
The Second Sex: Influence on the Feminist Movement

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Abstract

Women have always struggled to gain their place in history. No records of women's achievements existed before the 18th century. In the early 20th century, the economic, political and social standing of French women was not improving due to the ruling patriarchal mentality. Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex* which was published in France during that era raised much criticism, especially from Bourdieu, for the extreme ideas the book carried regarding women's rights. In the long run, the book acted as a catalyst to propel the second wave of the Feminist Movement and to break the patriarchal monopoly of the publishing industry, especially after being published in the United States by Knopf. No doubt, the book accumulated cultural, economic, symbolic and academic capital which is made evident throughout the article. In addition, the book played an important role in shaping policies related to birth control and abortion.

Key Words

Simone de Beauvoir; Pierre Bourdieu; Patriarchy; Feminist Movement; Alfred Knopf; Symbolic Capital; Economic Capital; Birth Control

Introduction

Women and their achievements have always been marginalized, especially in professions and positions which can influence the public's opinion. In an article titled 'Why Were Women Written out of History?' Hughes stated that despite the fact that women, throughout history, comprise almost 50% of the earth population, only 0.5% of their achievements are mentioned in recorded history (2016).

One of the major industries which contributed and led to the absence of women and their achievements from recorded history is the publishing industry. The publishing industry, which for the most part operated with a patriarchal mentality, and was no exception from other industries, played an important role in marginalizing the publications of influential women writers. According to Woolf, who is an influential critique of a male-centred literary and print culture, it was hard to find a female role model since bookshelves do not carry any books written by women before the eighteenth century, due to the lack of female literary heritage (1929, 70). The lack of female literary heritage is attributed mainly to the dominance of patriarchal societies which could greatly influence the type of publications which could reach the public and, therefore, can deny the voice of women and their opinions and perspectives the means to reach the masses, especially since patriarchy-dominated societies regard women's views and perspectives as inferior. Furthermore, Sultana indicates that patriarchal societies, where absolute priority is given to men over women, are responsible for the inferior status of women who lack access to resources and decision making, and whose low self-esteem and low self-confidence contributed to their own subordination due to feelings of discrimination and powerlessness (2011). In addition, despite the progress women had made in the publishing industry, an analysis in 2012 by Vida, an American organization for women in the literary arts, revealed the large inequality which, in the number of reviewed books published by women, constitute only 24% of the entire published work, and that the male authors continue to enjoy a large disproportionate share of the publishing industry (Flood 2013). However, despite all animosities and challenges, women continue their struggle to be heard and to take their place in literary-published circles by producing high-quality, controversial books such as *The Second Sex* which was written by Simone de Beauvoir in 1949 in France.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*

Based on an interview broadcasted on CBC, 'Simone de Beauvoir was a visionary French feminist, intellectual, novelist and memoirist, best known for her revolutionary book on women, *The Second Sex*' (2019). According to Thomson, *The Second Sex* is ranked as the

eleventh most influential book in history, and Beauvoir's statement, 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman', is still compelling and controversial today (2015). Furthermore, 'the millions of young women who now confidently assume that their entitlement to work, pleasure, and autonomy is equal to that of their brothers owe a measure of their freedom to Beauvoir', who was a main contributor to the major shifts in laws and regulations in women's favour (Thurman 2010). In addition, sixty years after its initial publication, *The Second Sex*, which analysed the Western notion of women by addressing historical, philosophical, economical and biological perspectives and which explored the power of sexuality, remains a 'triumphant revolutionary' book and an eye-opener for women (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2010). Yet, the book, which was written during a repressive time for women who less than a year earlier received the right to vote in France and whose control over their bodies through the use of birth control was prohibited, was so controversial that the Vatican placed it in the Index of Forbidden Books (Gray 2010). However, despite the Vatican's action and the controversy, the book, according to CBC, sold 22,000 copies in France during the first week, and became the catalyst for the second wave of feminist movement in the 20th century (2019). Although the book received much approval from many critics, it received negative critical criticism as well. While the writer and feminist Elisabeth Badinter stated that women owe Beauvoir everything (Freely 1999), Bourdieu referred to Beauvoir with disrespect and claimed that she does not have an independent idea of her own, but rather depends greatly on Jean Paul Sartre (Burawoy 2008).

An analysis of the criticism that the book and the author have received, especially Bourdieu's criticism along with other opposing views, and its influence on laws and regulations related to birth control, as well as the book's role in influencing the second feminist movement of the 20th century in the United States, is crucial to further understand Beauvoir's intentions behind authoring such a controversial book. Also, a review of the economic and political statuses of French women during that era, first, is important to understand the circumstances which prompted Beauvoir to write the book.

