



Karen Vintges

A New Dawn for the Second Sex

Women's Freedom Practices
in World Perspective

Amsterdam
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To Vera

*'I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine
which is the main danger' – Michel Foucault*

*'The Gods have their twilight, the heroes are forgotten; but though mythology has
been a passing phase in man's mental history, the epic lives on' – Susanne Langer*

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Introduction

In her study *The Second Sex*, published in French in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir brings to light the second-class status of women in history. According to her, women were always ruled by men and exclusively defined in their relation to them. She concludes, however, that things for women will turn out for the better thanks to their access to contraception, work, and education. 'The free woman is just being born,' she announces, thus picturing women as subjects on the move (Beauvoir 2010: 767).

Today, women all over the world are climbing the social, educational, and economic ladder. They are entering influential positions on all continents, as presidents and political leaders, managers, scholars, and teachers, and undertake risky ocean voyages and mountain expeditions. It has become obvious: women can do anything. A new dawn seems to have broken for them. As mainstream opinion holds, it is only a matter of time for women's liberation to be completed.

However, over the last couple of years, some of my female students at the University of Amsterdam started to counter this view, telling me that the situation for women 'is far worse than you think it is.' And, by way of another example from my own experience as a Western, white, university teacher (and here I follow one of philosophy's methods of starting from the bottom up, from one's own experience): why are there only six women among the 40 students enrolled on the Research Master's program, while 50 per cent of the students in my – predominantly white – department are women? Of the – again, mainly white – full professors in the Netherlands, only 17 per cent are women. In the areas of economics and politics, inequality between men and women in positions of power is standard, as is the case in other countries in the West, a part of the world that is commonly believed to have achieved the goals of feminism. Could it be that, after all, women's brains are less fit to participate in the upper ranks of these areas, as some scientists claim today? Or are women still discriminated against, albeit in subtler and less obvious ways? Or could it be that women are unwilling to step out of their 'comfort zone'? And yet another possibility: are women perhaps resisting the prevailing models of successful personhood?

Male dominance in the domains and ranks of society where crucial decisions and big money are at stake endures the world over. Power asymmetries between men and women still manifest themselves in many other ways. The number of women living in poverty is disproportionate to the number of men, and women earn less than men at all levels. Sexual violence

against women and children continues everywhere, and has taken on new, extreme forms such as a global trafficking in women from poor to wealthier countries, 'jihadists' forcing captured women into sex slavery and 'lover boys' luring and blackmailing underage girls into prostitution through social media.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir aims to grasp the hidden currents of her time, discussing and integrating social developments and scientific results in a synthesizing view – as is the task of social philosophy. She concludes that 'patriarchy' (literally, the rule of the father) will not come to an end by legal or economic changes alone, but that 'institutions, customs, public opinion and the whole social context,' have to change for men and women to become equal. Until these new economic, moral, social, cultural, and other consequences take place, 'the new woman cannot appear' (777). Summing up all of these consequences, Beauvoir implies that 'patriarchy' has many dimensions. From her argument, we can distill the image of patriarchy as a many-headed monster, with a legal 'head', next to a moral, economic, institutional, and social one, each representing practices that should be replaced by other social practices. Only then will women's positions definitely change; only then will women no longer be 'torn between the past and the present' (777). The image of patriarchy as a many-headed monster not only captures the multi-faceted character of patriarchal patterns, it conveys, too, that different 'heads' of the monster can dominate in different settings, requiring different strategies of attack.¹ Women's experiences with patriarchy's – often ugly – faces differ through time and place, demanding a variety of strategies.

