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Women, women's rights and feminist movements

Abstract. *This article contends that feminist movements are victims of social cryptomnesia: while women's rights are nowadays largely approved, the role of feminist movements in obtaining these rights is not recognized, and feminist groups are still stigmatized. This social cryptomnesia is believed to hinder further progress towards equality between men and women. Indeed, although women's rights are officially protected, men–women differences in status still exist; however, the potential of feminist movements to achieve real equality is blocked by social cryptomnesia, which describes feminists as extremists who do not realize that women's rights have already changed. We review some of the achievements of two waves of feminist movements in obtaining women's rights; the obstacles to a third wave of movements claiming real equality are discussed in relation to the social cryptomnesia phenomenon.*

Key words. *Collective movements – Discrimination – Feminists – Guilt – Minorities – Social cryptomnesia*

Résumé. *L'article soutient que les mouvements féministes sont victimes d'une cryptomnésie sociale. Bien que les droits des femmes soient largement approuvés aujourd'hui, le rôle des féministes dans l'obtention de ces droits n'est pas reconnu, et les groupes féministes sont toujours stigmatisés. Cette cryptomnésie sociale pourrait entraver le progrès ultérieur vers l'égalité homme–femme. En effet, bien que les droits des femmes soient officiellement protégés, il existe encore d'importantes différences de statut entre hommes et femmes; cependant, le potentiel des mouvements féministes pour promouvoir*

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une égalité réelle est bloqué par la cryptomnésie sociale, qui décrit les féministes comme des extrémistes qui ne se rendent pas compte que les droits des femmes ont déjà changé. Nous présentons quelques résultats obtenus par deux vagues de mouvements féministes dans la promotion des droits des femmes, et discutons – sur la base du phénomène de la cryptomnésie sociale – les obstacles qui s'opposent à une troisième vague de mouvements qui se battent pour une égalité dans les faits.

Mots-clés. *Cryptomnésie sociale – Culpabilité – Discrimination – Féministes – Minorités – Mouvements collectifs*

In most democratic societies, the political institutions (parliament, government and so on) represent citizens and are elected by them. However, these institutions are not in fact as representative as they purport to be on paper. At the origin of present democracies, not all people were citizens: women were excluded. A woman was not a citizen. For example, in France women obtained the right to vote only on 21 April 1944; this is relatively a very recent event. Moreover, the facts show that the representation principle of democracy is, even today, far from being applied in practice: while the democratic ideal proposes a principle of equality and tends to seek real equality (Schnapper, 2002) or social justice (Rawls, 1971), inspection of numbers in most western democracies shows that women are largely under-represented in institutions, government, parliament, positions of responsibility and decision-making, and so forth. For example, although there are more women than men, there are fewer women elected. In addition and in a more general sense, the democratic principle that tends towards equality between citizens fails on gender equality: men and women do not have the same opportunities in many domains, such as employment or political activities. Acknowledgment of these inequalities has generated a number of feminist movements aimed at achieving equality between women and men. In this article we present a brief review of the achievements of two waves of feminist movements in terms of women–men equality, and point out that, despite this achievement, feminist movements are still stigmatized and discriminated against. It is argued that this is due to the phenomenon of social cryptomnesia: the social role of feminists in the progress towards equality is not recognized, and feminist groups are labeled with negative attributes, which has the effect of maintaining these minor-

ity groups in a dominated position, which in turn hinders further progress towards men–women equality.

Two waves of feminism

Historical feminist movements lasted from the 19th to the 20th century (Michel, 1979; Gaspard, 2002) and are characterized, at least in France, by two distinctive waves (Fougeyrollas-Schwebel, 2000; Gaspard, 2002; Picq, 2002). The first wave of feminist movements fought for emancipation and economic rights. However, demands related to gender differences were not welcomed or were viewed as minor issues. For example, during the 19th century Marxism considered woman's liberation as a consequence of liberation of the proletariat. As a result women had to create their own specific newspapers and movements in order to gain visibility. To illustrate, *La Citoyenne* was introduced in France in 1881 (Michel, 1979) and was the first visible forum for "suffragettes" (the term attributed to women fighting for women's right to vote). In these newspapers, women could argue for emancipation and economic rights.