Women's Status in Early 20th Century France

From a political perspective, despite the fact that the French revolution of 1793 called for equality, liberty and fraternity, and despite the fact that French women's right to citizenship was declared during the Revolution, French women were not granted the right to vote until 1944, almost a hundred years after French men were granted the right of suffrage (Jenson and Sineau 1994, 244). In addition, French women only constituted five percent of the National Assembly *députés* despite the fact that they were able to run for elections since 1788 (Lambert 2001). Furthermore, French women used their political power differently than men by making conservative political choices, or by recording a higher rate of abstention than men. For instance, 24% of French women did not vote in the 1951 parliamentary elections (Mossuz-Lavau 1992). Such was French women's political status during the time when *The Second Sex* was written, which justifies Beauvoir's perspectives on women's role in politics. Since politics affects everyone, the absence of women's involvement in politics to create better conditions for themselves is referred to by Beauvoir as 'absurd vegetation' (S. C. Cleary 2017).

From an economic perspective, as of 1950, 60% of French females participated in economic activities such as day labourer, launderer, servant, dressmaker, and general farmer, of which all, except general farmer, were considered 'female occupations' (Zijdeman, et al. 2014). In addition, as technology progressed, women's participation in manufacturing increased since operating machines did not require much physical effort (Battagliola 2000, 41). However, women were not considered permanent employees since, at a particular time, they had to leave their jobs to marry (Woronoff 1994, 432).

Furthermore, French women's occupation in major industries was higher than men since women were more adaptive to modern technology, accepted lower wages, and were less willing to protest than men (Zijdeman, et al. 2014). Therefore, according to Beauvoir, the industrial revolution provided an entrance for women into the labour market and allowed them to gain limited economic freedom, but men began to see women as a

dangerous competitors since they accepted lower wages (Beauvoir 1952, 713).

Furthermore, women were unable to unlock their potentials since husbands and employers disapproved of women working outside their homes and created barriers for women at work (Goldin 1995, 61).

Such were French women's political and economic realities in the early 20th century. The controversy of *The Second Sex* stems from the critique of patriarchy by Beauvoir which challenged the political, social and economic realities of women which were used to justify women's inferiority (Bergoffen 2018).

Analysis of criticism of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*

Publishing a book such as *The Second Sex* by a female writer in the first half of the 20th century would certainly invite criticism, both positive and negative. Consequently, while Bourdieu criticized Beauvoir's book for increasing the symbolic violence which results from the traditional relationship between the sexes, and accused her of copying Sartre by saying that Beauvoir had 'no original ideas of her own', Burawoy, on the other hand, proved that Bourdieu's claims are baseless and that Bourdieu is extremely sexist (Salem 2014). Bourdieu's criticism and sexism should not be a surprise when coming from someone who approves of patriarchy, which is justified by myths and which make inequality seem natural and unavoidable, and from someone who regards any task conducted by men as difficult and noble, while the same task is insignificant, invisible and has no value when performed by a woman (Bruneau 2018). The other reason behind Bourdieu's attack on Beauvoir is because of her criticism to the man-made language which asserts patriarchal dominance and limits women's means of expression. According to Beauvoir, only man-made language which express maleness is available to women to express themselves (Willette 2012). Other critics such as Camus accused Beauvoir of 'making the French male look ridiculous' (Berger 2002, 120). It is worthy to note that Camus and Beauvoir were friends through Sartre, but the relationship between Camus on one hand and Sartre and Beauvoir on the other deteriorated due to Camus's support for the violent, revolutionary Algerian war and Beauvoir's and Sartre's opposition (Leisner 2012). Others criticized *The*

Second Sex for not providing a plan which could liberate women from the oppression of a dominant patriarchal society (Whitmarsh 2010, 160); but regardless, Vasilopoulou credited Beauvoir's book with the ideology which shaped the second wave of feminist movement (Vasilopoulou 2014, 489). Ironically, despite opposition and criticism at the that time by some American thinkers, Beauvoir is currently more studied by left-wing and feminist academic circles in the United States than in France (Lichfield 2008). In addition, upon the book's publication in the United States, the books received more positive reviews than negative reviews, and was described by Sanger as 'an encyclopedia of the evolution of woman', while Knopf stated, 'I must say I've never heard a book talked about so much', especially in academic circles, which demonstrate the influence of Beauvoir's book on the feminist movement and what it stands for (1953, 26).

The role of Beauvoir in influencing birth control legislations

In 2012, in a step to reduce pregnancies, the French government announced that females between 15 and 18 would have access to free birth control (Beardsley 2012). This would not have been possible without the contribution of Simone de Beauvoir in authoring and signing the *Manifesto of the 343* in 1971, which constituted an act of civil obedience and influenced birth control legislation in France, and in authoring her most famous book, *The Second Sex*, which started the new wave of feminism around the world (S. C. Cleary 2017). Up to 1967 birth control was illegal in France and abortion was not legalized until 1975 (Thurman, 2010), but by 1974, President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was determined to legalize abortion (Marlowe 2017). However, at the time the book was written, contraception and abortion were illegal; but Beauvoir still argued, then, that sex will lead to pregnancy which will either lead to marriage or to a secret operation, and added since women had no choice but to go through with a pregnancy, 'she is the prey of the species that will impose its mysterious laws on her, and generally this alienation frightens her' (S. Cleary 2017). The word 'impose' indicates the lack of women's opinion in a matter which directly relates to their own bodies. In relation to this, in an interview with NBC's *Dateline* in 2004, Donald Trump stated that despite the fact that pregnancy is wonderful for the parents, it is, however, inconvenient for

