WOMEN: ALWAYS TOO MANY OR NOT ENOUGH

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Women: Always too many or not enough

The frequency with which the media and the scientific world involve themselves in debates about the presence of women, as a minority, in this or that professional environment encourages us to study the narratives used to discuss the under- or over-representation of one gender category in relation to the other (Fortino 2002). At the time of writing, there are two examples of this discourse circulating in the media. First, there are "not enough" women (there are in fact none) on the shortlist of thirty authors of comics for the Grand Prix at the Angoulême Festival (to be awarded at the end of January 2016), which has attracted the attention of the French press (Potet 2016). Second, there are the rather inappropriate statements made by the British biochemist and Nobel Prize winner for medicine Sir Timothy Hunt, concerning the problems posed (for men) by the presence of "too many" women in scientific laboratories, which caused a mini media storm, mainly in the Anglo-American world and in Europe (Bouriaud 2015).

Below we will show that the reasoning that underpins the claims of there being too many women in research circles very largely overlaps with that which oversees the observation of their absence or under-representation in the field of comics. On this subject, "too many" and "not enough" therefore refer to a similar conception of gender and a common—and restrictive—vision of specific female qualities.

When the under-representation of women is denounced. . . and justified

In the case of the Angoulême Festival, a group called Female Comics Creators Against Sexism (FCCAS) hosts a very well documented blog, in which they have denounced the arguments put forward by the management of the International Comics Festival (FIBD) to justify the lack of women on the list of nominees for the Grand Prix 2016.[1] In fact, those in charge of the festival are reviving the argument that has been used many times, that of the "historical lag" in female presence in the reference group to justify the exclusively male composition of the list of creators eligible for this prize in 2016. This is how the management of the Angoulême Festival emphasizes the aim of the Grand Prix, which "crowns an author for all of his or her work and contribution to the history and evolution

[1] http://bdegalite.org/category/blog/.

of comics. In this sense, it could be compared to the induction of rock bands into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame or to an Honorary Academy Award. The last three winners embody the nature of this prize [. . .] The artists have been creating for several decades" (FIBD 2016). Insofar as the management of the FIBD cannot "rewrite the history of comics" (ibid.), it presents its current choices as being entirely determined by the—more or less distant—past of this creative space. So: "When one goes back that amount of time to observe what role men and women played in the field of comics, it is clear that there were very few recognized female authors at the time" (ibid.).

Yet, as members of the group of female comics creators comment, this argument referring to the nonexistent "pool" of women corresponding to the criteria for awarding the Grand Prix proves to be completely fallacious because the reward in question has previously been given to several men under the age of forty. . . who were therefore not even born when the last three prizewinners started in the profession.

However, where the case of the Angoulême Festival becomes particularly interesting is in what it reveals about the "new faces" of misogyny, which is taking on the characteristics of a "modern sexism" (Swim et al. 1995). Indeed, far from denying women the capacity for artistic creation, those in charge of this festival state loud and clear their attachment to promoting women's artistic expression, while at the same time suggesting that this is obviously not equivalent to that of men. Despite this, as announced on the website of the 43rd International Comics Festival: "The Angoulême festival loves women." However, it seems that this "love" is conditioned by a demand for the differentiation and segregation of the latter in the areas dedicated to "female comics" (FCCAS, n.d.).

The argument of the historical absence of women in the potential pool of the Grand Prix is supported by a second category of justification, which appears to be even more insidiously unfair than the first. The management of the festival recalls to what extent it "is a proactive player in the cause for female authors; however, it will not disadvantage them through positive discrimination which would make no sense artistically speaking" (FIBD 2016). Here we can identify a dual justification of "too few" women amongst potential Grand Prix prizewinners. In fact, the management takes care to clarify, first of all, that in 2014 the names of (two) women (Marjane Satrapi and Posy Simmonds) were added to an initial list proposed to professionals during the change in the nomination procedure for the prize (proof, if this were needed, of benevolent attention, if not the love that the Festival has for women). But later, the management states: "It happens to be that [these women] collected very few votes and came in last. Thus, they were removed from the list (according to the regulations)"

(ibid.). The circular line of argument is thus complete: the festival has nothing against women, but they are not appreciated, admired, and recognized by their peers and, quite frankly, nothing can be done about that. . . . Something that everyone can agree on: rules are rules; the judgment of colleagues (in a profession made up of 85 percent men, we learn on the same website) is final. In the end, from a problem with the pool, there is a subtle shift to a problem of performance, perfectly "objectifiable," all under cover of an "unconditional love" expressed toward women.

