on the degrees of mobilization. The feminist claims or actions are often criticized or caricatured by the medias. With the development of social networks and the constant googlization of the employees and the candidates in the companies, people calling themselves feminists can sometimes have troubles to get a job because they're seen as troublemakers even if this vision can be extended to the whole bunch of activists in associations. In the professional domain of the medias for example, some articles may not be given to some people who claim to be feminists in fear that they will have a biased point of view or that they won't be able to contain their "hysterical" side. This qualifier is often used to define the actions of feminists. This "hysteria" is fantasized because of some actions of feminists who allegedly burnt their bras as a sign of protest in the context of the second wave feminism, in the 1970s. This kind of trivial actions was later spread to the whole feminist movement in the collective imagination although they are myths with a symbolic violence less important than the real violence perpetrated against women even nowadays.

This social violence becomes a verbal and psychological violence on social networks (especially on Twitter, seen by some as a real arena) directed against feminists spreading their ideas. The harassment of these people claiming their feminism can be very harsh, going so far as threats of collective rapes or attacks with acid.

THE CONSTANT QUESTIONING OF THE FEMINIST FIGHT

Nevertheless, enduring this violence is only one among many other challenges that feminism has to actually deal with. The legitimacy of this cause met many criticisms and feminists have to constantly face the caricature and the calling into question of their fight which is perceived as useless and outdated. The engaged actors in this fight are facing a double tension. On the one hand, because of a logic of levelling down, some criticize them for leading a fake fight in France, a country where equality would already be granted, while worse things happen abroad. On the other hand, when actions are related to international events like the kidnapping of young girls by members of the group Boko Haram in Nigeria, some people say this is none of the French feminists' concern and that they should focus on what happens in France.

The strategy of these people is the same as the one used by those who fight against other discriminations. In fact, a hierarchy of fights is established, meaning some of them are supposed to be derisory. Feminists are often interested in the case of Afghan women who were raped, as if rapers or mad men are always abroad whereas about 7500 rapes per year are reported in France and, in most cases, they were perpetrated by someone close to the victim.

Moreover, many people don't think of feminisms as a claim for equality between men and women but instead as an attempt to suppress the biological differences between the two genders. Those arguments and representations are even more dangerous for the feminist cause because they are the product sometimes of women who integrated the simplistic representations of feminism. These "foil women" are often used to justify anti-feminist actions or the lack of representation of women at the top of various structures (political, associative or business related structures).

A PROBLEMATIC TERMINOLOGY

But if the feminist movement is criticized just as it is, the term "feminism" itself suffers from regular attacks, to the point where some women, feminists or not, are thinking of changing the word. Some even disown the term and choose to not call themselves feminists, but fight for equality between men and women. On the one hand the word may give the impression that the feminist cause deals only with the problems women are facing. On the other hand the word might be too connotative because of the negative representations we evoked before and that the individuals may have from the movement. The term feminism would have a distracting effect, when it comes out as a protest in a debate or in a text, and the views expressed would have their credibility undermined and any action would be prevented. The question of a change of term needs to be asked but some object that the same fate would fall upon any word picked up to replace the word "feminism" because it is the movement that raises the criticisms, not the word. The term feminism has to be restored to favor by reminding constantly that it means first the fight for equality and for the emancipation of women, for their autonomy as subjects... So, for those who desire to restore the term back to favour, giving it up would be a defeat as it comes from a long history of fights. It would mean throwing away this inheritance.

A FIGHT THAT ISN'T A VICTORY YET

To disown this inheritance would be in a sense giving up a fight that isn't won yet. Many young women may think the fight is over and everything has been gained for women. However, many inequalities still exist: the repartition of housework, employment access, unemployment, part-time jobs, poverty, inequalities of salary, violence at home and related to gender, representation in the political authorities... Teaching aids are still essential even if the resistance to progress remains. In this context, we have to understand that, for many men, accepting equality means giving up the male circle and a certain number of privileges. If they're linked to the professional sphere, these privileges are also present in other fields: first of all housework which is with maternity, according to studies, one of the main obstacles to a woman's career. A certain number of men, especially younger generations, are more prone to put a lot of efforts into taking care of those tasks. But there is a long way to go to finally reach the purpose of perfect equality and of a distribution less caricatural of the roles of masculine and feminine figures in the domestic sphere.

Any possible change is mostly stopped by the gendered marketing that keeps reminding us that the household products exist to make women's lives easier, as if domestic chores were viscerally linked to their existence. Those products and advertisements are roughly sexist but they are part of an economic logic in which the gendered marketing increases sales and doubles the intentions of buying by offering a model for women and one for men for a product that could be used by both of them. In this perspective, the brand Bic sells a pen for women while some banks offer pink credit cards especially made for women that some absolutely want to obtain.

