Contents

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The Social Representation of Feminism within the On-line Movement "Women Against Feminism"

Abstract

The present paper aims to analyse the social representation of feminism within the "Women Against Feminism" (WAF) on-line movement that is based on a shared blog which gained significant coverage in the U.S. and U.K. media since the summer of 2014. Using the method of quantitative content analysis and the insights provided by social representations theory, the paper will disclose what lies behind the concept of 'feminism' for the group embracing the WAF movement and also aims to find whether the members of this on-line community can be described as postfeminists. The article will conclude that the social representation of feminism within the WAF on-line movement is not based on a lack of information, but rather on a stereotypical understanding of the concept and on a non-nuanced perspective upon the history of feminism and its current developments (in particular the difference between post-feminism and thrid wave feminism). Moreover, similar arguments raised against feminism have been also drawn in the past, WAF sharing similar arguments with the '80s media backlash against feminsim.

Keywords: feminism, social representations theory, Women Against Feminism.

Introduction

The present paper addresses the social representation of feminism as it is depicted on the website Women Against Feminism, a blog which appeared in July 2013 and whose popularity increased overwhelmingly since July 2014, when it ceased to be a simple personal website and became a movement in the on-line medium. Thus, the website started receiving materials from its fans that have been posted on the website. The materials consisted of 'selfie' pictures in which the fans (all women) justified their opinion against feminism by holding up handmade placards that started with the statement "I don't need feminism because". In the summer of 2014, the website became extremely popular also on social media platforms – it gathered over 40,000 fans on Facebook, it became present on Twitter and it was listed as a subject on Wikipedia. Moreover, its popularity was fuelled by the criticisms issued by international magazines and news websites, as well as by feminist activists and academics. In the United States, feminism was resurrected in the mass-media after some of the most popular icons of the music industry

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declared themselves feminists and have included in their videos and lyrics direct links to feminism. The result of this mass dissemination initiated by pop culture, spread mostly in the on-line medium, was the comeback of the debate on the term 'feminism'. The website included in this analysis represents one of the aftermaths of this comeback.

Using the theoretical framework of the theory of social representations, this paper tries to offer a more comprehensive view on the growing on-line movement Women Against Feminism. I have chosen to use this theoretical framework as the movement has drawn the attention of various international newspapers which have criticised how the WAF supporters understand the notion of feminism. Content analysis, the employed research method, allowed me to identify both the frequency of specific meanings attributed to feminism by the analysed group, as well as the relationship between these meanings.

The main objective of this research is to illustrate what lies behind feminism's vehement rejection by the analysed group and whether this rejection is linked to a specific understanding of the history and concept of feminism. The secondary objective is to investigate whether we can classify this movement as an outcome of the tensions between post-feminism and third wave feminism. Given the fact that the last two approaches are contemporary and that mass-media tends to endorse fragmented aspects of each approach, feminism ends up being portrayed as a highly controversial and unclear concept.

The paper will be split into three main parts. The first part introduces the theory of social representations: it investigates the relation between social representations and communication through negotiation and conflict, and it also presents the role of individual identity, group membership, and cognitive polyphasia. Here I will proceed with a synthesis of the most important contributions and of the contradictions and discussion on the theory of social representations. The second part focuses on the methodology and the data obtained: the frequency of some terms associated with feminism in the studied group and also the contingency matrix. The third section briefly presents the evolution of the feminist movement, the differences between third wave feminism and post-feminism, and explores the social representation of feminism within the analysed group.

I. Social representations: history and characteristics

I chose to use the framework of the theory of social representation to better understand how social representations are formed, what is the role an academic understanding on a term can have on the mainstream understanding of this term and how (or if) mass-media (or new forms of media) can have a higher influence on the mainstream meaning of a concept, despite the original meaning of this concept.

The term 'social representation' first appeared in 1961 and was coined by Serge Moscovici. With this concept, the author tried to study the relationship between collective representations, and common and scientific knowledge. Moscovici was the first to conduct an empirical study on social representations, in his 1961 paper on the social representation of psychoanalysis.