The image also allows us to question the standard view in the West that feminism is no longer necessary, except as an export product to rescue women from 'other cultures'. Contra this standard view, is 'patriarchy'

1 Yvonne Benschop and Marieke van den Brink (2012) use the metaphor of a seven-headed dragon to characterize the multifaceted gender inequality practices that exist in Dutch academia. In their analysis of women's discrimination in several disciplines, they conclude that different gender inequality practices are salient in each context, requiring a variety of gender equality measures. No one-size-fits-all- approach will do: 'there are simply too many heads on the dragon, and each requires a specific attack' (89). Informal scouting practices in the medical sciences for professorships need to be countered by a more open way of recruitment. In the humanities, 'the exclusionary effect of masculine information and support systems affects women candidates in all phases of the appointment process,' tendencies that should be countered by strategic alliances between women candidates and men in decision-making positions (Benschop and Van den Brink 2012: 87). In the natural sciences, selection processes ultimately question and measure women's qualities against a masculine standard. An effective measure here is the inclusion of female members of appointment committees (88).

perhaps like a waterbed, when pushed down in one place, rising in another? Or returning to our image of the monster, does patriarchy rear new 'heads' when one is cut off? When its legal head is slayed, does it perhaps grow others, in different domains? In this sense, are we dealing with a hydra?

As Greek mythology tells us, the divine hero Heracles had to perform twelve labours in order to save himself, the second labour being the killing of the so-called Lernaean hydra. This serpent-like monster had many heads, one of them immortal. Heracles first smashed off all other heads, with the help of his nephew Iolaus, who burnt the wounds with a torch thus preventing the growth of new heads. Heracles then lifted the monster in the air, bashed off the last immortal head and buried it. After its defeat, the goddess Hera placed the hydra amongst the stars, turning it into a constellation (cf. the book cover). From the myth of the hydra we may ask ourselves whether patriarchy, too, has an 'immortal' head. Could it be that it yet has to be slayed and that, until then, it will continue to grow new heads? The story of the hydra suggests that defeating the monster is only possible in a joining of forces. Can 'feminism' be re-articulated again as such a joint project?

Currently, 'feminism' is an essentially contested concept. Women from the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Latin America, have developed strong movements for women's empowerment and rights. To many, however, 'feminism' is an integral part of the (formal and informal) imperialist strategies of the West and, in that sense, is synonymous with Western colonialism. African-American women, in a similar vein, have criticized 'feminism' for representing the prism of privileged white women, who are part of the problem instead of the solution. For these reasons, many postcolonial thinkers keep their distance from the political language of feminism.

However, the Moroccan women I have met in recent years taught me this political language again. From our cooperation in a research project, I learned that postcolonial thinkers are sometimes too critical in throwing away the categories and ideas that feminism is based on. Many Muslim women use the phrases 'women's issues' or 'gender justice', instead of 'feminism'; but 'patriarchy', 'women's oppression', and 'women's rights' are concepts that women from all backgrounds in Morocco use, including women from Islamist organizations. Rather than doing away with feminism, I take from their – multiple – voices the necessity of 'decolonizing feminism', i.e. of its critical reformulation in world perspective (cf. Connell 2009; Rhouni 2010).

In yet another sense, such a reformulation seems necessary. The standard view of feminism in the West holds that everything is already settled, but

for some minor issues. One of these issues is that girls and women do not equally participate in the labour market, allegedly due to some remaining obstacles and to women and girls not being angry and eager enough to compete for jobs, let alone for long-hours careers. State and market organizations try to remove these obstacles and stimulate women to seek full-time employment. Without questioning the current division of paid labour and care work, women are supposed to enter the job market on male terms under the banner of the values of feminism.

My worries about this type of state- and market-feminism only increased when, some time ago, I was invited by a group of Dutch female professionals to join a brainstorm meeting on how to raise a new 'feminist movement' in the Netherlands. Among them were a few parliamentarians, a high-ranking police officer, and a trade union leader, all of whom sympathetically exchanged their experiences of being 'lonely at the top'. I remember a conversation on the road to Rotterdam with one of these professionals, who, by that time, was an employee of a prestigious management consulting firm. Why had I not understood a word she said? And why did I leave the meeting without any of the enthusiasm I had originally felt? I did write an introduction to the first magazine of the new movement, on how feminism today was more practical than ideological, but the title of the new movement made it clear to me why I had felt uncomfortable: it was called 'Women Inc.'

