

Socialist Democracy as the Ideal for de Beauvoir's Existential Feminism

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Abstract: By positing that the socialist democratic framework is the necessary ideal of existential feminism this paper intends to prove that a socialist democracy is the most accommodating societal model for women. An ideal is defined as the ultimate end condition which woman must meet in her struggle for equality, and is grounded on her work, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Its analysis is based on Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory, which states that woman's subjugation is a result of man's monopoly of subjectivity. It is thru this subjectivity that he has defined her and limited her to a state of immanence. This paper exposes and expounds her analysis of liberation and demonstrating how this freedom can be attained in a socialist democratic framework. The given framework contains the economic features of socialism, such as public ownership of the means of production as well as equal distribution of opportunity to all members of society, coupled with the democratic political framework. It engages the nuances of Beauvoir's liberation, which is the economic and cultural emancipation, thru analyzing how these limiting factors interact with the framework.

Keywords: Existentialism, Feminism, Political Philosophy and Socialist Democracy

“One is not born a woman, rather one *becomes* one.” – *Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex*

I. Introduction

Simone de Beauvoir is a novelist and philosopher most known for her *magnus opus* on feminism, *The Second Sex*. In the mentioned text, she confronts the problem of the ‘feminine situation’ and culminates the ethics she outlined in *Pyrrhus and Ceneas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, by analyzing women in her ‘otherness’. Her work was considered as one of the major influences of the second wave feminism and is considered as one of the most influential texts of the 20th century. One of the most common mistakes that make in reading her works is to assume that she is a mere

application of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism rather than seeing her as a creator of her own framework. Despite their shared existential project, Beauvoir departs from Sartre on various different points, most notably in the concepts of situation and freedom.¹

For Sartre, all individuals are ontologically free. Beauvoir shares this view but posits that the extent of freedom which individuals can enjoy is contingent on their power, or their effective freedom. The extent of their effective freedom determines their moral accountability to their choices. In the state of collective oppression,

such as in the case of the slaves and women, they are not morally accountable for their bad faith because their inability to exercise their ontological freedom is directly caused by the exploitation of the freedom of others.

In terms of situation, Beauvoir, in contrast to Sartre, puts emphasis on the importance of the body as a means for freedom. She adapts Merleau-Ponty's analysis and posits that the body is a situation; "it is the grasp of upon the world and an outline of our project". Therefore, this means that whatever the limitation brought about by the material condition of a person defines the subjective experiences that they are able to have and consequently, the freedom that they are able to enjoy.² Unlike Sartre, Beauvoir emphasizes the situated nature of subjectivity.³

These deviations from Sartre are among the basic foundations of her feminist philosophy, which this paper will seek to explicate and situate. More specifically, this paper will argue that her existential feminism is best achieved thru a democratic socialist model.

II. Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Feminism

The problem that Beauvoir confronts in *The Second Sex* is the how the myth of the eternal feminine, or the archetype of what woman ought to be, has confined woman to a state of immanence that disables her freedom. She seeks to remove one of the most powerful elements of the myth; it's subtlety. Her work provides a rigorous analysis of the feminine situation, without which, woman herself would not be able to understand her subordinate status.

She shares the Sartrean idea that all human beings are ontologically free, but argues that there are certain limitations to their freedom based on their situation. She does this thru the

distinction of ontological freedom and effective freedom. In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, Beauvoir highlights that in order to be free, one must have the freedom to be able to transcend, or to allow the 'up-surge of the for-itself in the world'.⁴ Such an upsurge necessitates both internal and external emancipation of the subject.

The root of woman's immanence, according to Simone de Beauvoir, is her body. Despite the body being an essential part of her experience, Beauvoir argues that it must be a means for her to grasp her totality, rather than a means to limit her. The body is part of her material reality and must become a "field of interpretative possibilities".⁵ In this regard, the body is seen as a means to achieve freedom, rather than a means to limit it. The body, in itself, has no predetermined destiny. It is society that has wrongly imposed a predetermined fate to her body. She is viewed as the means to perpetuate the species and this is her misfortune; instead of engaging in activities that contribute to her project, she engages in passivities, such as lactation, menstruation and pregnancy, because of her biological capacity to perpetuate the species.⁶ This becomes her destiny because she cannot alter nor avoid it. In this regard, her body is viewed as a means of her oppression.

