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# Feminism versus neoliberalism: women's freedom practices in world perspective\*

Karen Vintges\*\*

## Abstract

Turning to the “original” voice of Simone de Beauvoir we find that she, like Fraser (2013), had criticized a neoliberal kind of “feminism”. However, Beauvoir’s approach also captures how contemporary feminism involves a plural set of freedom practices, rather than a universal program as Fraser implies.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Neoliberalism, Freedom Practices, Simone De Beauvoir, Nancy Fraser.

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According to feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser, “feminism” today is the “Handmaiden” of “Capitalism” (Fraser, 2013). Feminism started as a critical social movement that was about social solidarity, and participatory democracy. But feminism has become entangled with neoliberalism, which is the latest phase of capitalism and is characterized by new forms of inequality and exploitation. Feminism has thus become an ingredient of a new kind of “progressive neoliberalism” – a mixture of capitalist and emancipatory claims (cf. Fraser, 2017).

In her 2013 article, “How Feminism Became Capitalism’s Handmaiden – and How to Reclaim It”, Fraser specifies that feminism today emphasizes individual autonomy, increased choice, and meritocratic advancement. It wants women to become autonomous individuals who strive for personal success and self-realization – with the highest ideal being female entrepreneurship.

I will argue that Simone de Beauvoir already criticized the kind of neoliberal feminism that Fraser targets. Moreover, Beauvoir’s “original” voice also alerts us to feminism’s plural character and strategies. From Beauvoir’s approach, contemporary feminism emerges as a culturally plural set of freedom practices, rather than a universal program as Fraser implies. At the end of her article, Fraser argues that feminism should shift its focus from identity politics to political economy. Due to

the feminist turn to identity politics’ that dovetailed all too neatly with a rising neoliberalism, (...) we absolutized the critique of cultural sexism at precisely the moment when circumstances required redoubled attention to the critique of political economy (Fraser, 2013).

Clearly, there is a “we” in Fraser’s view, and this we should “integrate” the struggles to transform masculinist cultural values “with the struggle for economic justice” and with movements to strengthen “the public powers needed to constrain capital for the sake of justice”.

According to feminist scholars Brenna Bhandar and Denise Ferreira da Silva, Fraser's intervention amounts to a "persistent claim to universalism, which is the core of [this] White feminism". Fraser overlooks the voices of black and third world feminists who have never ignored economic issues, and always integrated them in their cultural struggles. Scholars like Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and many others have "developed critiques of capitalist forms of property, exchange, paid and unpaid labour, along with culturally embedded and structural forms of patriarchal violence" (Bhandar; Ferreira da Silva, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Not only does Fraser overlook these voices, she according to these critics speaks about feminism as if it is a unified movement, whereas there is a plurality of feminist perspectives.

While Fraser argues in terms of a "we" and speaks about feminism as if it is a unified movement, from the work of Beauvoir feminism emerges as a set of plural policies, as I will argue in the second section of this article. In the first section I will show that Beauvoir criticized the neoliberal kind of "feminism" Fraser targets.

### Neoliberal Superwoman

Beauvoir is known today as the feminist philosopher who wrote the feminist classic *The Second Sex* [or. 1949], but she mainly saw herself as a novelist. In most of her novels, she outlines, in indirect ways, her philosophical concept of an ethical way of life in contrast to other modes of living. This is the scheme of her novel *Les belles images*, published in French in 1966, and translated in English under the same title. Laurence, the novel's central character is an advertising director immersed in a world of *belles images* or "pretty pictures".

In addition to being a career woman with sophisticated market skills, she is successful in her personal life as well, with an

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<sup>1</sup> In her work, Moroccan scholar Fatima Mernissi has also integrated critiques of patriarchal values and economic injustice, writing about Moroccan female factory workers and other issues.

affluent architect husband, two daughters, a lover on demand, and a family house in the country. All seems to be well: “Everything was clear, fresh, perfect: the blue water in the swimming pool, the opulent sound of the tennis-balls, the sharp white rock of the peaks, the rounded clouds in the smooth sky, the smell of the pines” (Beauvoir, 1968a:19). But cracks begin to appear.

“Every morning when she opened her shutters Laurence gazed at a splendid glossy photograph” (19). Being an advertising specialist, “she knew too much about how a set was put together – it fell to pieces under her eyes” (91). Laurence increasingly feels like King Midas who turned everything he touched into gold: “Everything she touched turned into a Picture” (18), including her daughter Catherine.