As pointed out by Bard (1999), "anti-feminism" – the opposition to women's emancipation – was a flourishing attitude during these times. It has taken a great variety of forms, from denigrating the presence of women artists in exhibitions, at the end of the 19th century, to spreading jokes about women who wore trousers, in the 1920s, from comparing women to uncivilized populations to finding justifications for rape. Furthermore, anti-feminism was defended by a great variety of people, not only politicians – from right to left – the military and the police, but also writers, journalists and filmmakers (Bard, 1999), and this in spite of the fact that Marxist socialist protest movements incorporated equality between the genders as a claim.

Feminist movements had to go a long way before some results could be seen; although these movements began, as noted, during the 19th century, most present-day women's rights in France are less than a century old. For example, married women obtained the right to keep and use the wages of their work only in 1907. Women's incapacity was eliminated in 1938. Nevertheless husbands kept the right (1) to impose the family place of residence, (2) to authorize (or not) their wives to work, and (3) to have total power over the children, and women did not acquire the right to vote in France

until 21 April 1944. It is important to note that when these rights were obtained, most feminist movements vanished.

However, although economic and political rights were acquired, a new problem appeared: women demanded the right to full control over their own bodies. They refused to be viewed solely as a means of reproduction. Thus the second feminist wave was concerned with freely chosen maternity, the denunciation of violence at home and, more generally, equality in a paternalistic society. Feminists of this wave are separated from those of the first wave by a long period; interestingly, and important for our contention, they thought they were the first feminists (Gaspard, 2002). Conflicts were unavoidable (Michel, 1979; Gaspard, 2002), but, as in the first wave, feminists managed to obtain certain rights. For example, in 1966 women obtained the right to have a job without their husband's consent. In 1970 "paternal authority" became "parental authority". In 1972 the equal payment principle was declared. In 1975 both parents could choose the place of residence. In 1984 equality was obtained in the management of family possessions and the education of children.

This non-exhaustive list shows the gradual and recent progression of woman's emancipation. As far as the law goes, there is now perfect equality between women and men. In other words, men and women have the same rights. However, this equality of rights hides an inequality in the facts.

After equality, inequality

A study by Djider (2002) showed that women are still subordinated to men. For instance, women's salaries represent just 82 percent of men's. In addition it appears that the higher the position, the greater the difference in salary between women and men. Moreover, there are more women in less qualified positions and fewer women in more qualified positions. Interestingly, this is a paradoxical phenomenon because educational data show that women have excellent training. Women study longer than men. Women have more diplomas. There are more women in universities. However, there are more women in low-status fields (such as literature and social sciences), and fewer women in high-status fields (such as the natural sciences and physics). In other words, women represent a large majority in the liberal arts (73%) and a minority in the sciences

(19%). Thus disciplines in which women are a minority are also the disciplines that are considered to be of high status (ETAN, 2000). In addition, even if women make up the majority of university students, their number falls dramatically among those who choose to have an academic career, and roughly only one out of five academics in Europe is a woman, despite their excellent graduation record (ETAN, 2000). Moreover, women are rare at senior levels of Academia (i.e. full professorships) and occupy less important positions in the decision structure. In France women represent only 34 percent of research assistants and 14 percent of professors; and this is one of the most favorable situations in Europe. It seems therefore that women are in a minority position in Academia in both numerical and power terms.

The same phenomenon can be found in other aspects of social organization, such as political participation. Indeed, women represent 55 percent of the French electorate but are largely under-represented: in 2003 there were only 71 women deputies, compared with 506 men deputies, in the National Assembly. To avoid this well-known problem, a parity law was voted, according to which 50 percent of the list of candidates for communal elections (for cities of more than 3500 inhabitants) must be women. However, election results show that for these cities only 7 percent of mayors are women. The representation of women is a failure in terms of the democratic ideal.

All of these inequalities provide evidence that women are victims of neo-sexist attitudes in western societies (Swim et al., 1995; Glick and Fiske, 1996; Tougas et al., 1999). This sexism is manifested not by unfettered discrimination but by inertia and surreptitious ways of introducing differences. Thus there is a real glass-ceiling effect for women, as argued by Sanchez-Mazas and Casini (this issue): officially women can obtain any valued position, but they are blocked by "invisible" forces. As a consequence men are still in a dominant position. This situation shows that declarations of equality are accompanied by inequality in the facts. Here is a first paradox. However, a second, intertwined, paradox accompanies the first.

