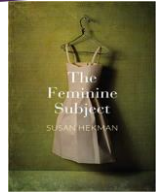




Contribution of Second Wave Feminism

SESSION 5: SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, MONIQUE WITTIG & LUCE IRIGARAY

- ▶ Hekman, Susan (2014) *The Feminine Subject*. Polity Press.



Nicholas p7

- ▶ 'whilst these thinkers did not all extend this analysis to the corollary that sexual difference itself ought to be eradicated, this naturalised notion of oppositional difference was problematised, and is perceived in this project as the problem inherent to gender, which makes its eradication the most efficacious solution.'

- ▶ (problematised – see Foucault)



Argument I'm making

- ▶ Foucault and de Beauvoir contribute to the unsettling of '**heteronormativity**', they do it in different ways:
- ▶ Foucault
- ▶ Linguistically – discourse. The subject position. From a conceptual, rational position. Head. Very influential in Judith Butler's work.
- ▶ History of Sexuality (Multiple Volumes)



2nd Wave Feminism

- ▶ On first reading these puzzling slogans:
- ▶ Beauvoir – 'One is not born a woman. One becomes a woman'
- ▶ Wittig – 'One is not born a woman' / 'Lesbians are not women'
- ▶ Irigaray – 'The sex which is not one'
- ▶ Essentially challenging the '**heterosexual matrix**'

Beauvoir's project

- ▶ In the *Second Sex* (1949) to redefine the concept of 'woman' outside what had hitherto been the accepted thought within the Western paradigm.
- ▶ Big job, controversial then, controversial now.
- ▶ Set the Feminist agenda
- ▶ Discourse within Queer Theory

Quick history of Western thought

- ▶ And therefore how women came about:
- ▶ Classics and Vetruvian 'MAN'
- ▶ Descartes
- ▶ Enlightenment – Kant; Nietzsche – rationality, thinking like a man
- ▶ Industrial Revolution and Capitalism - Braidotti
- ▶ Social, cultural, economic, sexual, educational inequality

Simone de Beauvoir (1908 -1986)

- ▶ Instrumental on moving feminism into its contemporary discourse
- ▶ Radical philosopher and writer.
- ▶ Second Sex (1942) – an analysis of why women have had less power than men. That women have been oppressed throughout history.
- ▶ Biopic
- ▶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etWabzRB-1k&t=378s>
- ▶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmEAB3ekvU>

- ▶ 1972 – declared herself a feminist. Previously has thought a socialist revolution would be enough to 'free' women.
- ▶ Became increasingly sceptical of men on the 'left' understanding of interest in 'women'.
- ▶ Critical of Marx's position on women not being a 'class' - that 'class' meant more than economic class.
- ▶ Beauvoir's contribution in the Second Sex re-evaluated Marx's theory of dialectical materialism.
- ▶ Beauvoir was a materialist but not a Marxist.

Second Sex (1949)



- ▶ Reviews women's social status from the beginning of civilisation.
- ▶ Women forced to take a second role to men since the beginning of time.
- ▶ The human condition is viewed in masculine terms
- ▶ Is described in language that excludes women
- ▶ Women are not born with a gender identity but are given one. Need to read this in the context in which Beauvoir was writing.

3 frames of reference – to make her case

- ▶ 1. **Historical Materialism** – addresses the social and economic and class influences on shaping history.
- ▶ 2. **Existentialism** – personal freedom and choice in a world where there is not god or other higher power. Questioned the historic freedom of women and the structures that limited freedom = choices
- ▶ 3. **Psychoanalysis** – considered the underlying causes of human behaviour. Although generally she had a strong disliking for the theories of Freud and argued against his understanding of women.
- ▶ N.B. Regrettably, she is almost alone in this in the later Feminist tradition –

Historic materialism

- ▶ 1. showed how women have been trapped in their relation to men in every area of their lives. Ensuring no real power in culture or society.
- ▶ Highlights how society treated women as legal minors, very much like children. Frustrated women's ability to take part in society on an equal footing with men.
- ▶ Therefore women are absent from history (no herstory)
- ▶ Men = economic, political and social power. Influence on cultural and historical events.

Existential

- ▶ 1. Femininity is constructed – a person's 'nature' depends on outside forces.
- ▶ 2. Challenges the long held tradition in Western society that 'human nature' is fixed at birth.
- ▶ 3. As an existentialist – humans are not born with any particular values. Identity is created through circumstances.
- ▶ 4. One is not born a woman, but becomes one - through how she is raised and treated by society.

Alterity – the 'Other'

- ▶ 5. Throughout history women have been treated as 'the other' to men.
- ▶ A philosophical term which indicates separateness from the human self.
- ▶ Society views women as the 'Other' because they are only seen as being in relation to men. Objects of desire, mothers to future heirs, or look after everyone else.
- ▶ Denying women their own subjectivity, the right to view themselves as individuals, with their own perspective is de-humanising, and leaves them powerless.

Psychoanalysis

- ▶ 1. To look at the contradictions and untruths in myths about femininity to be found throughout culture – art, literature, science, religion, popular culture.
- ▶ 2. These myths have no basis in fact. Rooted in male fear and male desire. They express men's longing to desire, possess and achieve in the world. Women's role in society is to satisfy such longings.
- ▶ 3. Female role is passive – women moved by men's action and in reaction too – men's desire – women do not have desire outside of this. Women have no reason to exist outside of their relationship to men.

Phenomenological Perspective

- ▶ Beauvoir's work has traditionally been viewed as existentialist, probably because of her association with JPS.
- ▶ New re-reading of her work as a phenomenologist and therefore puts her work differently from ????
- ▶ Her question 'how sexual difference is experience' – the study of the phenomenon itself

Sexual difference

- ▶ Is gender experienced as an accidental attribute of a person or as an essential feature?
- ▶ Are men and women two species of one genus, or do we see them in a complementary or oppositional relation?
- ▶ Do we experience our own gender in the same way as we experience the gender of other people?
- ▶ Is the distinction between the sexes restricted to human beings and animals – are inanimate objects sexed – sun, moon, sky, cups, chairs.
- ▶ For Beauvoir woman, femininity, female underpinned the fundamental question of philosophy, which had largely been ignored.

Significance of the book

- ▶ Regarded by some as the birth of contemporary feminism.
- ▶ Controversial when it came out and controversial amongst feminists and critics today.
- ▶ A book of scholarship drawing on different disciplines. Strong analysis, methodically argued. Not relying on arguments of 'justice' or 'rights'.
- ▶ I would argue that this book foreshadowed Foucault's History of Sexuality.
- ▶ Questioned the construct of 'Woman'

Excellent Lecture

- ▶ Set the agenda of debate regarding patriarchal influence and dominance in Western society.
- ▶ In contemporary reading some statements seem obvious, but at the time of writing no-one had raised these issues. Highly controversial.
- ▶ Can seem dated in reading. Except that the question of 'Women' has not been resolved and has taken very different and sometimes conflicting paths.
- ▶ Highly original approach to defining 'gender' and 'sexual orientation'.
- ▶ Highly influential in its contribution to feminist activism in France (and America).

- ▶ Toril Moi on Beauvoir – one of the leading Beauvoir scholars.
- ▶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRl3sYdMjcE>