When "too many" women pose a problem

In the case of a female presence in science, a similar process of celebration–specification–devaluation of women can be noted. As a reminder, on June 8, 2015, at an international journalists' conference in Seoul and, more precisely, during a lunch organized for female journalists and researchers, Professor Timothy Hunt is supposed to have said: "It's strange that such a chauvinist monster like me has been invited to speak to women scientists. Let me tell you about my trouble with girls. Three things happen when they are in the lab: you fall in love with them, they fall in love with you, and when you criticize them they cry. Perhaps we should make separate labs for boys and girls?" (quoted in Young 2015) The reactions to these words caused their author to be dismissed from the Royal Society and forced him to resign from his position as honorary professor at University College London. They were followed by hundreds of photos of female scientists at work being put online, often dressed in not very flattering clothes or in poses that were obviously not very seductive, under the hashtag #distractinglysexy.[2]

Caught up in the media maelstrom triggered by his words, Professor Hunt's defense was based on two successive lines of argument. First, he maintained that he was quite simply making a joke, rather clumsily, admittedly, but with no malice. This assertion does seem to be quite credible, because several people noticed that there was a phrase of transition in his speech (largely improvised), as follows: "Now, seriously [. . .] Science needs women and you should do science, despite all the obstacles, and despite monsters like me." (quoted in Young 2015)[3] Here, we find again something similar to the case of the Angoulême Festival: the assertion of a widespread male benevolence toward women, toward all women and *a priori*, we could say, and a form of collective disempowerment by men with regard to the professional future of women.

When asked to justify his "sexist" remarks, a few days after the improvised mini press conference in question, Tim Hunt then sounded a different note, that of a real and new problem, in his view, resulting from an increase in women in

[2] A term that suggests the idea that researchers are "sexy without seeking to be so" (distractingly attractive) and at the same time that they represent a distraction for men in their professional entourage (attractive to the point of distracting their colleagues).

[3] This is still only according to the remarks reported in the media, because there is no recording or written evidence of this speech.

scientific circles: "I found that these emotional entanglements made life [in laboratories] very difficult. I'm really, really sorry I caused any offence, that's awful [. . .] I just meant to be honest, actually" (BBC News 2015), he explained at the press conference that preceded his departure from the Royal Society. It is difficult not to be struck by the point of his reference to "emotional entanglements" existing in professional circles, including those dedicated to producing scientific knowledge that is neutral and objective. On the other hand, we immediately see how, through "the honesty" claimed by Tim Hunt, women embody a problematic emotionalism, which would be just as damaging to the advancement of science as to the peace of mind of their male research colleagues. Again, this disqualification of the presence of women in research laboratories was accompanied by wholly flattering remarks with regard to women in general. Sir Tim Hunt not only admitted his "love" for researchers ("you fall in love with them,") he also emphasized the positive role that they can play in his own area of expertise ("science needs women.")

Women: Always too many or not enough, never the right amount

What is interesting in these examples is less the illustration of "ordinary sexism" (Grésy 2009) as the opportunity it offers us to study the narratives mobilized around the quantitative presence of women in different professional fields. Indeed, what these two cases show are the mechanisms by which considerations of relative quantitative presence ("too many" or "not enough") evolve into collective attributions of women in general, which are then used to specify a typically female relationship with the world. This is how the observation of a numerical under-representation of women in some prestigious occupations (where there are "not enough" of them today, except for in the eyes of Sir Timothy Hunt, apparently) is combined with reasoning referring the source of this phenomenon to the individual or collective deficiencies of women themselves (Le Feuvre 2013). In fact, women are "not ambitious enough"; "too" emotional; "not available enough;" "too" young; "not mobile enough," and so on, to legitimately be on a level playing field with men. This narrative does not necessarily contribute to a naturalization of the ambitions and skills of women (their "deficiencies" or "faults" can result from primary or secondary socialization processes and not necessarily from biology), but it tends to take responsibility away from men for any kind of role they may play in reproducing gender inequalities.

It is rather amusing (one could say. . .) to note that when the number of women in a given profession is judged to be "excessive," we often find very similar references to their

shortcomings as in cases where their absence is the problem. Thus, the danger of having "too many" women in teaching (Cacouault-Bitaud 2011), the law (Boigeol 1993; Schultz and Shaw 2003), scientific research (Löwy 2004), medicine (Pringle 1998), or any other powerful occupation (Schweitzer 2010), is denounced because they are apparently "not sufficiently" authoritative; "not sufficiently" attentive to the particular needs of boys (with high drop-out rates) or men (divorced fathers); "not sufficiently" willing to move to rural areas (medical deserts); "not sufficiently" committed to the defense of corporatist interests, and so on. Ultimately, even when the danger becomes having "too many," rather than "not enough" women in a particular occupation, the problem is always framed in terms of collective gender deficiencies.

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These two empirical examples are a useful reminder of a fundamental epistemological problem facing researchers, including feminists: any judgment made about the relative presence of women within a given profession (whether they be "too numerous" or "not numerous enough") tends to rely on a process that specifies the qualities, skills, and know-how attributed to a particular group of women, and to generalize these traits to the whole of their gender category.

In the two cases used here, selected at random from the news, we find several paradoxes of work on occupational feminization processes. These pose as much of a problem to gender equality activists as they do to social science researchers (Cacouault-Bitaud 2001). As we have seen, these paradoxes do not necessarily imply a naturalization of what it means to be a woman, but they still involve attributing an ahistorical particularism to women, and this is highly prejudicial to a careful analysis of the challenges of occupational feminization, whether this be deemed "hindered" or "excessive." The challenge that we have to face is that of defending the gender equality ideal with arguments of social justice (Junter 2004), rather than falling into the trap of stressing the specificities of women, in relation to their male counterparts, or of celebrating their so-called "female qualities." We should always be wary of any justification of gender inequalities that is based on declarations of love, understanding or admiration for women as a whole. Such declarations are always double-edged.

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