Discrimination against feminist movements

Alongside the first paradox, that of purported gender equality accompanied by real gender inequality, there exists a phenomenon

that is seemingly very interesting: the status of feminist movements does not seem to be related to the benefits promoted by these movements; they are by and large discriminated against. Although this discrimination is predictable for the majority of men, threatened in their control of the status quo, the majority of women could be expected to be grateful to feminist movements for the social benefits they now enjoy. They could also be expected to support feminist movements in view of achieving real equality. However, this is not the case: although all women approve the rights obtained by feminist movements, these movements are still victims of discrimination, even on the part of women. Overall, people lack esteem for feminist movements and view them with distrust (Twenge and Zucker, 1999). This is the second paradox.

How are we to understand this double paradox? Because it is a very complex phenomenon, possible explanations emerge if we view it through the lenses of history, sociology, philosophy and economics. The purpose of this article is to bring a social-psychology perspective to this problem, through the knowledge acquired by minority-influence research.

The social function of minorities

In 1976 Serge Moscovici introduced and developed the idea that minority groups, even those without any power, can produce social change, provided that minority actions are consistent over time. In addition he suggested that minorities not only can exert influence but also have a real social function: to produce innovation and increase the group's chances of success. In this way the minority prevents the majority from sinking into conformity and social reproduction.

The presence of minorities represents an alternative to the status quo. This presence leads to better cognitive performance (Nemeth, 1986; Butera et al., 1992, 1996) and greater creativity (Nemeth, 1994). For instance, the correct solution to a decision task often depends on the capacity of group members to deviate and accept the minority point of view (Moscovici, 1985). Thus the social function of the minority is to avoid dangerous and excessively conformist results. This idea is important because it not only presented a new area for research in social psychology but also introduced the

suggestion that minority groups could gain gratification for their social function rather than it being regarded as simple deviance.

From social influence to social cryptomnesia

There is an abundance of studies on minority influence that seek to understand how a minority, without any power, can influence a majority (e.g. Moscovici, 1976, 1985; Turner, 1991; Pérez and Mugny, 1993; Moscovici et al., 1994). Moscovici (1985) has argued that minority influence, when it occurs, is a very long process that follows four stages. The first is the *revelation* phase, in which a consistent and determined minority is revealed by its non-conformist positions, thus confronting the majority's position or practice. Conflict is the power of minorities (Mugny, 1982). In the second stage, the *incubation* phase, the minority message becomes well known and is repeated, as it is important for the minority to consistently keep the conflict alive. In this stage the minority message is connoted by negative affects, but is also intensively inspected. However, it is during the third stage, the *conversion* stage, that the internalization of the minority's position leads to clandestine change. At this point majority members agree with the minority position, but only privately. Majority members do not yet have the courage to publicly affirm their position. When they do, the final stage proposed by Moscovici has been entered: the *innovation* stage.

The innovation stage proves the efficacy of the minority. Indeed the minority group converts the majority, of course after a long period of time. Mucchi-Faina (1987) very nicely described the long historic evolution of feminist movements in Italy and showed, using the framework of these four stages, how these movements could be successful. Now the question that might be asked is whether there is a benefit for the minority group after its success. As mentioned above, it is possible that people might want to thank feminist movements for the advantages they were able to obtain. However, the fact is that people continue to exhibit negative behavior towards feminist movements, as they do towards any minority group (such as ecologists, anti-globalization activists, . . .) that produces notable social changes. These minority groups are stigmatized; they are victims of social cryptomnesia (Mugny and Pérez, 1989; Butera et al., 2002; Vernet and Butera, 2003).

