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Abstract: The article aims to sketch the reception and the representations of French feminist discourses in the Anglo-American critical theory starting from the early 1970s. It situates French Feminism within the field of French Theory, a notion created in the Anglophone critical discourses, and analyses the meanings ascribed to both terms. Through a historicised discussion of the appropriation of the French theories — for a long time limited to the propositions of Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray — the text also attempts to present the popular critical moves (selectiveness and standardisation) in this process. What follows constitutes a brief analysis of the reasons and responses to the propagation of French feminism as a reductive construct. The article concludes registering a change in more contemporary approaches which attempt to move beyond the initial label.

Key words: French Theory, French feminism, theoretical discourse, poststructuralism.

Introduction

The treatment of French Theory in the United States is one of the key factors which dictated the manner of reception of the non-Anglophone theories around the world. Selectiveness of the appropriation of the theories — mostly, in the fields of literary, cultural or identity studies — partly accounts for several coinages which, according to many critics, were simply slogans used in marketing of the set of user-friendly readers which promoted a trickled-down versions of otherwise very finely constructed philosophical meditations. A good example of this process is to be found in François Cusset's (2008) representation of the arrival of French Theory onto the American intellectual scene. Using a Hollywood, western-like dramatic mode of exposition, Derrida, Deleuze, and Foucault,

among others, are presented as "heroes of American mythology or the celebrities of the 'show business'" (Cusset 1). Exerting a lasting influence, the process of Americanization of the French poststructuralist and postmodern authors around the early 1980s in America resulted in their acquiring an unprecedented level of official recognition and influence never achieved by them in their own country. Interestingly, the names themselves also became reference points, or labels for the new, exciting phenomenon, collectively called French Theory. Within this theoretical field, French feminism seems equally selectively (mis)represented.

The present article seeks to address the American appropriation of French feminist discourses starting from the early 1970s. The text situates French feminism within the field of French Theory, a notion created in the Anglophone critical discourses, and analyses the meanings ascribed to both terms and, through a historicised discussion of the appropriation the French feminist theories, attempts to present the popular critical moves (selectiveness and standardisation) in this process. What follows constitutes a brief analysis of the reasons and responses to the propagation of French feminism as a reductive construct, and concludes registering a change in more contemporary approaches which try to move beyond this initial label.

French Theory

Owing to the popularity it has achieved in the US campuses at the turn of the 1960s and 70s, French feminist theory has undergone a similar process of appropriation in the New World to that of poststructuralism. The subsequent reception of the intellectual work of the non-Anglophone scholars in the Anglophone world was accompanied by a particular selectiveness of attention and reductionism, earning these endeavours a label of a French Theory (often written down with quotation marks, capitalised or italicised). The naturally varied and dynamic body of French feminist thinking of the time, for example, was for future years predominantly represented solely by Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, or Luce Irigaray. Despite such filtering, French feminism has established a firm place for itself within contemporary Anglophone critical theory, becoming a somewhat "self-explanatory expression" (Gambaudo 93). However, due to its somewhat artificial status, the notion, similarly to that of Theory, requires a brief clarification. So, before moving on to the discussion of the context and possible reasons for which the Anglophone reception focus was put on the francophone "textual" feminists, what will presently be discussed is the polyvalence of "Theory" and "French feminism" as terms employed in Anglo-American critical discourses.

The need for a closer inspection of the terms at hand does not only stem from their complexity or their relation to the national modifier (French/Anglo-American), but it is more perhaps an issue of a certain precision with respect to their semantic field (see Butler et al. 2000). Both Theory (capitalised or not) and feminism(s) are contentious terms as far as their meaning and usage is concerned. The notoriously debatable notion of Theory, for example, with its back-of-the-head references to poststructuralism, postmodernism, or critical theory in general, demonstrates how its very meaning rests on a multiplicity of issues it refers to. The underlying approach here seems to ascribe false unity to the otherwise disparate phenomena — a frequent practice in the discussion of theoretical discourses, let alone in the case of French Feminism.

