

Simone de Beauvoir:
Introduction to the Second Sex

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The Second Sex

- Woman as the second sex
- The second sex derived from the first sex
- Women in the position of the “other”
- What does it mean to be an “other”?
- I and the other
- We and the other

The Second Sex (1949)

- Beginning of second wave of feminism
- Main idea of the book
- Women as the second sex
- The second sex as derived from the first sex
- Women have been defined as secondary to men who have been seen as the primary sex

Duality of the sexes

- Duality of sexes in the history of ideas
- The male and the female acc. to traditional understanding that goes back to ancient philosophy
- The male is the rational being, the female deviates from the male
- Thomas Aquinas: “The female is an imperfect male”

Traditional understanding of duality of the sexes

- Male
- Rationality
- Culture
- Mind, soul
- The role of men is to be pater familias and govern society
- Female
- Body
- Nature
- Emotions
- The role of women is to bear and rear children

Women according to traditional duality of the sexes

- Women are “dangerous” in the public sphere because they are “unpredictable” as they are determined by their emotions (Hegel)
- Women should not be allowed to take part in politics
- Women should keep silent in the church (Apostle Paul)

Traditional duality of the sexes and Essentialism

- According to traditional dualistic theories about sexual difference:
- Sexual difference is understood to be based on different anatomy of the sexes
- The anatomy of women predestines them to fulfill certain roles
- Women are thus “essentially” different from men
- Old believe that there is a women’s nature or essence
- This belief is the basis of traditional ideas about the division of sexual roles in society

Essentialism about sexual difference

- Women's essence = women have certain attributes, all women and everywhere and at all times
- This is biological essentialism
- According to it women have biological basis that makes them cognitively and morally different from men (less rational and less morally accountable)

Essentialism

- Essentialism about sexual difference is therefore a very much criticized doctrine
- Impossible doctrine: Essence means that all women have to be in a certain way
- If there is one exception to this it is impossible to talk about essence of all women
- Is it nevertheless possible to talk about sexual difference?

Sexual difference

- Men and women are different, biologically
- Are they different psychologically, cognitively?
- Perhaps not much more than men are different from one another, just as women are different from one another
- But are there “tendencies” or “styles” that are common to women and common to men that could allow us to define sexual difference?
- Perhaps

Essentialism

- Has there been an essentialism about men?
- According to Beauvoir not to the same degree as about women
- Men have been associated with being “human”. The human is man. Woman has thus been considered less than human in the history of our culture
- Men have been the measure according to which women have been defined.
- The woman is defined according to which she lacks being a man (Aristotle)

Beauvoir

- Are there really women? asks Beauvoir
- She means, is there a woman's essence?
- She denies that
- Women and men are however different
- Their differences are determined by historical, social circumstances, and also different bodies
- That does not have to lead to biological essentialism

Sex and gender

- To avoid essentialism about sexual difference anglo-american feminists make the distinction between
- Sex and Gender
- Sex is biological sex
- Gender has to do with the social, historical determinates of the difference of men and women

Sex and Gender

- This distinction is based on the idea of social construction of the differences between men and women
- Beauvoir: “One is not born a woman, but becomes a woman”

Sexual difference

- Sexual identity is nevertheless not only
- cultural (determined by culture)
- social (produced by society)
- discursive (produced by discourses)
- or
- volitional (free choice)
- it also has a basis in the body
- Beauvoirs thesis is thus that being a man or a woman determines the life of us all

The Second sex

- It matters of what sex one is born
- Men have better chances, have a better position of power
- Women have less power in politics, in society
- Women are poorer (still women only one ca 3% - 5% of the wealth of the world)
- Women are not as free as men, acc. to Beauvoir
- It is because women have been defined as being “other”, as being different

Why a book about the second sex?

- Women have to define their situation
- To be a woman is being in a certain position
- Men have not had to define their position in the same manner according to Beauvoir
- A male is “man”
- Woman is what deviates from being “man”
- Therefore women have to define their position anew

First and second sex

- Being the second sex implies that woman is seen as “the sex”
- Therefore emphasis on women’s body, sexuality
- The male is seen as the one, as “man” and related to his cognitive capacities
- The female is the other, the lesser
- All that is different, negative

The other

- Why did women become the second sex and land in the position of the other?
- Beauvoir's explanation
- The division of consciousness in “self” and “other”
- Self defines itself by demarcating itself against an other
- Self has more power and can “other” the other one, put him/her in the position of the other
- Individuals and society do this (I and other, We and others)

I and other

- Hegelian dialectic of master and slave: the struggle for power and recognition between two individuals
- The stronger one becomes “master”, the one who loses the fight becomes the “other”
- Not only women are in the position of the other
- Other minorities (Blacks in US, Jews etc.)

System of opposites

- Women are not a minority in the same manner as for example Blacks in the US
- Women have always been with men
- Women do not have a common history like Blacks and like Jews
- Women have not formed themselves (acc. to Beauvoir) as a group, like other minorities
- It is now beginning, she claims
- Women are beginning to refuse being the other

The situation of women in France in the first half of the 20th century

- Acc. to Beauvoir women and blacks are seen as they are more bodies, more animalic
- The one who is insecure about his masculinity is more arrogant towards women
- The Second sex was published 1949
- Women in France had recently gained the right to vote
- Abortion was illegal and even punished with death in the first half of the 20th century
- Pre-pill times, less control over procreation than now

Time for change

- Men do not recognize women as equals
- Attributes that have been associated with women are considered less and even “dirty”
- Time to change this
- Beauvoir calls for mutual recognition and respect

Ethics of existentialism

- Beauvoir is an existentialist
- Main creed of existentialism: Man is freedom, man always has a choice
- Man has to decide about his/her life, take responsibility for it

Ethics of existentialism

- Women have acc. to Beauvoir not been able to exercise this freedom
- Freedom = Transcendence, go beyond oneself
- vs.
- Immanence: To be stuck in a condition, not be able to go beyond it
- Women should get out of immanence, and use their transcendence

Beauvoir's conclusion

- Men and women should work together
- Men and women should respect each other as equal, although there are differences