Laurence had always been a pretty picture herself, a “faultless child, an accomplished adolescent, a perfect young woman,” “so clean-cut, so fresh, so perfect” (19). However, her daughter Catherine suddenly began to ask difficult questions about why people are poor and why there is war in the world. Laurence is advised by a psychologist to separate Catherine from a new girlfriend, who watches television and who unfortunately worries too much about “sad things” in the world (67).

Beauvoir, in this novel, sketches the Americanized way of life of the Parisian upper class in the 1960s. She does so along the lines of William Whyte’s 1956 bestseller *The Organization Man*, a work that she repeatedly refers to in her autobiography.

According to Whyte, the American way of life in the 1950s had become a life protected by organizational planning. As corporations became increasingly bureaucratized, in their pursuit of success, security, and safety, these norms spilled over into US society at large. At stake was the collective organization of the US population by calculated action with the help of the social sciences. Whyte analyzed the science-based social engineering of people’s lives and work and focused especially on “the principal impact that organization life has had on the individuals within it” (Whyte 1956:4). As “the man of success”, The so-called Organization Man endorsed a corporate society that he should have resisted. This is

seen in the growth of business administration courses at universities, Whyte concluded with horror – as early as 1956.

Whyte's study shows how the US type of neoliberalism - that emerged after World War II and has spread across the globe ever since – strives to remake society and self as if they were corporations. Whyte had anticipated how neoliberalism would turn man into an entrepreneur of himself, oriented to personal success and safety in all domains of life.<sup>2</sup>

In her autobiography, Beauvoir repeatedly praises Whyte's study for showing that America today is a society that is "measuring value by success" (Beauvoir, 1968b:385). In her novel *Les belles images*, we encounter the neoliberal Organization Man, and more specifically the Organization Woman. In the personas of Laurence and her mother we encounter successful women, each is an "entrepreneur of herself" oriented to personal success in all domains of life, such as career, family, social life, and consumption, and is keen "to prevent anything breaking in upon this security" (Beauvoir, 1968a:38). In Beauvoir's posthumously published novella *Misunderstanding in Moscou* (2011, or. 1966) we encounter another example of the Organization Woman, as a "woman of success". As one of the characters in the novel affirms:

"She's the 'super woman' type (*femme totale*). [...] There are a lot like that in Paris. ... They want to prove to themselves that they can be successful at all levels" (Beauvoir, 2011:226).

Beauvoir had already seen successful super women in the US, and she saw them arriving in Paris. *Les belles images* is a timely critique of the neoliberal model of personhood of the entrepreneurial self and especially of the successful "Lean In" woman of today, that is, of the kind of emancipated woman that neoliberalism wants women to be and that neoliberal "feminists" promote. Beauvoir contrasted this model in her novel *Les belles images* with a more caring way of life, that is concerned with

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<sup>2</sup> We find a similar criticism today in the work of authors who are inspired by Michel Foucault's studies on neoliberalism (Foucault, 2008), some of who also refer to Whyte's study (cf. Vintges, 2017).

commitment and responsibility towards other people's lives. The plot of her novel is totally in line with her study *The Second Sex* where she stated that "the successes of some few privileged women neither compensate for nor excuse the systematic degrading of the collective level" (Beauvoir 2010:154).

Finally, Laurence, against the will of her family, decides that her daughter should no longer be deprived of her girlfriend. Rather than enclosing her daughter Catherine in a world of beautiful pictures, she will allow her to experience the real world. Maybe then she "will get herself out of it. Out of what? Out of this night. Of ignorance, of uncaring" (Beauvoir, 1968a:152). The contours of this more "caring" way of life, can be found in Beauvoir's essays on ethics, especially in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948). In Beauvoir's concept of a lived ethics as developed in this study ethics and politics are always situated and contextual, and thus subjective.

### **Feminist Practices of Freedom**

In her essay *The Ethics of Ambiguity* – published in French in 1947, two years before *The Second Sex* – Beauvoir outlines an ethics of solidarity and commitment to the wellbeing of others. In contrast to an abstract morality, as found in Kant's maxims, she argues for a type of ethics that is situated and lived, and is thus plural, rather than universal. The ethical person is always socially embedded within distinct communities and is a dialogical, or interdependent, embodied subjectivity. There can only be a plurality of ethical and political perspectives. Since we are always situated beings, no one can speak for others. There can be no "previous justifications which might be drawn from the civilization, the age, and the culture". Instead of "total truth," there are only "necessarily partial truths which every human engagement discloses" (Beauvoir, 1948:68). When people speak about "Nation, Empire, Union, Economy, etc." we should consider which concrete individuals are involved (145).