What had puzzled me was was the idea of a new feminist movement being an enterprise.² Women Inc.'s activities and aims are mainly about enhancing women's 'employability' in the labour market. Women from all cultural backgrounds (Inc. meaning not only incorporated, but also inclusive) are mobilized through, among other things, festivals with a range of events, such as lingerie shows, workshops for kick boxing or pole dancing, and panels on topics such as health and money. Partly subsidized by the state, Women Inc. is an organization that exemplifies the rise of state- and market-feminisms that use the channels and mechanisms offered by the market to promote gender equality (cf. Kantola and Squires 2012). How should we evaluate these current feminisms? Has 'feminism' been confiscated as a political term to the extent that its meanings range from

2 Women Inc. today has over 16 employees who function as program makers, project leaders and coordinators. It is financed by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, local governments, organizations and foundations. It has worked for the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, The Ministry of Internal Affairs, Delta Lloyd, ABN AMRO bank, Hurkmans Consultancy, Microsoft, and several other companies, as well as several local governmental institutions.

‘the invasion of other countries’ to ‘shopping, pole-dancing, even eating chocolate’ (Power 2009: 12, 27)?

Maybe it is no coincidence that, in recent years, interest in the work of Beauvoir has grown.³ Her 800-page study *The Second Sex* generally counts as the founding text – or ‘exemplar’ – of contemporary feminism (cf. Vintges 1998). Are people perhaps interested once more in the ideas and ideals of ‘original’ feminism? Should we return to its initial meanings and reclaim the notion versus its current confiscations? But what does it stand for, and how do we distinguish it from its current mainstream versions? The present study aims to answer these questions as well as to articulate some inspiring guideposts for change (cf. Taylor 2004).

In order to push the critical perspective offered by Beauvoir’s theoretical work, some concepts from the work of Michel Foucault will be introduced in this study. His mid- and final works provide important clues to update Beauvoir’s stances on who women are today – an issue that Foucault himself did not address, but which is the main theme of the present study. Especially his final work offers some concepts that enable us to revitalize Beauvoir’s notions of politics and ethics, allowing for a critical reformulation of feminism in world perspective.

Outline

Building on the theories of Foucault and Beauvoir, the present study is anchored in current academic debates as well as in the original vocabulary of contemporary feminism (cf. Vintges 1998). The first chapter discusses both Beauvoir’s and Foucault’s critiques on current ‘neoliberal’ models of self and society, and distills from their work a theoretical toolset that fits a culturally plural, global feminist perspective. The chapter argues that Foucault’s final work on ethics exhibits some striking similarities with Beauvoir’s perspectives as developed in her essay *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948), which allow us to synthesize (the best elements of) their approaches in a concept of ‘freedom practices’. The latter concept will be defined in terms of five core characteristics in order to specify it as an analytical tool. From this approach women’s ‘freedom practices’ i.e. their critically creative ethical life projects, become visible, several of which will be sketched at the end of the chapter.

3 This observation is based on my own experience.

Chapter 2 discusses the culturally plural character of the concept of freedom practices as distilled from the works of Foucault and Beauvoir. It argues that the concept comprises a culturally plural notion of an embedded ethical self that surpasses notions of moral autonomy. The concept, moreover, is culturally plural in yet another sense, in that it comprises cultural repertoires in addition to verbal ones. Building on the concepts of Susanne Langer (1960), women's freedom practices are articulated as comprising several 'keys', especially the 'presentational forms' of rite, art, and myth, alongside verbal language. From its culturally plural character, the concept of freedom practices in principle allows for a critical reformulation of feminism in world perspective. Against dominant readings of Beauvoir's exemplary text, *The Second Sex*, I will argue that this work supports a critical reformulation of today's mainstream feminism. Re-reading *The Second Sex* through the lens of Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, the work's culturally plural perspective comes to the fore. Moreover, many of *The Second Sex*'s analytical concepts turn out to be still relevant in the light of new theoretical, scientific findings and current social and political developments. The work also gives us a clue to specify what is the 'immortal' head of the patriarchal hydra today. The chapter ends by sketching some examples of women's freedom practices in world perspective.