In the *Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir discusses that oppression is more than a mere 'dyadic relationship', but rather practiced towards a collective group.⁷ This becomes the condition of the woman specie. The collective societal imposition of her 'destiny' acts upon her like a natural force, and conditions her to believe that there is a feminine identity that she must adhere to. Such a destiny is man-made, because human beings are essentially uncaused and free. The behaviors and the habits that men impose are integral to women are mere impositions.⁸ These impositions are what constitute her

objectification; she is not the creator of her destiny, but rather the receptor of the destiny man imposes on her. Her oppression disallows her from making a choice about whether or not to accept such impositions. Instead, she is made to choose between them. In this sense, woman becomes similar to a slave; having the ability to choose only among predetermined choices.

Her inability to freely determine her project disallows woman to become transcendent. She becomes limited to a mere potential transcendent and ultimately, as an immanent being. Despite her immanence being a choice made in bad faith, she is not morally accountable for these choices because there is no possibility of choice to begin with.⁹

Society partakes in her oppression by teaching her to assume it, thru its practices and customs. Her oppression “involves shutting off a group from transcendence and condemning it to a life of vegetation so as to increase the freedom of their oppressors”.¹⁰ Albeit our current age has brought a wider array of choices for women, the primitive conception of the myth still lives on thru the upbringing and the biases we have in society. These manifest themselves societally in the form of gender norms, which, most often than not, are mistaken to be the integral to one’s sexuality. In the second volume of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir provides analyses of how these expectations are ingrained into woman’s consciousness at different instances of her life.

During their formative years, young boys are necessitated to be assertive and dominant, whereas young girls are domesticated and taught to be docile.¹¹ This is evident in the difference in their education and their upbringing. Even today, when we look at gender-exclusive schools, the curriculum is largely based on gender normative; for instance in all-girls schools, young girls are mostly taught sewing,

knitting and embroidery while all-boys schools teach men woodwork and drafting.

As they transition from childhood to sexual maturity, the man asserts his own virility in a whole different light; he teaches her that desire is immoral. The startling difference in the reception of a sexual active woman compared to a sexual active man is testament to this discrimination. Women are taught that virginity is an important value, to the extent that her active engagement to sexual activities is the cause of her societal degradation as a woman.

Women are also expected to marry at some point in their lives. Marriage, Beauvoir argues, reinforces her immanence because woman willingly submits herself to the role of the wife and the mother, confining herself to maintaining the household.¹² Instead of it being a binding contract between two individuals, it serves to forward man’s dominance by asserting her economic dependence on him. Despite the fact that majority of married women nowadays are working, her prioritization of her career is still taken against her. For instance, people presuppose that a woman who is married must have children. Her husband, her family and her in-laws, pressure her in this situation as well. When she does decide to have children, she is further imposed into expectation, that of staying at home and caring for the children. Marriage and motherhood, according to Beauvoir, are not natural instincts that women have. These are conditioned responses that society imposes on her. Attempting to escape such a situation also does not work in woman’s favor: growing up single causes her stigma. The derogatory connotation that unmarried women are ‘crones’ and creates a notion that these women were not attractive enough to find a suitable partner, or that they have ill-personalities. It is never presupposed that she isn’t married because it is her choice.

In all these instances in her life, she is raised to believe that proper women must exemplify such submissive characteristics and, subtly and not subtly, she is conditioned to believe that denying her self – her desires, her aspirations – is the only way to achieve happiness and gain acceptance. The narrative of a predetermined woman has been continuously schooled to her such that it limits her from actualizing her own self. She is given a false sense of equality when she is appraised to be ‘a real woman’ and an exorbitant amount of criticism when she is not.¹³ This is how her false consciousness is created and perpetuated; thru the misinterpretations of patriarchy about her identity and her sex and how society perpetuates these misinterpretations.

The societal conditioning convinces her that as a female, attached with her was such expectations and standard and thus her behavior.¹⁴ As women are conditioned to believe that their options are inherently limited, they continuously allow themselves to be dominated by male narratives. This, Beauvoir states, is how man learns his power and affirms his supremacy.