But an ethical attitude requires that we are not blinded by the goals that we establish for ourselves (cf. 89). The cause that we serve “must not lock itself up” (89-90). As she phrases it: “It is fitting that the black fight for the black, the Jew for the Jew, the proletarian for the proletarian, and the Spaniard in Spain”. However, “each one must carry on his struggle in connection with that of the other and by integrating it into the general pattern” (89). Not only do different communities and the different individuals within them develop their own ethical and political trajectories, they also choose their priorities: “the Arabian fellah is oppressed by both the sheiks and the French and English administration. Which of the two enemies is to be combated? The interests of the French proletariat are not the same as those of the natives in the colonies: which are to be served?” [H]ere “the question is political” rather than ethical. During the Second World War, prominent black leaders like Richard Wright in the United States refused “to drop their own claims for the sake of the general interest; he thought that even in time of war his cause had to be defended” (89).<sup>3</sup>

I would like to rephrase Beauvoir’s concept of lived ethics in terms of a plurality of arts of living, considering that “art of living” [*art de vivre*] is a term that she uses as a synonym for a lived ethics in her novel *The Mandarins* (cf. Vintges, 2017). Philosopher Michel Foucault also used this term to indicate a lived kind of ethics. He also used the term “practices of freedom” to indicate that such a lived ethics is not a matter of obeying maxims and moral rules, but is created and invented in collectivities, balancing collective and personal dimensions. Beauvoir’s approach, however, clarifies that what is at stake in ethical freedom practices is not only lifestyle issues, but also meso- and macro-political aims, involving cultural, social and economic alternatives for self and society.

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<sup>3</sup> The ethics of ambiguity is present in *The Second Sex* in that the work argues for men and women to become singular ethical selves (cf. Vintges, 2017). It is also present in that nowhere in the work do we find readymade blueprints for a future society – which is in keeping with her position that people must fashion the future.

From this perspective, “feminism” can also be captured as a plural set of arts of living or practices of freedom that offer ethical-political alternatives for self and society. To paraphrase Beauvoir, feminism can never claim “total truth”. There can be no “previous justifications” such as economy, nation, empire, union, to be drawn “from the civilization, the age, and the culture”. Instead of a “total truth,” there are only “necessarily partial truths which every human engagement discloses” (Beauvoir, 1948:68). Likewise, there are only “feminisms”, a plurality of practices, each of which involves specific political strategies and priorities.

Muslim women throughout the world today organize as activists and feminists, demanding social justice. They do so with and without wearing headscarves, in a step-by-step invention of new mentalities and social-economic and cultural changes. For many of them, veiling is part of their lived ethics, which is an example of how perspectives do differ among “feminists”. From Beauvoir we can understand that feminists worldwide should support each other in their struggles, instead of – to paraphrase the words of Beauvoir above – deciding on feminist strategies *a priori*, based on justifications drawn from one’s civilization and culture, or based on a universal reason. Feminist struggles, in other words, are plural and contextual, and feminisms that oppose neoliberalism consist of women’s multiple – critically creative – freedom practices in world perspective.

Concrete cross-cultural coalitions are possible among women, an example of which was Beauvoir’s support for the Algerian Muslim woman Djamilia Boupacha, an active member of the FLN who was imprisoned and tortured during the Algerian war. Together with lawyer Gisele Halimi, Beauvoir spoke publicly to defend Boupacha. Ranjana Khanna (2008), Julien Murphy (1995) and Elaine Stavro (2007) have all pointed out how Halimi, Boupacha and Beauvoir formed a successful alliance although they had different religious backgrounds, Jewish, Muslim and Christian respectively.

## Conclusion

An examination of Beauvoir's "original" feminism reveals that Beauvoir had also challenged the kind of neoliberal feminism Fraser criticizes. Moreover, turning to Beauvoir's voice elucidates the plural character of feminist strategies. By speaking of feminism in the singular, Fraser – to paraphrase Eddouada 2016 – risks removing one authority figure and replacing it with another. In Beauvoir's approach, contemporary feminist strategies and priorities are recognized as plural practices of freedom.

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