Indeed, the discussions of Theory are repeatedly marked by implicit totalising assumptions which confine the field of theoretical discourse to a narrow understanding of Theory as French Theory, that is the non-Anglophone, poststructuralist work usually represented by the names of Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, etc. This — in contrast to theory understood as a formalist, structuralist and systematic endeavour — is frequently tantamount to a complete loss of reference, resulting in a conflation of poststructuralism, postmodernism, theoretical discourse, or even virtually anything that came after poststructuralism. For the more traditional-minded critics, this latter-day mode of critical discourses implies a set of self-referential, textual practices and procedures, involving a specific jargon and terminology that revels in its own, stereotypical, decontextualised play of meanings, resulting in common accusation of the loss of political relevance (Butler et al. ix). Contrastively, for the leftist critics the significance of poststructuralism and Theory, however, stems from its continuous reworking of the modernist theme of the crisis in representation, aiming to subvert the *bête noir* of the times — the bourgeois ideology permeating language, culture and society. In fact, substantial part of the most emblematic francophone poststructuralist critics (Barthes, Derrida, Kristeva, Tel Quelians, etc.) conducted occasional but detailed studies of the works of modernist authors and it is due to the strong Marxist theoretical influence that theory has expanded to investigate issues of race, colonialism, sexuality or gender, and contributed to viewing these categories as politically invested areas.

However, the debates about (T/)theory no longer constitute the core of academic discussions. In the times which Terry Eagleton termed as "after theory," poststructuralist-descendant endeavours have evolved into the general backdrop for the humanities, morphing into a loose, vague, ultra-compendious umbrella term, omnipresent in the intellectual culture of the contemporary world. Theory (especially in its capitalised variety) now seems to be simply understood as a "label for contemporary literary business," usually having to do with the non-Anglophone thinkers and their philosophical influence from the 1960s onwards (Culler in Cunningham 16—17).

With the insistence on a continual redefinition of the movement, for example in the form of a recurring preoccupation of critical works in the field with feminist *waves*, feminism — similarly to Theory — also seems to exist as an amorphous notion. Additionally, parts of the more recent traditions, frequently refereed to as *post*-feminism, further contribute to the confusion around the discussion and the meaning of the term. Such features lead to the lack of definite description agreed upon both in the case of "feminism" in general or a feminist *third wave* (Hammer and Kellner 220).

Regardless of their initial subversive origins, both terms also safely inhabit the space of various guides, readers, anthologies, or practical introductions, testifying not only to their widespread diffusion but to a gradual transformation into handy, trickled-down, simplified and standardised theoretical tools, attractive in form and easily applicable in critical practice. In this respect, the chief feature of the reception of French Theory (including French Feminism) is typified by certain unifying gestures (i.e. capitalisation and blanket terms), allowing the critics to assume a safe, seemingly objective distance and permitting them to construct a false unity with totalising pretensions. A thorough illustration of this process can be found, among others, in Colin Davis's book on the "wake" of poststructuralism (2004). The critic aptly shows how the false unity of the Theory monolith is further strengthened by the umbrella term of French Theory. Helpful in achieving such a degree of (mis)representation are the manifestly unjust allegations continually put forward against the exponents of the post-war French thought — in particular, against poststructuralism and postmodernism — which serve to discredit the theoretical discourse and which are frequently based on decontextualised clichés permeating the opinions of both anti-theorists and their opponents.

Consequently, French Theory in Anglophone discourses is frequently an equivalent for poststructuralism or postmodernism. It refers to the critical and academic work within the field of cultural, literary or film studies, informed by the theoretical and philosophical insights proposed by French or francophone thinkers at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s. Likewise, French feminism during this time came out of the backdrop of a politically sensitive ambience resulting from the student protests of the late 1960s, with a shared Marxist inflection also prominent, for example, in Britain (Gamble 34). The national adjective added to what may appear as "regular" theory points to the fact that this collection of disparate theories, artificially grouped together under one name, exerted their influence outside France and the European continent.