Social Representations Theory (SRT) started from the concept of 'collective representations' developed by Durkheim in 1898 which stated that representations are external and do not belong to the individual but to the community to which he belongs. The terminological nuance between the two types of representations is not the aspect that determines the differ-

ences between the two approaches because in the XIX century the word 'collective' was often used instead of 'social' (Moscovici in Moscovici & Markova, 1998, p. 401). The difference does not lie in their name, but in the claims of each theory. The critics of collective representations stress that Durkheim's theory is deficient because it appeals to a high degree of generality and ignores the fragmentation and heterogeneity of society. As such, collective representations theory does not constitute a realistic approach as it considers society as a uniform whole, whereas society is, in fact, "a plurality of dynamic systems of knowledge which creates a continuum of different representations, extremely unstable and different from one group to another" (Howarth in Deac, 2008, p. 18).

Moscovici's main objection to the theory of collective representations is that the latter is too static and under-equipped to understand contemporary society (Hoijer, 2011, p. 4) – where individuals can also contribute to the formation of representations. Social representations, on the other hand, are not a static concept, they are not simple reflections or reproductions of an external reality, on the contrary: their meaning is formed and consolidated through negotiation processes, which implies the coexistence of representations which are competing which each other or which are contradictory – within the same group, within a culture or within a person (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005, p. 433). Furthermore, Durkheim considered that collective representations are produced by a sole source of authority which is persistent to change and has the purpose of uniting societies (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005, p. 433). Moscovici distances himself from this approach and considers that social homogeneity is not a realistic depiction of society, underling the plurality of the representations encountered in a group.

While the theory of collective representations stated representations are the result of the macro-social system and not the sum of individual representations, SRT endorses this principle only as applied to the group level (Raudsepp, 2005, p. 458). Another essential difference among the two approaches is the fact that Durkheim saw collective representations as rational, whereas Moscovici considers that the relationship between thought and emotion constitute the foundation of social representations. For the latter "society is not a source of information but of meaning" (Moscovici in Joffe, 1998, p. 31). Moreover, Moscovici considered that the dynamic aspect of social representations – their power of generating actions – is due mostly to their relation with their collective passions and beliefs.

Within SRT, individuals are presented as members of social groups and this is the reason why social phenomena cannot be reduced to an individual level. Therefore, social representations are not the sum of individual minds, but a reflection of the social processes which take place between the members of a social unit (Raudsepp, 2005, p. 458). Wagner underlines the central role that the social representations grant to groups and not to the world in general: "social representations belong to the 'tamed world'" and represent social objects specific to a group (Wagner in Raudsepp, 2005, p. 460).

Moscovici explains how social representations are formed by calling the metaphor of the 'amateur scientist': any person selects, carves out and classifies the information that are unknown in a similar manner like a documentary maker and integrates them in the same universe, without being constrained by the rigour and prudency of the specialist. Even if the new ideas and terms are not actively wide-spread, regular people continue to seek explanations, this exploration being motivated by the lack of understanding of the respective terms and ideas (Joffe, 1998, p. 25). According to Moscovici (1997, p. 42), the purpose of such an endeavour is not to continue the process of knowledge, but to be updated and to fill in the gaps. He underlines that:

"no notion is put into circulation together with its usage instructions, no experience is presented together with its practice method, thus, once received, the individual uses them in the most suitable manner according to his opinion. It is important that he succeeds to integrate them in a coherent image of his reality or that he succeeds to slip them in a language that allows him to speak of what everyone else is speaking" (Moscovici, 1997, p. 42).

This behaviour of the amateur, self-taught scientist, freed from rules and usage instructions of the new experiences and notions, is often limited by "prejudices, by already-made visions and by dialects borrowed from the world of the discourse" (Moscovici, 1997, p. 43).

Moscovici insists on differentiating between social representations, on the one hand, and myths, stereotypes, opinions and attitudes, one the other hand. For him, the latter three represent "short-term answers on the objects in themselves" while representations are the foundation on which these three are based on (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005, p. 438). The myth belongs to the archaic world, while representations belong to the actual society; the former is considered an absolute science while the latter is only one of the way of knowing the concrete world (Moscovici, 1997, p. 33). An opinion represents, on one hand, "a formula socially valued towards a subject and, on the other hand, a position towards a controversial issue of the society" (Moscovici, 1997, p. 35). Opinions do not present in detail the context in which they are issued nor the concepts that lie at their foundation –this is why opinions have a partial character and are less stable.