Even when they feel displeasure about their current situations, woman does not retaliate against men because she assumes that the imposed limitations of patriarchal institutions and male narratives are inherent within her very nature. Beauvoir states that she acts as her upbringing directs, and the methods by which she attempts to become the subject only seek to push her further in her already imposed immanence. Even if she tries to retaliate, her meaning is hers alone and actively denied by the society she participates in or that her retaliation results in her immersing herself deeper in her immanence. Beauvoir outlines these escapist tactics in three scenarios; the narcissist, the woman in love and the mystic.

The narcissist responds to her immanence with an obsession with herself. When the object of her desires are continuously deprived from her – such as sexual satisfaction, opportunity and attempts to be dominant – she shifts her focus from these objects to herself exclusively. She desires to become the subject of her own objectivity thru appreciating herself. Such narcissism confines her to finding meaning in herself in her state of immanence and allows her to objectify her own objectified self, which in turn, limits her further.¹⁵

When a woman falls in love, she slips into becoming an object even more because of her conception of what love is. For a woman in love, Beauvoir argues, societal conditioning necessitates total surrender of body and soul. It synthesizes both her eroticism and narcissism. The greatest narrative of female love is such sacrifice. Love is a superior concept, and a woman binding herself to man thru love assumes a superior unity with his subjectivity.¹⁶

Lastly, in situations wherein a woman fails at passionately loving a man, she turns such love to God thru becoming a mystic. The difference between man and woman’s love for God is that man’s devotion has foundations in the intellect – take priests and their education for example – whilst woman’s devotion has a foundation on her idea of unconditional love and devotion. The idea of unity with God, she argues, is what woman feels is the highest form of positing herself as a subject because she finds herself ‘one’ with the absolute subject.

A woman can only be considered free when she liberates herself from her dependence on men and socializations that compel to comply with the narrative of the eternal feminine.¹⁷ Being compelled by a generally conceded value leads her to act in bad faith. This is because the lack of awareness she has of her endless possibilities

renders her unable to maximize them. The ability to freely engage the world and to communicate the meaning she posits to herself allows her to be the agent of her own meaning and allows her to avoid being bound by generally conceded values. Simply put, in order for her to be free, she must first be able to recognize her ontological freedom.

But despite having created meaning, Beauvoir states that the liberation of one woman is not enough to posit herself as a transcendent or a subject, given that as a transcendent, one must not only create one's own meaning but also convince others of the validity of such meaning.¹⁸ For all the decisions that she makes, if the society she is part of does not acknowledge her meaning, she will still be judged based on the customs of her time. Operating on her premise of inter-subjectivity, woman is both her own project and the starting point of others' project.¹⁹ Her freedom is her project, and if this cannot extend beyond her own being, such a project is futile. For instance, if she were able to freely exercise her sexuality in a conservative society, she is still unable to break free from her immanence because the meaning she makes is not shared by the society she exists in. She is yet to be considered a transcendent, because the preconceived notion of what a woman should be still exists in her context and she is always interpreted on such basis. Her project has not been fully actualized because she has not shared it with other subjects.

If however, she succumbs to the preset standards of men in order to be considered a subject, she is still an inauthentic being. This necessitates that she rejects her femininity, her material reality. Succumbing to such standards also does not bring her equality because she is still unable to change or even engage the male narrative that has long oppressed her.²⁰

For woman to be a free agent, the myth of the eternal feminine must be systematically uprooted from society's consciousness. Liberation, according to Beauvoir, is the project of all women, given that they share a similar history of oppression. In order for the meanings she posits to stand, she must create an appeal the bond of humanity that she shares with her oppressors. However, in order for her appeal to be effective, she must be able to unite all gain the response of other women and usher them to struggle against her oppressors, she must be able to reject happiness brought about by decisions made in bad faith and she must discover the pleasures of freedom.²¹ Only when her freedom and her meaning is shared can a woman truly be able to create her own narratives about her sex.