Chapters 3 and 4 elaborate concrete examples of women's freedom practices that oppose the different faces of the hydra's 'immortal' head, in various 'keys'. Chapter 3 discusses examples of Muslim women's agencies and freedom practices, both past and present, in the domain of religion, in a synthesis of the research project 'Women and Islam: New Perspectives'.⁴ The chapter draws on the work of its participants, especially on the dissertation of Aziza Ouguir that examines the legendary stories on the lives of Muslim women saints in Morocco's past (Ouguir 2013); on Fatima Sadiqi's and Moha Ennaji's work on Moroccan feminism; and on Marjo Buitelaar's research on Dutch Moroccan women's life stories. It also presents the work of Muslim women scholars who have uncovered the Qur'an's gender egalitarian message. Finally, the chapter discusses some of the conditions of Muslim women's lives in the West as well as a few examples of cross-cultural feminist media strategies.

Chapter 4 presents several freedom practices of women and girls that oppose patriarchy's 'immortal' head in the West. As a social philosopher, trained to elucidate social patterns in 'the multiplicity of forms', it took me some time to specify patriarchy's dominant faces in this context. Moroccan

4 Cf. Acknowledgements.

colleague Fatima Sadiqi handed me an important clue telling me that ‘while we as women in the Arab world are oppressed via space, you Western women are oppressed through the image’ (Sadiqi 2013). Another part of the answer was handed to me by Beauvoir’s chapter on myths in *The Second Sex*, the studies of British feminists Angela McRobbie (2004) and Rosalind Gill (2008) and by Camille Paglia’s study *Sexual Personae* (1990). I will specify the contours of patriarchy’s immortal head in the West in a discussion of current Hollywood films, especially *The Twilight Saga*, four books and five films that in recent years created a ‘global hype’ (Bucciferro 2013).

A concluding chapter evaluates the extent to which we are witnessing a new dawn for women and the extent to which Beauvoir’s study *The Second Sex* is still relevant to our times and deserves a new dawn as well. Contra mainstream feminism in its colonial, state, and market versions, a ‘feminism in a new key’ will be articulated, consisting of women’s culturally plural freedom practices, each hunting the hydra in their own contexts and ‘keys’ – with mutual support.

The reader who is primarily interested in the thematic content of this study should skip the following section on its methodological backgrounds.

Method

Postcolonial authors rightly argue that Western philosophy should revise its concepts and perspectives in the context of our globalized world. Foucault hinted at this as well, when he said: ‘European thought finds itself at a turning point. This turning point, on an historical scale, is nothing other than the end of imperialism. The crisis of Western thought is identical to the end of imperialism’ (Foucault 1999: 113). He added that there is not yet a philosopher ‘who marks out this period. For it is the end of the era of Western philosophy. Thus, if philosophy of the future exists, it must be born outside of Europe, or equally born in consequence of meetings and impacts between Europe and non-Europe’ (113).

In my view, Foucault can be counted as a philosopher who developed some critical notions for a philosophy of the future. Using ancient Greek ethics, i.e. a pre-modern era, as a stepping stone, he came up with a new concept of freedom in contrast with the dominant Western ones of individual autonomy and authenticity. I take his concept of ‘practices of freedom’ as a serious contribution to the postcolonial project of developing concepts that account for diversity and different cultural settings. As a consequence,

new political and normative perspectives emerge, with some remarkable similarities to Beauvoir's ideas, updating her views in a timely manner.

But what about Beauvoir's 'grand theory' of patriarchy from a Foucauldian approach? Foucault was opposed to 'total' theories of society. To him, history and society are too complex to be covered by one 'totalizing approach' (Foucault 2003: 6). Societies consist of various and dynamic patterns of power one Logic cannot account for. All-encompassing theories, moreover, have inhibiting effects, putting brakes on discontinuous, particular, and local critiques.

Rather than covering the development of societies via one central concept, as grand theories do, Foucault argues for a variety of analytical tools to capture concrete patterns of power in history. At the background of his methodological concern is what William Walters (2012) calls Foucault's 'patchwork' conception of society (Walters 2012: 78). Foucault's analyses of dominant power practices (for instance, current 'neoliberal governmental' ones – see Chapter 1) should never be taken as a new grand theory of society and socio-cultural change, as Huub van Baar (2011) and Stephen Collier (2009) argue. Walters (2012) interestingly introduces the concept of 'polytemporality' in this respect. We should 'grasp the contemporary as a rather *polytemporal* state of affairs [...], a time combining multiple political techniques and styles of government, not all of which cohere or answer to a single logic of development' (Walters 2012: 10, cf. 40).