the business, which implies that it is more economically feasible for women to produce children and for men to work (Byers 2016), an attitude which was prevalent in France in Beauvoir's time. However, Beauvoir had argued, then, that the lack of abortion, birth control and parental leave would only reinforce the stereotyping of men as perpetual workers and women as perpetual baby-sitters, staying home and raising children (S. C. Cleary 2017). Aside from taking control over decisions related to her body, and aside from the economic and opportunity costs and risks associated with pregnancy and abortion, Beauvoir's ultimate argument for birth control stems from her feelings towards marriage and pregnancy. In an interview with Alice Schwarzer, Beauvoir compared the idea of marriage and children to becoming a slave (Patterson 2019). Beauvoir simply did not want the monotonous life her mother had and the burden of raising a child, which went against her existentialist ideology which 'condemned the "spirit of seriousness" in which people too readily identify with certain abstractions at the expense of individual freedom' (Mussett n.d.).

Simone de Beauvoir's Influence on the Second Wave of Feminism

Although Beauvoir declined an offer to join the feminist movement in 1960, she admitted in an interview with Alice Schwarzer, in 1972, that she was a feminist who believed that work is the most important thing and the first condition, in a woman's life, of achieving independence (Napikoski 2019). Although as an existentialist she believed that social development is required to solve society's problems, she realized that social development did not improve women's life in the world, and noticed that women's problems are the same everywhere, which prompted her to join the feminist movement (Napikoski 2019). The second wave of feminism started in the early 1960s upon the publishing of *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan in 1963, who was influenced by Beauvoir and her book *The Second Sex* on one hand, and by the suburban lifestyle which limited women's options and isolated them on the other (Bisignani 2015). It was Beauvoir's questioning of the inequality between men and women after World War II which provided steam for the second wave of feminism. According to an article in *The Daily History*, Beauvoir argued that society defined the role of women: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.' Yet, during the war, women were

asked to assume roles outside what was drawn for them by society, despite the fact that in peacetime women were regarded as secondary to men at work (2019). In addition, an articulate account of the oppressive effects of prevailing notions of femininity appeared in *The Second Sex*, which raised feminist consciousness for the second wave (Burkett 2019). Because of *The Second Sex*, the fight of feminism was won and women became more or less equal to men, but Beauvoir was not interested in the narrow view of this political movement which was reformed to include women; she was more interested in making women free within the system, thus setting the standards and objectives for the second wave of feminism (Leffingwell 2018).

The Second Sex in the United States

In the United States, no one was as happy as Alfred A. Knopf, the publisher of *The Second Sex*, with the publication of Beauvoir's book in the spring of 1953 because, on one hand, the book was listed on New York Times' best-seller list, and on the other hand, the book seemed to be on its way to become the 'most ambitious and brilliant study of woman ever written' (Gillman 1988). During that era, publishing was a male business; however, female staff from all levels of the publishing process were employed by Knopf Publishing, but none of them had the status of Blanche Knopf, Alfred Knopf's wife, who brought *The Second Sex* to the United States, which resulted in record profits for Knopf Publishing (Scutts 2016). According to Gillman, 'Paperback sales of the American edition of *The Second Sex* reportedly have passed the million mark and the book is an important resource for women's studies courses' (Gillman 1988). In addition, it seems like the 'cuts and abridgments' which Knopf requested from Parshley upon the translation of *The Second Sex* were essentials for the American market to reduce costs (Thurman 2010). However, Simons shows, after a thorough comparative reading of Parshley's translation, which was published by Knopf, and the original book, that Parshley's version is sexist and reduces the extent of Beauvoir's philosophical commitment (Simons 2017). Regardless, *The Second Sex* achieved some of Bourdieu's forms of capital accumulation. According to Bourdieu, capital is accumulated through five forms: economic, cultural, symbolic, academic and linguistic (Bourdieu n.d.).

Economic capital was achieved by the sales and profits which Knopf reaped from publishing *The Second Sex*. Symbolic capital was achieved since the book was look upon as the beacon of the feminist movement and the cause of the second feminist movement. Academic capital was also accumulated by the increased number of academic institutions which are currently studying Beauvoir's feminist perspectives and the lessons behind *The Second Sex*.

Conclusion

In the early 20th century, women's political, social and economic choices in France were limited due to patriarchal dominance in almost all aspects of life and businesses, including the publishing industry. Despite these challenges, a few women such as Simone de Beauvoir were able to break through these challenges, especially with a book such as *The Second Sex*. Although the book received much criticism by notable literary figures, the book also received praise and support by many others including and most importantly from women within the feminist movement. Beauvoir's book played an important role in shaping legislation related to birth control in France and acted as a catalyst for the second wave of the feminist movement, especially after being published by Knopf in the United States. The symbolic capital accumulated by this book is evident in the push it provided for the second feminist movement on one hand, and the changes it influenced in birth control legislation in France on the other. Needless to say, the book also accumulated economic capital which evident by the sales and profits generated by Knopf after publishing the book in the United States, not to mention the 20,000 copies sold in France during the first week of sales.

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