One reason for the overseas reception of what later became "big names" was not only the fact that the attractive theories definitely had a slightly exotic ring to them, but that they offered new, electrifying modes of discussing issues of difference or ideology — issues which went hand in hand with the subversive energies unleashed by the 1968 revolutions. Drawing on Lacanian reworking of

Freudian psychoanalysis, Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray were shown to demonstrate the central role of language and culture in the construction of sexual difference. In addition to a common lineage with the countercultural movements, French Theory has also acquired the reputation of a revolutionary social critique and resistance, whilst having been renowned for the introduction of a variety of neologisms, popular catchphrases and buzzwords in the post-war critical discourse. The latter were soon to become emblematic for their reception.

In America, for instance, the adaptive requirements of the market might be blamed for the simplification of the otherwise intricate discourses (Domańska and Loba 68). Because of the natural language barrier the profusion of the texts was dependent on translations, and, as some believe, these are the translations that were partly to blame for the simplifications in French Theory's dissemination. Owing to this the texts were shown to highlight categories decided upon as being more important by the translators, rather than their original French authors.[1] Some critics go as far as to claim that the English constructed for the purposes of a global reader is as much decontextualised and as least complex as possible, consequently producing a sort of sterilized version of English.[2]

In spite of these problems, the issues raised by French Theory became the cornerstones of the intellectual debates from late 1960s through 1970s and 80s. In the mid-90s however, partly because some of the exponents of the French radical thought simply started passing away, French Theory began losing its momentum. In the twilight of its apparent "popularity" the notion was accompanied by a widespread domestication and institutionalisation of the theories on both sides of the Atlantic, peaking with regular criticism and revisions of the works of its most recognisable proponents at the turn of the century.

French Feminism and "French Feminism"

Within the wide area of French Theory "French feminism" constitutes an undoubtedly important element. As already noted, despite its apparent currency in the Anglophone academic discourses, the term seems a contentious one as

[1] Ewa Domańska boldly suggests that this might be the case of Spivak and her introduction to *Of Grammatology*. According to the critic, Spivak foregrounds "deconstruction" as a term which in general is not the organising principle in the case of the whole book (Domańska and Loba 68).

[2] Such is the position of another Polish scholar, T. Szkudlarek who claims that e.g. Derrida is more easily readable in English that he is in French, or in Polish for that matter; the loss of native context of the original language causes a flattening of the otherwise multilayered play of references (Domańska and Loba 93).

it not only functions according to similar selective lines as the notion of French Theory, but also implies certain hierarchical distinctions, especially through its operation as a "coded referent, signalling the users' inclusion in a certain way of thinking" (Gambaudo 93).

Even though the term "French feminism" can be traced to Alice Jardine's article from 1982,[3] one of the first, widely-accessible sources to introduce it to American audience was Elaine Marks's and Isabelle de Courtivron's *New French Feminisms* (1980). Compiled with an aim of spurring a thought *exchange* between feminist traditions from the Old World and the US, this anthology presented a fairly diverse range of francophone feminist intellectuals.[4] Nevertheless, at the same time the biggest intellectual currency in America was certainly ascribed to Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray.[5] Yet, a decade later, the reception of "French feminism" and the relationship between the French and Anglo-American feminisms was already established as a legitimate subject of discussion. Nancy Fraser, for example, opening a revaluation of French feminism (Fraser and Bartky 1992), qualified the Marks and de Courtivron's book as instrumental in the first construction of "French feminism" as a distinctive cultural object for English-speaking readers" (1) and acknowledges, both, its emphasis on such categories as "difference" as one of the initial subversive and radical features of the movement, as well as the scholarly-critical industry the notion later spawned. Importantly, the selective nature of the reception, or what she calls a "synecdochic reduction," is aptly qualified as focusing almost solely on deconstructive and psychoanalytic strands.

The qualification of "French feminism" as a construct, above all, may paradoxically mean that it is "not French and it is not feminism" (Gambaudo 94). Also the notion's meaning may be different in France than outside of its territories. This led to several consequences: first of all, it allowed to produce binary oppositions between the French-oriented and Anglo-American theories; secondly, the frequent use of inverted commas, invariably accompanying the two constructs enabled the critics to adopt a particular rhetorical (and ideological) dismissive stance towards the French feminists (see Allwood 1998); finally, on the European side, it also spurred anti-feminism which, in France, was also synonymous with anti-Americanism.