The relationship between social representations and attitudes is more complex. Markova (in Moscovici & Markova, 1998, p. 382) mentions that U.S. theorists – supporters of the importance of attitudes and their separation from representations, erroneously classify attitudes as being individual while they classify social representations as collective. According to Moscovici, attitudes study the "relationship between thought and object", but no one can have a thought on an object without having a representation of that object (Moscovici & Markova, 1998, p. 380). Thus, having an attitude means in fact to express an attitude towards your own representation that you have on that object (Moscovici and Markova, 1998, p. 383). For Moscovici (1997, p. 52), attitudes are not opposed to representations, but represent one of the latter's dimensions – the three dimensions being attitude, information, and image.

Most of the theorists consider that social representations do not have a clear or encompassing definition, but Moscovici drafted the concept as a multi-faced one that focuses on value systems, ideas, images, and practices, thus social representations being both cognitive and social processes (Bidjari, 2011, p. 1594). As Serrano Oswald (2013) underlines, cognition is social in itself because it develops through social interaction. She stresses the importance of culture which represents the cognition's framework, making possible the formation, dissemination and the transformation of social representations.

SRT focuses on two interdependent aspects: the content of the meanings of the daily life and "the specific processes by which these contents are shaped" (Jofee, 1998, p. 23). Joffe mentions three processes that generate social representations: (i) the transformation of experts' ideas into common language through communication; (ii) the return to the forefront of past ideas and their imposition on a new event that must be understood; and (iii) the saturation of the event that has to be understood with the symbolic meanings already existent in the culture.

For Moscovici, social representations have a double function: firstly, they "establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world" and secondly, to "enable communication to take place among members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying un-

ambiguously the various aspects of their world" (Moscovici in Hoijer, 2011, p. 5).A detailed analysis of social representations identifies four core roles: (i) the function of knowing: allows understanding and communication; (ii) the guidance functions: they guide conducts and practices; (iii) the legitimacy function: social subjects can justify their positions and behaviours *a posteriori*; (iv) the identity function: social groups can define their identity and specificity (Serrano Oswald, 2013, p. 67).

Moscovici (1997) highlights two main characteristics of social representations. Firstly, they are not static, but "dynamic ensembles" that produce behaviours and relations with the environment. Thus, social representations have a creative task, contributing to the processes of social conducts and of orienting social communication. Secondly, "any representation is someone's representation", it is a method of knowing through which the person that knows re-positions himself in what he knows – here individual identity and group membership play a key role in the development of a representation. The nature of social representations is a relational one, being "impossible to find an isolated social representation" (Serrano Oswald, 2013, p. 65).

Voelklein and Howarth (2005) raise the issue of the power relations in the construction and dispersion of social representation and of the justification of the actions determined by social representations, especially taking into account the importance of communication (be it dialogical or through mass-media): "we need to analyse how representations may be infused with ideological power to justify status quo and so maintain systems of inequality and exclusion" (Voelklein & Howarth in Hoijer, 2011, p. 14).

The dynamic aspect of social representations

Wagner (1998, p. 309) insists on clarifying the implications that derive from the dynamic aspect of social representations. He highlights that the French meaning of the word 'representation' (used by Moscovici) has constructive and dynamic connotations. Unlike the mother tongue of SRT, English and German languages consider representations as being something static or a reproduction of something (e.g. maps or pictures). For Wagner, this difference between the French and the English meaning can easily explain why SRT has been mostly ignored by the non-French-speaking academic field.

Social representations are dynamic assemblies because they "not only influence people's daily practices – but constitute these practices" (Howarth 2006, p. 73). For Howarth, the dynamic aspect is given by the inter-relational component involved in the dialogue and negotiation with the others. Wagner considers that ignoring the importance of action within social representations deems them to the static, descriptive aspect. For social representations to be dynamic, they have to include both acts of speech as well as the actions through which a social object appears: actions, like speech, it is not just an expression of a social representations, but analytically it is an integral part of it (Wagner 1998, p. 314).

The dynamic aspect includes, besides actions, the situations in which the representations change or the situations in which new representations emerge. Castro and Batel (2008, p. 482) underline the importance of time in this changing process and they identify two phases: the emergence of the change/new element and its generalization. During the emergence phase, the ideals defended by a numerical minority takes shape as a proposal of changing an element from the society, for example a law. In the generalization phase the creative potential of the new proposal is debated. During the debate, hybrid representations appear – they