It may sound trivial but this gendered marketing is deeply related to a mythologization of the role of the mother and of the woman on whom paradoxical injunctions are weighting. The perfect woman should, in the broad lines, seduce men while preserving her modesty, build a family before turning 30, deals with both her desires and her career ambitions... These goals are both hard to reach and contradictory and they are consequently a source of guilt for many women who can't reach all of them. Gendered marketing constitutes an economical weight falling on the shoulders of women. Studies in the United States show that products intended for women are more expensive than the products intended for men and that the extra cost is in fact a "Women Tax". This "tax" represents an additional cost for women whenever they buy a gendered product even if it isn't really useful (pen for women, shampoo for women, drink for women...). Women are penalized twice: first because of the discriminations in the companies and then because of this "Women Tax" meaning they are put under a greater financial pressure than men.

In terms of interiorization of male chauvinist representations, sexist humour is considered by advertising executives as especially funny and many women think they have to bear it. Whenever they try to defend themselves or to react to sexist advertisements, they are criticized for their lack of humour or worse for being hysterical. When a woman tries to speak for herself, her reaction is often reduced to fits of anger whereas a man in the same position would be considered as eloquent. Besides, women hesitate to take part in debates as their education and socialization hardly prepare them to feel legitimate in this kind of context. There are hardly more than 30% of women in these meetings, most likely around 10%.

In terms of judicial aids, France is well endowed but they are not often used and, when they are, sanctions fail to be imposed. The lack of mobilization of these judicial aids can be explained by the fact that many women don't realize how the law can defend their rights. Even worse, the sanctions are often not imposed on those who don't respect the measures to insure parity or those who fall in the logics of harassment or they don't have the necessary impact. But the absence of sanctions can be explained by the fact that the necessary means are not given to the authorities tasked to impose them. For example, the first Ministry of Women's Rights received less money than other institutions. Plus, about the problems of rapes, sanctions are believed to be insufficient and the limitation period was only just extended. The clause of distress for women to get an abortion have been abolished and it is a victory on the judicial field but, at the same time, 180 medical centers were shut down: these closures created a discrimination de facto to the access to medical care and abortion.

Furthermore, a feminine guilt was created through the different mediums of socialization and lead an important number of women to not consider themselves as victims but to accept the daily discriminations they suffer from as "normal". Violence (social, physical, psychological) are still present in society and the fight is far from being won. For the feminists of the new generation, they'll have to extend the fight and above all to materialize it.

WHAT ARE THE MODES OF ACTION AND THE WAY TO GO?

Despite the fact that real evolutions and small progresses can be noticed at every level, feminist fight has still good times ahead. It is up to the activists but also to the feminists of the new generation, following the steps of the historical figures of feminism, to pursue the fight. To achieve this, different ways are conceivable and can be associated to obtain positive results.

For this new wave, it means that they have to keep on denouncing inequalities and organizing real actions without to give in out of tiredness due to the critics we mentioned before. Furthermore they have to insist on education, notably by means of the conveyor of information that social networks are. Reactions can be virulent but a great number of individuals can be convinced of the importance of feminism through those mediums. The efforts put in communication have to be relayed by celebrities and cultural products that embrace the feminist cause without lapsing in "feminist washing", a commercial exploitation of the cause like the "green washing" was developed as a fake showcase for ecology. But above all, the education of feminism has to be conducted in a resonant way with the introduction of a culture of equality in school, in order to make young women conscious of the gendered stereotypes as well as the discriminations they suffer from. Stereotypes impact both boys and girls in predefined roles since their childhood. The term feminism has to be discussed and the outcome of this discussion will decide its fate. Does it have to be rehabilitated or replaced by other terms?

Regarding the juridical domain, new laws and decrees need to be supported but, most importantly, making sure that they are applied and that the people who might be discriminated against are informed of their existence is a priority. Their application won't be effective unless sizeable financial means are granted: a creation of funds (or banks) dedicated to the support of feminists could be a good solution, especially if we consider that money is the sinews of war. The money could help women in distress. Finally, it could also finance the instruction and the coaching of women in different domains, especially public speaking, to boost their self-confidence so that they will be interlocutors people will liaise with, like men in debates, in a panel of contributors or in round tables.

Plus, those movements must keep on or start to think in terms of fights joining themselves and above all to act having this in mind. It is necessary to think of the co-building of different relations based on domination depending on social class, race, sexual orientation, religion, and women, it is a well known fact, suffer from various forms of discrimination.

Men too have to reflect on their place in the feminist movement and to support the fight for equality but women also have to think about their involvement in other movements of fight for freedom and equality. If only some men would allow them to join their fights. Finally, we have to understand that it is not possible to fight against a discrimination and to support another. For example, one can't fight to promote equality between men and women while turning a blind eye to racism, homophobia and vice versa. Even if a discrimination that X suffers from doesn't affect Y, it's better for both of them that X make progress towards equality. In fact, it will benefit to the representation of an inclusive and progressive society and, as a consequence, to his own fights.