The first of the aforementioned modes of discussing French feminist theories is typical for academic monographs, textbooks, or dictionaries. Selective in its

[3] Jardine's influential "Gynesis" identifies the emergence of French feminisms from 1980s France and contextualises them on the backdrop of the search for new theoretical horizons at the rise of postmodernity and the failure of the modernist project (Gambaudo 96).

[4] These also included Catherine Clément, Christine Delphy, Claudine Herrmann, or Monique Wittig, among others.

[5] The first two are enumerated, among others, by Spivak in a text from 1981 as "the two feminist discourse-theorists who are most heard in the U.S." (Spivak 166).

presentation, but also well-aware of such an approach,[6] Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* (2003, originally published in 1985) was one of the first major sources to present the Anglo-American audience with a succinct discussion of post-68 French feminism and to operate on the French/Anglo-American binary. More importantly, it seems to legitimise the official division between Anglo-American (Kate Millet, Virginia Woolf, Elaine Showalter) and French (Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva) feminisms (Gambaudo 96). In such systems of nationally-oriented organisation, as some scholars see it (e.g. Cuddon 1999), French feminist theories are predominantly related to the matters of abstract theorising and are opposed to the Anglo-American strand of feminism. The latter — in fact not solely English or American — in literary studies for instance, was largely characterised by a reliance on tradition and convention, with the division still upheld well into the early 1990s. This customary practice of a realist approach to reading literature, for instance in the light of representations of women, was often contrasted with "French feminism." Following the insights of the major non-Anglophone theoreticians (usually Lacan, Foucault, Derrida), this side of the binary was not only "more overtly theoretical" — and, as already noted, limited to Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray — but mostly preoccupied with "concerns other than literature […]: language, representation, and psychology […] before the literary text itself" (Barry 125; my emphasis). Synecdochically selective it might have been, but it also had the effect of distancing the works of these intellectuals from any political goals of French feminism. Indeed, already in 1981, Spivak identifies French feminist theory in the US as linked more to "literary" interests rather than those working "in the field" (Spivak 165).[7] Interestingly enough, the apolitical dimension of "French feminism" can be recognised as linked to the second-wave's "difference" claims as well as the third-wave's more academic intellectualization of the debates (see Gambaudo 2007).

It seems that the disparate nature of French feminist activities — be it political or intellectual — resulted in a certain confusion in the actual identification of women's struggles that are included under the name. In vein with the strategies identified in case of French Theory, the reductive veneer of the French Feminist theory construct effected a somewhat "sticky problematic" of the second wave's central proponents (Walsh 6). This is a result of, both, the fact that Cixous, Irigaray, or Kristeva offer a radical critique of the subject, as well as because of

[6] "[Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva] have been chosen partly because their work is the most representative of the main trends in French feminist theory, and partly because they are more closely concerned with the specific problems raised by women's relation to writing and language that many other feminists in France" (Moi 95).

[7] She also contrasts this situation with the one in England "where Marxist feminism has been used in mainstream (or masculinist) French 'theory' — at least Althusser and Lacan — to explain the constitution of the subject (of ideology or sexuality) — to produce a more specifically 'feminist' critique of Marx's theories of ideology and reproduction" (Spivak 165).

the use of inverted commas almost always accompanying the Anglo-American "French feminism" which may demonstrate "the authors' detachment, hesitation or recognition that the term does not really mean what it says" (Allwood 42). Such merely typographical tricks, as it were, ascribed a false unity and uniformity to the discursive field of francophone theories, making it easier for the critics to adopt a negative stance towards such propositions.

