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The Second Sex and 1968

The mother of second-wave feminism, Simone de Beauvoir was a pioneer in the field of feminism, writing her most famous text *The Second Sex* in 1949 and inspiring countless women to see themselves and their position in a new light. *The Second Sex* also inspired the famous 1967 *Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, which launched the same movement in the United States. Although *The Second Sex* was written decades before 1968, the spirit it advocates and represents is truly a mark of 1968, embodying the departure from the old and the courage to. In Julian Bourg's *From Revolution to Ethics*, the spirit of *The Second Sex* can be found throughout the movements of 1968. *The Second Sex* is a redefinition of woman, and an inspiration for the events and thought of 1968.

The Second Sex challenged women to reexamine themselves and their place in society. Challenging the previous notions of old, de Beauvoir famously said: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman," which is the crux of her new definition of femininity (de Beauvoir, 330). De Beauvoir gave a new account of femininity, traditionally viewed as an inherent characteristic of women, as an idea that is created and instilled into women, rather than innate. Challenging the view of women in society, de Beauvoir suggests that women are not independent, no matter how much they think they are.

Man defines the entire notion of women, as men are the de facto definition of society, the standard choice, while women are the supplementary, needing to be

distinguished and redefined by the man: "Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being" (de Beauvoir, 26). Women are always viewed as the Other, in relation to man as the One, and with this definition women lose their own definition of self. Even women who society views as masculine are still not free from this chain that limits their own self-definition. "Women who assert they are men still claim masculine consideration and respect," meaning that the definition of female and femininity are still viewed as secondary and undesirable, and that women need to identify themselves as men to somewhat escape from that implied weakness of being female (de Beauvoir, 24).

This new account of women lies very much in the spirit of 1968, challenging traditional norms. In the spirit of "it is forbidden to forbid," and the "liberation of a 'private' mores," Simone de Beauvoir's new definition and her fight against the archaic customs that bind women to a state of inferiority represent a new set of values that challenge the opinions of the past (Bourg, Chapter 1). By challenging the established foundations of society, de Beauvoir is completely uprooting what has become accepted customs and beliefs, turning accepted facts on their head and suggesting a liberation and a revolution in women, very much like the revolutionary attitude of 1968.

De Beauvoir challenged many previous justifications for the inferiority of women, including biological factors and ideas of different schools of thought. Although women and men are biologically different, de Beauvoir argued that the biological

difference is not what defines women, rather the consciousness that the body develops: "But her body is not enough to define her; it has a lived reality only as taken on by consciousness through actions and within a society" (de Beauvoir, 71). De Beauvoir argued heavily against Freudian psychoanalysis, which saw its popularity rise in the post-war period and aimed directly at women, claiming to help their seeming unhappiness. Freudian thought, argued de Beauvoir, was never developed for women: "Freud was not very concerned with woman's destiny; it is clear that he modeled his description of it on that of masculine destiny, merely modifying some of the traits," thus again supporting her argument that women are nothing but a secondary thought to men, defined in male terms that may do not suit them (de Beauvoir, 74). Rejecting the notions of libido and humans as purely sexually driven beings, de Beauvoir prefers to focus on the pressures of society as the indication for the status of women: "For us woman is defined as a human being in search of values within a world of values, a world where it is indispensable to understand the economic and social structure" (de Beauvoir, 85).

De Beauvoir's criticism of Freudian thought was a trend of 1968, with many turning against Freudian psychoanalysis, including *Anti-Oedipus*, the opening chapter by Deleuze and Guattari. Similar to de Beauvoir, *Anti-Oedipus* challenged the Freudian idea of libido behind all actions: "To imagine desire as the hunger or search for an object is to have misapprehended a secondary situation that develops through the trapping or channeling of desire by 'law' into a regulated and controlled economy" (Bourg, Chapter 9). The trend of anti-psychoanalysis and the rejection of Freudian ideas of sexuality reverberate throughout 1968, as the consciousness

becomes more important than the subconscious as traditional norms and customs were the focus of agitation.

De Beauvoir stressed the importance of societal factors in the creation of the woman, and how the female plight is not brought on by an inherent fault in her being but rather the situation society places her in. Offering the definition of a woman from a male perspective, de Beauvoir describes: “she ‘wallows in immanence,’ she is argumentative, she is cautious and petty, she does not have the sense either of truth or of accuracy, she lacks morality, she is vulgarly self-serving, selfish, she is a liar and an actress” (de Beauvoir, 724). These traits, however, do not come from the nature of women but the role that society forces her in. Women were excluded from the workplace because of their biological bodies and their ability to bear children, limiting their freedom and their ability to shape society the way men do. Men keep women docile and subordinate in order to justify their own superiority: “no one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or more disdainful, than a man anxious about his own virility” (de Beauvoir, 34). This need to maintain a superior hold over women is why emancipation will not come from men, but needs to come from women.

The problem with self-emancipation, however, is that women are not inclined to act for an abstract ideal that breaks them out of comfortable slavishness. From the beginning of time, women have found themselves the Other, and do not know the feeling of liberty: “It is mainly because she has never experienced the powers of liberty that she does not believe in liberation: the world to her seems governed by an obscure destiny against which it is presumptuous to react” (de Beauvoir, 729). De

Beauvoir links this ignorance to the situation that women are confined in. They have no idea what lies beyond the kitchen and her home, and resort to the present. Their attitudes towards their men are never strong: "they lack conviction; their attitude to man is too ambivalent," as their entire world is defined and dominated by men, their understanding of the world is constrained to one which they are dependent on their men (de Beauvoir, 743). The situation of women is not dead, however, and she only needs to have a taste of the possibility for freedom: "Let a future be open to her and she will no longer be obliged to settle in the present." (de Beauvoir, 731).

The challenges against the new feminist movement rose, however, when feminists fighting for their reproduction rights and guarding their sexuality were accused of being moralists. In the fight for personal reproductive rights, the issue of pedophilia rose and caused a rift among the community for homosexual rights and the feminist community, who "found common cause with one another in attacking the sexual and gender 'old order,'" (Bourg, Chapter 15) but disagreed on many other issues. Many inspired feminists, "women trying to find a balance between the demands of motherhood and those of radical agitation," also face challenges with their responsibilities and their newfound enlightenment (Bourg, Chapter 15). This struggle between the traditional and the radical, and the accusation of moralizing and alignment with the right, driving rifts in 1968, are still present today in activist groups.

The ideas presented by de Beauvoir are reflected in the Power to the Imagination movements found in 1968. The notion of Power to the Imagination is really what lies at the heart of de Beauvoir's hope for women to break out of their subservience.

With women bound to their home lives, they must use their imagination to break out of the mold of what has already been established to face a new reality, one with uncertainty but also liberty. The idea of liberation is at the heart of *The Second Sex*, very much in line with the 1968 movement. Almost two decades before the events of 1968, Simone de Beauvoir had already created her work that predicted and inspired the spirit of 1968, and remains a key in the redefinition of women and promotion of womens rights.