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La Barbe! Cinq ans d’activisme féministe by La Barbe (review)

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La Barbe! Cinq ans d’activisme féministe by La Barbe (review)

Abstract
To celebrate its fifth birthday, the French feminist group La Barbe—an ironic play-on-words with a symbol of masculine domination and the colloquial equivalent of “to be fed up with something”—released a selection of their most significant actions in La Barbe! Cinq ans d’activisme féministe. In the introduction, La Barbe underlines the specificities, goals, and genesis of the organization. Originally a response to the sexist treatment of Ségolène Royal in the media during the 2007 presidential election, La Barbe claims to imitate a third Republic masculinist style so as to expose the lingering gender gap and “entre-soi masculin” in French society (17). For La Barbe, it is not feminism or equal rights that are “ringard[s]” but this very lingering masculine domination (24). The group also underlines the collective nature of their actions: the speeches, pamphlets, and book translate their non-hierarchical stance.

They go on to describe their “modus operandi” (9): members of the organization attend conferences, talks, or business meetings where men are exclusively or primarily speaking. They rise up in the middle of talks, put on fake beards, and interrupt the speakers. They call them by their first names to underline the male-centeredness of the event but also to reverse the sexist media habit to call women experts by their first names (90). They read an ironic speech that congratulates the male participants on keeping patriarchy and masculine domination alive by not allowing women to join their circles of power. When a token or a few women still partake in these events, they deplore this feminist invasion. While audiences usually support the group’s actions, the ones “barbés” react according to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s five stages of grief: ranging from denial to acceptance; the latter being an exceptional occurrence (18-22).

Disciplines
French and Francophone Literature | Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Other French and Francophone Language and Literature | Women’s Studies

Comments
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To celebrate its fifth birthday, the French feminist group La Barbe—an ironic play-on-words with a symbol of masculine domination and the colloquial equivalent of “to be fed up with something”—released a selection of their most significant actions in *La Barbe! Cinq ans d’activisme féministe*. In the introduction, La Barbe underlines the specificities, goals, and genesis of the organization. Originally a response to the sexist treatment of Ségolène Royal in the media during the 2007 presidential election, La Barbe claims to imitate a 3rd Republic masculinist style so as to expose the lingering gender gap and “entre-soi masculin” in French society (17). For La Barbe, it is not feminism or equal rights that are “ringard[s]” but this very lingering masculine domination (24). The group also underlines the collective nature of their actions: the speeches, pamphlets, and book translate their non-hierarchical stance.

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The introduction is followed by a selection of actions, themselves organized into nine chapters covering the arts, business, sports, humanitarian organizations, or politics. Targeted institutions included major French political parties, the Free Masons, L’Oréal, the Cannes Film Festival and Médecins du monde. While humorous, La Barbe’s actions and ironic speeches undeniably make the current and overwhelming gender gap glaring: men, on average, hold 70 to 100% of positions of power. The figures provided all stem from a thorough research performed by specialist activists before any action (18). The selected performances usually include these figures; the speech given; the pamphlet or press release; pictures of the event; or placards used during the action such as “le racisme c’est bien, le sexisme c’est mieux!” when they crashed a UMP meeting in 2011 (132). The conclusion denounces the systemic invisibilization of women or women’s contribution to various areas of social and cultural life. La Barbe hopes that their performances expose this historical injustice and allows women (back) in.

Iconic materialist feminist Christine Delphy wrote the preface to the book, lauding La Barbe’s successful demonstration of a rampant masculine domination in France. This preface is particularly interesting because it underlines the difference in style and tone between second and third-wave French feminisms. La Barbe is informed by US gender theory and third-wave/queer politics since it seeks “l’empowerment des femmes” (26, English in original), to foster “la confusion des genres” (24), and relies on a politicized ironic performance as “la répétition, la redondance, les effets de miroir et de superposition dans la mise en scène . . . rappellent les phénomènes de la cooptation, d’autocongratulation, de reproduction des élites qui sont à l’œuvre dans les milieux en question” (24-25). Delphy, instead, deplores how women still do not realize how oppressed they are and this, in turn, prevents them from developing a political, feminist solidarity. Delphy appears defeatist and at times one-dimensional regarding men. Intersectional studies have demonstrated it: class, age, color, sexual orientation also impact men when it comes
to being in power—or not. And if men necessarily always bond against women to keep their privileges, why have men joined the ranks of contemporary feminist groups such as Osez le féminisme! or the AmiEs de la Barbe? Delphy’s bleak view on misogyny and sexism in French society is, however, not unjustified, as La Barbe figures, actions, statements, or the physical and verbal violence they encounter, demonstrate.

*La Barbe! Cinq ans d’activisme féministe* showcases the vitality—and popularity—of feminism in contemporary France. While it does not constitute a feminist academic study, its mode of activism make it a great tool for French undergraduate classes. In advanced language courses, the pamphlets may be used for translation purposes, to foster comparative discussion on the status of equal rights, or even have the students create their own pamphlets, speeches, or placards. In civilization or women’s literature classes, it may be used to discuss the legacy and new currents in French feminisms. The book’s populist and fun nature will engage students and, perhaps, may even foster “une épidémie de barbes” on American campuses (159).

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