“Social cryptomnesia” refers to the occultation of the minority origin of some of today’s well-accepted norms and values. For example, women’s rights are nowadays well-established values although their feminist origin has been obscured. Pérez and Mugny (1989, 1990) explain social cryptomnesia as a consequence of a dissociation process: in order to avoid being associated with a minority group’s negative attributes, all the while adopting publicly their point of view, people have to dissociate the contents of an (accepted) message from the source of a (rejected) message. Social cryptomnesia is characterized by two components. First, a successful minority is not visible in the attitudinal field because there is a consensus on its position. However, because the majority has dissociated the minority origin (i.e. the source) from the contents of the message, the majority continues to stigmatize this minority. As a result the minority does not receive any credit for its success. Dissociation is the (only) way for people to accept the message without accepting the minority negative attributes at the identity level. As a consequence it is possible to simultaneously adopt a minority point of view (e.g. to be favorably disposed towards women’s rights) without associating this point of view with minority action (e.g. feminist action). Thus it is possible to continue to discriminate against the minority group (e.g. feminist movements).

Empirically, Mugny and Pérez illustrated the social cryptomnesia phenomenon for the first time in 1989. One-third of the participants in their study were asked to rate their attitude towards five normative principles in our democratic society: liberty, equality between genders, equality among ethnic groups, respect for the environment and peace. Another third of the participants were asked to rate their attitudes towards the groups who traditionally fought for these principles: (1) liberty was promoted by anarchists, (2) equality between genders by feminists, (3) equality among ethnic groups by anti-racists, (4) respect for the environment by ecologists and (5) peace by pacifists. The last third of the participants simply rated their attitudes towards the five groups, with no reference to the five principles. The results showed that the participants who rated only the minority groups were the ones who showed the least favorable attitudes. Participants who rated the five principles alone clearly approved them; those who rated the values with their associated minority group approved them significantly less. This last difference is a symptom of the cryptomnesia process. One can approve a value

and yet discriminate against the group that promoted it. This effect was replicated in a recent study (Vernet and Butera, 2003).

In sum social cryptomnesia can be an interesting explanation of the feminist-group paradox presented above: minority groups such as feminist movements can be successful and stigmatized at the same time. This is interesting because social cryptomnesia not only elucidates the reasons for the obscuring of the minority origin of some of today's well-accepted norms and values but also points to the fact that dissociation brings the social conflict to an end; and social change is blocked when conflict ends. Let us go back to the equality problem. Since there is a consensus about men–women equality and a law that regulates the quota of women candidates for communal elections has been passed, it does not appear necessary to verify if this law is effective and if more women really are elected. This is the first part of the paradox.

At the same time, since equality exists only on paper, several feminist groups have devoted their action to obtaining a real change at the level of practice. If there were some sort of acknowledgment of the role played by feminist movements in the acceptance of women's rights, this commitment would be interpreted as a new thrust towards real social change. However, social cryptomnesia has obscured the link between feminist militancy and women's rights, and this commitment is in most cases interpreted as a form of extremism, since it is viewed as dissatisfaction with an already solved problem, which explains the second part of the paradox and the discrimination against feminist movements, “un curieux refoulement du féminisme” (“a curious repression of feminism” – Cohen-Halimi and Boissière, 2002: 9).

Reducing discrimination

The important question then is whether it is possible to decrease the stigmatization of a successful minority in general and of feminist movements in particular. If one considers that the dissociation process produces social cryptomnesia, then it is reasonable to think that re-associating the message contents and the minority source of a message can lessen the effects of social cryptomnesia. In order to make this re-association, people have to recognize their dissociation

behavior. They have to recognize the distance between their favorable attitude towards the obtained norms, rights and policies, and their attitude towards the groups defending and promoting these same norms, rights and policies. Recognizing this distance should produce some sort of guilt.

Harvey and Oswald (2000) examined whether the induction of guilt led to a decrease in discrimination. They studied whether exposing white people to collective guilt would lead them to support black programs. The results showed that guilt was indeed effective, but also that white people replied in a pro-social manner only after reaffirming their individual integrity. In other words, in order to produce a positive attitude change, collective guilt must not be too threatening. A too threatening level of guilt is likely to obstruct the constructive action of conflict (Pérez and Mugny, 1993) and prevent change (Harvey and Oswald, 2000). In other words, if people can recognize their social cryptomnesia with a not too threatening re-association, then an attitude change towards the minority group should be possible.