To come back to the outcomes of seeing French feminism as a construct, its presentation as a notion of the past also enabled a hostile position towards the American discourses, or feminism in general. Developed properly in France only after its recognition in the US and its subsequent implementation in the continental thought, French feminism provoked reductionist views that rendered it as an American construct. Consequently, this orientation received a portrayal which presented it as "something […] indulged in briefly by some French women in the 1970s, but [that was] essentially American," thus, abstracting the discussions of feminism from the French experience and rendering "France as 'postfeminist' or no longer in need of feminism" (Allwood 39). Likewise, the reductionist view of the American women's issues debate also functioned in the French intellectual arena where American feminism was seen as more radical, men-hating and powerful. The moves which confined this orientation to the past implicitly paved the way for ideas of post-feminism. These, as Allwood argues, followed the proposition announcing the end of feminism and the beginning of "a postfeminist era" (38). Presented in the media — through their newspaper declarations of death of feminism, or through referring to it in the past tense — they contributed to producing the impression that (at least some of) the feminist issues had been accomplished, or that they simply belong to the past. Accordingly, any discussions or criticism of gender relations and discrimination were, in this light, *post*-feminist. Symptomatically, the latter term itself is not only difficult to define, but also related to media coverages of feminisms (and such issues as victimisation, autonomy, and responsibility); it also constitutes, much like postmodernism, an ironic critique of the former forms of feminist intellectual endeavours (see Gamble 2006).

The abovementioned selectiveness and generalisations, with their main focus on the critique of the subject, language, the production of meaning and power relations in the society, which mark representations of feminism outside France were noticed relatively early in Anglophone critical literature and have equally spurred many critical debates in France as well. One significant example of such a critical position is that of Christine Delphy, a distinguished materialist feminist, who claims that French feminism is a total fabrication and an invention. She opposes the Anglo-American promotion of "French Feminism" under the label of a "Holy Trinity" of "three women who have become household names in the Anglo-American world of Women's Studies," but who have been "increasingly divorced from the social movement" (Delphy 192). Significantly, such a label is

construed as an imperialist invention to "produce a particular brand of essentialism … in order to pass off as feminist a "theory" in which feminism and feminist need not figure any longer" (Delphy 195). To counter this, she proposes to treat French feminism as a self-referential fabrication, i.e. Anglophone writings about (selected) French thinkers ("literally: Anglo-American writings that are about it *are* it," 194). However, this approach is contrasted by critics who recognise the artificial quality of the notion, but who also argue that such feminism is "qualified not only by its national origins, but also by "something else" — a certain "supplement" that somehow loosely traces the reception of the diverse, psychoanalytically-informed theories of sexual difference within a more or less foreign Anglo-American contexts" (Walsh 6; see also T. Moi in Allwood 48).

Similarly, some critics see French intellectual tradition in general as a notable constituent informing the particular quality of francophone theories. Anthony Easthope, for example, claims that it was the French tradition of the *essai* which was one of the reasons why the French achieved such publicity in the Anglo-Saxon world (33). Also, Sylvie Gambaudo (98—99), despite acknowledging the fact that "French thought" does not necessarily include all French speaking countries, emphasises the importance of the long-standing connection between the French language and power struggles, or its role in the formulation of "ideas of difference" (98). Thus, what she traces back to the time of French Revolution, when a change of focus in philosophy, literature and politics took place in the form of a rejection of rationality in favour of emotions, can — if understood as a movement "away from collective concerns to that of the individual and his/her singularity" (99) — be seen as a key factor in the allure French language theory had for foreigners.

Beyond Nationalities…

In the light of such problematic nature of the reception of the nationally-driven labelling system of theories it seemed that a change in approach was needed. One, instructive case in point is that of Rosi Braidotti. While discussing some of the French feminist thinkers in *Nomadic Subjects* (1994), the scholar was still openly using the nationally-oriented organisational systems to sketch a divide between Franco- and Anglophone feminisms: "whereas 'sexual difference' theories are mostly French-originated, 'gender' theories are closer to English-speaking feminism" (1994: 258). Recently however, despite admitting the usefulness of such systems "of indexation […] often used to make sense of this wide field of feminist knowledge production" (Braidotti 2003: 195) — especially in the case of relatively unknown traditions of feminist thought (non-European, non-English

ones) — she turned to a more "nomadic" approach to disparate categories, as it avoids the growing context of the "rising nationalism and xenophobia of the contemporary world" and observes the very "vitality of the feminist movement" (2003: 196). Consequently, in the case of a trans-national feminist scholar like Braidotti one may notice that the contemporary discursive tendencies lead on to a non-hierarchical plurality of various approaches which, on the one hand, admit the rightful place of the postmodern, psychoanalytic and French "philosopher queens" in the history of the movement, but also agree that it, as such, has transcended beyond the premises marking its beginnings (2003: 211). Such formulations constitute an argument for the fact that the appropriation of French feminist theory can also be viewed in a positive way — in particular as one of the important achievements of the second wave, or feminism in general, where this self-awareness of the artificiality of the constructed nature of labels like French feminism is seen as a mark of maturity of the whole movement (see Agacinski 2004).