III. Democratic Socialism

A socialist democratic framework is a combination of a socialist economic framework with a democratic political framework. This entails public ownership of essential aspects of the means of production. Socialist democracy differs from a social democracy on the grounds of its economic framework; socialist democracies have a socialist framework whereas a social democracy operates on a capitalist framework.

Democratic Socialism combines a socialist economic framework and a democratic political framework. The key aspect of the model is that it is publicly owned means of production. This is not to be mistaken for a social democracy. Social democracy is a system that prioritizes social justice in a capitalist framework. In an economic sense, it involves the equal distribution of wealth and in a political sense; it prioritizes the protection of the basics rights of individuals. The principle goal of such a

framework is to provide equal opportunities for individuals in the state to actualize themselves.²²

The socialist economic model is quintessential because there are certain problems inherent within the capitalist framework, such as alienation, private profit and gross wealth inequality. Since these features are inherent within such an economic framework, any attempts at humanizing it thru rigorous regulations fails both the working class as well as the framework in itself. Public ownership of the means of production diminishes such harms, if not totally removing them thru the allowance of individuals to reflect their inner creativity within their work, a distribution of the profits among the individuals who worked for it as well as the capacity of all individuals within the state to share in its resources.

The democratic political model is essential as well because it allows for the continuous participation of all sectors of society in its development. The principle, which underlies a democracy, is freedom. This is advantageous to the underprivileged and discriminated individuals in society because it gives them the rights to be represented as well as the right to collectively assemble and lobby for rights. Legislation is essential in the actualization of individuals within a modern society as they are the vanguard of an individual's rights and liberties. In contrast to a Marxist-Leninists political model, wherein there is a totalitarian leader which creates social policy, the harm of static legislation is less likely in a democracy. This is because it allows for a discourse to exist within society and necessitates that the grievances of all sectors to be alleviated.

In essence, as socialist democratic model gives us two things; the material means for actualization of individuals and the ability to create progressive discourse in society. These

key elements are essential to the systematic liberation of women because it is targetive of the roots of her oppression, which is her economic and cultural subordination.

IV. Socialist Democracy as the Ideal

In the Ethics of Ambiguity, Beauvoir argued that the goal of society must be social equality. This is in order for all individuals to have the material means necessary to actualize their projects. In terms of woman and her otherness, she argues that the primary causes of woman's oppression are capital and culture. I'll argue that the model of a socialist democracy is targetive towards these specific aspects of her oppression, making it a justified ideal for existential feminism, as a movement, to work toward.

Capitalism has oppressed women thru alienating her from the workforce and exploiting her choices. It has both collectively oppressed her as specie and also as an individual human person. As specie, she is primarily alienated from the work force biological features, such as her capacity to bear a child. In modern day labor, this is also an evident consideration for corporations. Such features render her more of a liability than an asset because and result into workplace discrimination. Even if states intervene to ensure that individual women workers must have maternal benefits and are included in their anti-workplace discrimination laws, corporate interest manifests themselves thru wage gaps.

In terms of her consciousness, capitalism creates another caveat to the myth of the eternal feminine. Capitalism creates new standards for her thru over-sexualizing her, ultimately degrading her value to that of a mere object. This profoundly affects her and the way she sees herself. It has resulted in her negative

images of herself; she is never skinny enough, her complexion isn't clear enough. It creates a preset image of a woman that she is forced to confine herself to because it has been embedded in her consciousness that this is how a real woman should look like. The rise of advertisements has commodified her body and further renounces her ownership to her own body. The power of capitalism pervades the cultural sphere of human life and necessitates that society should police woman so she may conform to the standards it sets.²³

The upheaval of capitalism removes woman's collective alienation and her false consciousness. Publicly owned means of production translate to humane corporations which exist for the benefit and welfare of individuals because the individuals working within these models will create the corporate policies. Given that the priority is to provide everyone with the equal means to actualize themselves, this model increases the power of her appeal because it highlights the value of her humanity. This gives her and opportunity to gain subjectivity because it allows her to tailor the environment with equitable opportunities based on her own difference. This helps curb the myth of the eternal feminine by giving woman the opportunity to challenge her alienation with her new found subjectivity and prevent the creation of more myths that seek to limit her.

