

Feminism à la Simone de Beauvoir

Why Patriarchy?

- Biology does not explain female subordination. Different experiences (pregnancy, lactation, etc.) are not proof of inferiority unless seen from a particular point of view.
- Biological facts, in other words, are interpreted to justify inferiority, but do not explain the cause of patriarchy.
- Marxist analyses suggest patriarchy arose with private property, when women were excluded from ownership.
- This does not explain the reason for the exclusion, so the cause must lie elsewhere.
- Freud reduces human action to sexuality, denying human freedom. This alone makes a psychological explanation suspect (since it denies choice).
- However, even if Freud is essentially right, sex drives do not exist in a vacuum; they derive meaning from a social context, in context of human activity.
- History gives much evidence of domination of women by men, but it cannot offer a cause or justification for patriarchy. It can only document its existence.
- History is a reflection of the working out of people's attitudes and ideas. In isolation, it has no normative force.
- Biology, class relations, psychoanalysis, and history can provide facts used to justify sexism, but these proofs are only persuasive if seen through a way of seeing that is already sexist.
- Female domination, then, must be cultural in origin, a result of human activity and human behavior.

Self and Others

- Existential freedom: one becomes autonomous by actively defining the terms of one's own existence against external criteria of identification.
- Freedom is an active, on-going struggle that requires constant vigilance and self-reflection
- Freedom requires one affirm one's subjectivity in opposition to others; others have the freedom to do the same with us.
- One can choose to accept pre-existing definitions of the self (bad faith) or can actively choose to be free (rejecting external criteria).
- When culture denies women the possibility of transcendence, however, there is no possibility of freedom.
- In patriarchal societies, the male is conceived of as the Self and female as the Other (defined in relation to the male).

Culture as a Tool of Patriarchy

- From early times, men have appropriated those activities which allowed transcendence and allocated women to activities which did not allow it.
- Acceptable roles for women are assigned in ways that subjugate women through passivity.
- The myth of the "eternal feminine" (woman as virgin, woman as mother, woman as nature, etc.) traps women by creating unrealizable ideals that substitute for autonomous identity.

- Masculinity is seen as logical and scrutable, while femininity is seen as irrational and mysterious.
- To the degree that women do not measure up to masculine ideals of what women should be, they are judged accordingly.
- Dichotomies of representation: virgin / whore, savior / temptress, saint / monster, amenable / bitch.
- Maternity is both worshipped and reviled, as the mother brings life but also heralds death.
- Taboos against things like menstrual blood display a patriarchal “horror of feminine fertility.”
- These mysterious operations get projected onto the woman, who are transformed into symbols of life and death-- and thus robbed of all individuality.
- They become projections of male preoccupations and desires.
- Cultural narratives (myth, art, literature) conceive of woman in terms of man, and reserve for woman roles that reflect men’s projects and goals.
- Similarly, beauty ideals either tame or accentuate female sexuality to accommodate male attitudes toward sex.

“Woman” as a Social Construct

- “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman,” where “woman” is an intellectual idea, not a biological entity. Identity is an effect of choices and actions in specific situations.
- Cultural norms socialize women to adopt acceptable roles within society in a way that denies them true agency, since these roles are not freely chosen.
- A woman finds her dignity only in accepting her vassalage-- affirming her identity through the assumption of “feminine” characteristics.
- Every force in society works to deprive woman of her subjectivity, flattening her into an object. Discouraged from the possibility of independent work or creative fulfillment, women are taught to identify with domestic labor, childbearing, and sexual slavishness.
- Unlike men, a woman’s situation is not a result of her character. Rather, character is a result of her situation.
- Women come to embrace immanence (“remaining within”), rather than transcendence (“moving beyond”).
- Though women do not lose the capacity for freedom, they are conditioned to not seek it.

Transcendence

- Women are excluded from both the possibility of human solidarity and the ability to define oneself against others when they are defined as objects not as subjects, as inversion of masculinity rather than as fully human.
- Women must seek transcendence through their own free projects with all the danger, risk, and uncertainty that entails.
- Social structures must also change to facilitate this (universal childcare, equal education, contraception, legal abortion, legal and economic freedom) so that women are not trapped by their biology.