A change has certainly taken place in the representation of the French feminist thinkers in the US as well. Lois Tyson (2006), for example, when discussing the topic in a book written for students of critical theory, even though still employing the "holy trinity" mode, acknowledges the diversity of the movement and the importance of social and political activism. While still upholding French and Anglo-American binary on the grounds that "French feminists have tended to focus more strongly on the philosophical dimension of women's issues than have British or American feminists" (96) — Tyson explicitly talks about how the notion of *French feminism* repeatedly denotes only a section of French feminism (104). She believes that the mainstream American academia, holding the most influence over the dissemination of this critical theory, has welcomed French psychoanalytic positions because of the abstract quality of their theorising — a feature, paradoxically, both willingly accepted by such critics and one which allowed for dismissal and ridicule of the jargon-ridden propositions; more importantly, however, it stemmed from the fact that this tendency, exactly through its abstraction, was difficult to understand and thus could secure the positions of those scholars already within the academic positions of power. This may explain what Tyson identifies as a long-standing tradition of "the desire to ignore or dismiss French feminism" in much of American academia, both among some feminists and nonfeminsts (105). As a result, the radical textual, psychoanalytical and deconstructive positions of French feminism, despite their dissenting and transgressive attempts to stake out new theoretical and intellectual theories, can be seen as being used to strengthen the status quo.

Today the 21st-century feminist discourses seem to have acknowledged the changes in approaches to feminism, French or otherwise. Fairly recent anthologies and monographs attempt to present a fairly varied scope of ideas and texts from continental and trans-Atlantic feminist theorists working in disparate tra-

ditions (see e.g. Oliver and Walsh 2004; Mousil and Roustang-Stoller 2009). Therefore, it seems possible that the younger generations have yet to earn new labels.[8]

Conclusion

The varied reception of French feminist theories presented in this text shows that, as a construct, it relied on a certain version of French feminism, which naturally did not go unnoticed both in America and in France. In the 1970s, textual and psychoanalytical French feminism — even if initially represented by a fraction of theorists — provided the Anglo-American theorists with useful tools they could employ to problematise (or with which to subvert) issues of difference and dominant power relations. With the insistence on novel, non-masculine forms of expression (e.g. *écriture feminine*) and new forms of theorising indebted to psychoanalysis, French feminism as a collection of intellectual and political propositions — despite being linked to the second wave theorists (Kristeva, Cixous, Irigaray) — proceeded through stages of importance, popularity and maturity. What the history of the notion also shows is that the difficulties in ascribing geographical, cultural or linguistic denotations prove ultimately unnecessary (Gambaudo 106). It seems that the critic is right in arguing that the relationship between French and Anglo-American feminisms is based on a mutual theoretical prodding: "French feminism is inviting Anglo-American feminists to revisit their comfortable position and Anglo-American feminism is teasing clarification out of French Feminists' seductive linguistic enigmas" (106). Such interrogation then should be understood in a positive light, as the seemingly uneasy relationship in fact helps to reformulate the movement. Indeed, it seems that feminism in general actually needs constant reformulation, as in different geographical places and points in time the goals of the movement are disparate. However, as it is the case with the notion of *waves*, the discussions of which are practically ubiquitous in works devoted to feminism, the various forms of the movement, regardless of (national) labels attached to its particular exponents, constitute important elements of both its past and its future.

[8] As Walsh (7) suggests, despite their inclusion in the academic tradition and their links between the second wave, postmodernism and the theories of poststructuralism, the French feminist theories, at the turn of the millennium are yet to be christened with any sort of *nom propre*.

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