Empirical support

Vernet and Butera (2003) found empirical support for this hypothesis with a sample of women. A women-only sample was selected because, for men, opposition to feminist movements can be motivated by opposition to women's rights. The first step was to ask all participants to fill in both a scale of agreement with feminist movements and a scale of agreement with women's rights. Then they were asked to go back to their answers and calculate a score for each of the two attitudes. Finally they were asked to compare the two scores to see if there was a difference. All participants revealed the expected difference: the women's rights scores were higher than the feminist movements scores. Participants were then given an explanatory note inducing a feeling of guilt. In this note the difference was labeled as a form of forgetting (non-threatening re-association) as opposed to a form of discrimination (threatening re-association). Inducing a re-association through forgetting or discrimination does not have the same consequences. Re-association by forgetting might be viewed as a mild mistake, but re-association by discrimination is threatening and serious because it normatively refers to deviant acts. Indeed the non-discrimination norm in

western democracies is part of the *Zeitgeist* (Doise et al., 1999). Alternatively re-association by forgetting does not appeal to group norms and “anybody can make a mistake”. A pilot study (Vernet, 2003) assessed and supported the differences between re-association through discrimination and forgetting meaning. Thus re-association by forgetting meaning is expected to decrease discrimination towards feminist movements, while no change is expected under re-association by discrimination. Finally, a week later, in order to assess change, participants were asked to fill in the same scale of agreement with feminist movements.

As expected, participants confronted with the threatening re-association (discrimination) did not change. However, participants confronted with the non-threatening re-association (forgetting) changed significantly and developed a more favorable attitude towards feminist movements. Participants in the forgetting condition changed more than participants in the discrimination condition. This result was replicated in four different studies (Vernet, 2003).

Social cryptomnesia and equality

The dissociation process generates social cryptomnesia. However, people can recognize it and make a re-association between message contents and source, which produces a real attitude change towards minority groups when the re-association is not too threatening, as shown above. However, when this re-association is too threatening, no change is observed. This empirical support does not answer all of the questions that have been raised in this article, but suggests that a re-association between today’s well-accepted normative principles and discriminated minorities may be a means to decrease such negative effects of social cryptomnesia as discrimination. From a more general point of view, social cryptomnesia can explain the particular situation of feminist movements. Indeed, the predicaments of being a feminist group are threefold. First, feminist movements are not perceived as the origin of a well-accepted social change. As pointed out by Roux, “At present we observe the creation of institutional means to enforce this principle [equality]” (2001: 165), but while people seem to trust institutions, they clearly reject (and forget) feminist movements as possible actors in achieving this equality. Second, feminists are still discriminated against. Minorities always elicit some sort of fear, but feminists are particularly distrusted,

perhaps because their action is counter-stereotypical of the feminine role. One might argue that, say, young anti-globalization activists are perceived as extremists, but this is a view consistent with the stereotype of youngsters. Conversely, being conflictual, being against, being assertive, are characteristics that go against the classic gender role of women; perhaps this is a supplementary stigma associated with feminists. Third, further change is hindered, making the action of these movements a sort of Pyrrhic victory. (Pyrrhus, King of Epirus, defeated the Roman army at Heraclea and Asculum, but lost so many of his warriors that his victory looked much like a defeat.) In a similar vein, although feminist movements won the battle of gender equality in law, the obscuring of hidden forms of gender inequality not only eliminated the legitimacy of feminist claims but also decreased the chances of feminists to further influence society. In fact most of these movements find it very difficult to carry on any kind of proselytizing because women see gender inequality as a theoretical problem, do not see themselves as victims and are particularly reluctant to engage in feminist groups.

In this perspective, studying history (and the history of institutions) can play an important role in civic education. Indeed tracing the evolution of how our society came to be organized as it is today could obstruct social cryptomnesia in a process that we could call “heritage management”. In this way minority groups would achieve some visibility and dignity, and could hence be reintegrated in the social-change process. According to Gaspard (2002), new feminist movements are currently emerging. Today’s movements claim no new rights but rather the application of existing rights. Perhaps this development suggests the rise of a third wave of feminist movements. If this is the case, work on social cryptomnesia can help make this wave as effective as the previous ones.

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