Democracy, on the other hand, helps alleviate the oppression of women by giving her the avenue to challenge the cultural narratives that are the source of her oppression. It provides the effective freedom that she lacks. Under a democratic framework, she has the ability to create her own project because her ontological freedom is acknowledged, and safeguarded by democratic principles. She is allowed to participate in the political process, the education system and cultural development of her state

thru positive rights, such as the right to associate, the right to lobby and the fundamental right to vote. Ultimately, the model gives women the avenue to regain her subjectivity because it concretizes and protects her freedoms and rights especially from the individuals who do not understand her appeal. This also allows her to voice out her grievances and to necessitate action for them and ultimately allow her to disclose the meanings she creates for herself. Thru democracy she was able to gain her right to suffrage, education and reclaim her right to choice over her body. The opportunity to be educated allows her to be aware of her endless possibilities, such as her career choices and the rights she has to utilize her body in whichever way she deems fit for her. The right to assemble, lobby and free speech, she is given the opportunity to usher women thru their common history and to collectively struggle for their different kinds of emancipation.

The model is ideal primarily because it accommodates women best in both her individual and collective freedom. Even if the perfection of the model cannot be achieved, the collective participation of all the sectors of the feminist movement to move towards the direction of the model provides monumental support for its rhetoric and ultimately women's collective struggle for emancipation.

V. Conclusion

Essentially what Simone de Beauvoir means when she talks about equality, is the fair and equal space for all women to define her without societal infringement. Ideally this is possible, if we operate under the assumption that society shares the same collective consciousness that all individuals must have the space to mold their essences. Beauvoir highlighted this impossibility thru the necessity of the woman's struggle for

this equality. The model, even if it cannot instill that consciousness to everyone, puts in its place the continuous regulation of humans' totalitarian and objectifying habits, to serve as correcting mechanisms to society's cultural attachments. In turn, this will result into a greater capacity for woman to collectively emancipate herself, as it keeps in check the external forces that limit her.

Even if absolute equality is an ideal dream, it must have concrete guidelines that women would be able to work toward. This is to enable them to materialize the essential aspects of such utopia, such as opportunities for woman and a space to struggle, grapple, and understand what it means to be a woman for all individual women. The ideal, as an end goal, results in the unification of larger demographics of women, because the ideal allows for a wider array of choices to be made available for women.

Ultimately, we are never completely assured that the myth of the eternal feminine will meet be eradicated. This is because we can never predict the innovation of society and its limitations. The best we could do is to give women the capacity to protect her from such judgments and limitations. The existence of an ideal of equality allows us a clear-headed vision of what we must collectively strive towards and resonate a goal that we must collectively achieve.

¹ Sonia Kruks. "Beauvoir: The Weight of Situation". *Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical Reader*. Edited by Elizabeth Fallaize. Routledge: London, 1998.

² Sonia Kruks. "Ambiguity and Certitude in Simone de Beauvoir's Politics." *PMLA* 101, 2009: 214.

³ Sonia Kruks. "Beauvoir: The Weight of Situation". *Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical Reader*. Edited by Elizabeth Fallaize. Routledge: London, 1998. 46.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵ Judith Butler. "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex." *Yale French Studies. Simone de Beauvoir: Witness to a Century*. No. 72, pp. 35-49, Winter 1986.

⁶ Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Shiela Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Vintage Books, 2011. 96.

⁷ Sonia Kruks. "Beauvoir: The Weight of Situation". *Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical Reader*. Edited by Elizabeth Fallaize. Routledge: London, 1998. 55

⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹¹ Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H.M Parsley. New York: Vintage Books, 1953. 503.

¹² *Ibid.*, 505.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 756.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 774.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 815.

¹⁹ Sonia Kruks. "Beauvoir: The Weight of Situation". *Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical Reader*. Edited by Elizabeth Fallaize. Routledge: London, 1998. 48.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 816.

²¹ *Ibid.* 857.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Sarah Levy. "How Capitalism Degrades Women." *The Socialist Worker*. June 14, 2012. Accessed May 21, 2016. doi:<https://socialistworker.org/2012/06/14/how-capitalism-degrades-women>.

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