Dominant patterns of power thus exist in combination with others from different times and from different descent, contradicting or overlapping each other, or converging into new assemblages. 'Genealogical' research should track and trace these power patterns by 'studying upwards' and finding out what their nodal points are – decisive for who we are today. However, I would like to draw attention to the fact that, according to Foucault, grand theories do make sense. After discussing 'the inhibiting effect specific to totalitarian theories,' he adds: '(n)ot that all-encompassing and global theories haven't, in fairly constant fashion, provided – and don't continue to provide – tools that can be used at the local level; Marxism and psychoanalysis are living proof that they can' (Foucault 2003: 6). In the words of Foucault, analytical work 'cannot proceed without an ongoing conceptualization,' but this conceptualization 'implies critical thought – a constant checking' (Foucault 2000: 327, quoted in Walters 2012: 42).

A 'genealogical' approach can take in grand theories, since strong patterns need strong theories, but it discloses these patterns in their entanglement with other power practices. Total theories have 'provided tools that can be used at the local level only when, and this is the real point, the theoretical

unity of their discourse is so to speak, suspended, or at least cut up, ripped up, torn to shreds, turned inside out, displaced, caricatured, dramatized, theatricalized, and so on' (Foucault 2003: 6). Beauvoir's grand theory of patriarchy, which involves a single logic of development of human history, should equally be torn and cut up, and be re-articulated as a set of analytical tools that allow us to study patterns of patriarchal power in their current various configurations, in 'a constant checking.' To paraphrase Laura Nader (2008), we should study upwards, and downwards, and sideways simultaneously – an approach that can be re-interpreted as well as an intersectional one (cf. Harris 2015).⁵

Finally, from Foucault's analysis of the entanglement of science and normalizing power practices, we can learn that it does not take long for scientific results to be adopted in government policies and procedures. In the process of trying to get funding for a research project employing Muslim women's own perspectives, I received an email of a Dutch-Moroccan woman activist asking me what the heck I was thinking. Muslim women in the Netherlands are very suspicious of questionnaires and other top down survey research, and rightly so. As Foucault formulated it, 'visibility is a trap' (Foucault 1979: 200). Science reports classify people and are often used to intervene in their lives in controlling, social engineering ways (cf. Spivak 1988).

Foucault's analysis of the entanglement of power and knowledge, however, did not stop him from doing concrete research, nor from developing theoretical concepts and toolsets. His work aims to uncover what he calls 'subjugated knowledges': types of knowledge that are disqualified as insufficiently elaborated, non-scientific and naive. At stake are 'knowledges from below' that deserve to be revealed by using the tools of scholarship (Foucault 2003: 7). What makes critique possible at all is exactly 'the reappearance of what people know at a local level, of these disqualified knowledges' (8). In a similar vein, the present study aims to uncover women's and girls' subjugated knowledges, which deserve to be revealed instead of disqualified and marginalized, as repertoires of critique and creative transformation of dominant models of self and society.

Walters (2012) discusses Foucault's approach to scientific research in terms of map making, referring to Foucault's own ironic description of himself as a cartographer (Walters 2012: 141). He adds that 'there is nothing innocent about cartography' since maps 'erase as much as they reveal' (142). As Ronald Giere (2006) argues, cultural background, conventions of map

5 Nader (1969) launched the concept of 'studying up' for doing fieldwork among the powerful rather than the powerless. I therefore use the term 'studying upwards.'

making, and the designation and specification of what features are mapped, all determine 'a *perspective* from which the region is mapped' (Giere 2006: 75).⁶ However, we can and should discuss our maps in order to make better ones. This is what academics do, in reference to the world and to other theories, i.e. earlier map making. And this is what demarcates academic work from other social power practices or language games, such as literature, poetry, religion or spirituality. If there were a definition of academic work at all, I would prefer it to be: the art of accountable map making.

6 While Giere (2006) mainly refers to scientific 'models' in terms of representational maps, other authors apply Giere's scientific perspectivism to scientific theory as such. With thanks to Hans Radder.