

## Time and temporality - A phenomenological and feminist approach.

The work of Simone De Beauvoir is often looked solely through the lenses of the Existentialist philosophy that marked her entire legacy - more often than not this approach has rendered her a satellite of Sartre's genius. This has also brought her a myriad of critics and claims of inconsistencies in her understanding of concepts that lay at the crux of existentialism.

Her contribution to feminist thought was at first a revelation that shook the traditional confines of the philosophical and sociological world to the core - however, a more overlooked approach that is worth exploring when it comes to Beauvoir's work is the phenomenological framework which can be discovered when taking a closer look at her texts - to be more exact, a feminist phenomenology. Her writings are often sparked by the lived experience, and on this type of phenomenological train of ideas she also builds her understanding of existentialist freedom.

Drawing from works such as "The existential phenomenology of Simone De Beauvoir" and "Gender as Lived Time: Reading The Second Sex for a Feminist Phenomenology of Temporality" in this paper I aim to present a brief inquiry into time and temporality approached from a feminist phenomenological lense, focusing at large on Simone De Beauvoir's work but not drawing a line behind it.

We will attempt to clarify the relation between time and womanhood from a phenomenological point of view. Gender and temporality may not see, at first glance, to be interconnected, so we will attempt to follow other authors' pathway into discrediting that claim. Temporality is traditionally viewed in a phenomenological sense as a temporal passage, an advance of the present moment that ensures that future will become present anew. From a husserlian perspective, time is a complex form of intentionality that seeps its way into every facet of our life. Following into the footsteps of other feminist or phenomenological thinkers (or both), we will explore how, through her work, Beauvoir opens up the possibility of time as a gendered topic - where 'waiting' or passive present is a detrimental aspect of a woman's lived experience.

The issue of time occupies a central place in phenomenology, more specifically the consciousness of time proves to be one of the most complex challenges of contemporary philosophy, a form of intentionality that seeps into every facet of our lives. The traditional concepts we associate and use in relation with time, such as past, present and future succeed the status of indicators of a specific, isolated portion of time and become in the husserlian language more of an appearance for temporal objects.<sup>1</sup>

In phenomenology we have focused our attention on time as a subjective experience of the consciousness that is still universal and non-gendered. But as Christina Schues puts it, the connections between time and gender “have been completely neglected by many phenomenologists”<sup>2</sup> If connections have been drawn between time and subjectivity, time in relation with physical space and our bodies, why hasn't there been more inquiry into time as a gendered topic?

We argue that an important objection to this rhetorical question is Simone's De Beauvoir phenomenology, or more accurately, her phenomenological approach to temporality that is often overlooked on account on her belonging to both existentialist thought and feminist revolution. Beauvoir's work however was deeply influenced by the cornerstones of existential phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger etc) and by the way in which they approach a problem, starting with the lived experience of it and circling out into objective, general statements – we see how in *The Second Sex*, we emerge from the author's experience as a woman and outwards<sup>3</sup>.

Lived experience are what give her work authenticity, but she approaches not only from the phenomenological experience of the individual, but also from an objective perspective in order to elucidate the universal<sup>4</sup>. In *Ethics of ambiguity*, Beauvoir offers us a section on her viewing of present and future as both “infinity and totality”, a twofold perception of future as a prolonged existence of today, closely knit with the present moment. The author describes the other version of future often romanticized by catholic thinking – a future distinct from the present, in which man can fulfill his true purpose and happiness. Through the works of Hegel

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<sup>1</sup> Brough, J., *Temporality, A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism* Edited by Hubert L. Dreyfus, Mark A. Wrathall, 2006, p. 127

<sup>2</sup> Schues, C. (Ed.). (2011). *Time in Feminist Phenomenology*. Indiana University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Bauer, N. (2001). *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism*. Columbia University Press, p.266

<sup>4</sup> O'brien, Wendy & Embree, Lester E. (2001). *The Existential Phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 4

or socialist thought, the future merges together with present to become both terrestrial possibility and a promised kingdom to man, infinite in its resources and opportunities for happiness<sup>5</sup>.

We have seen how time is discussed as a whole and without taking into account gender – what dimensions of temporality affect the discussion of gender and, in general, of what it means to be a woman? The quote “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” from *The Second Sex* has been often interpreted, most famously by Judith Butler, as an acquisition of attributes that over time construct what we understand traditionally as woman. In a phenomenological sense, being and becoming a woman pertains to the “understanding of human existence as (...) an open, ongoing process”<sup>6</sup>.

When discussed in relation to gender, the future becomes a temporal space in which a woman will continue to realize her ‘womanhood’, to effectively ‘become’ a woman. This task proves impossible without the involvement of the concept of time and irrevocably ties together gender and temporality. Judith Butler writes about this ‘becoming’ as never-ending process that continuously projects itself into the future through “an active process of appropriating, interpreting, and reinterpreting received cultural possibilities”<sup>7</sup>.

Time as a gendered topic for Beauvoir, however, goes beyond the complex issue of woman as ‘becoming’, of woman as an ongoing project that re-actualizes itself in relation with time: it also entails the dimension of waiting, a suspended place that is situated in present without fully qualifying as present, as it is defined by anticipating something beyond the now, and basing an entire experience on a projection of what is to come, what needs to happen, or what we hope will happen. In the case of woman, Megan Burke argues that Beauvoir makes of waiting not only a specific, gendered dimension of time, but also a defining characteristic of her experience as human, because her “temporality is entangled with the particularity of becoming a woman”<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Beauvoir, S. (1948). *The Ethics of ambiguity*, Citadel Press, “Present and future”

<sup>6</sup> Burke, Megan M. (2017). *Gender as Lived Time: Reading The Second Sex for a Feminist Phenomenology of Temporality*, Hypatia

<sup>7</sup> Butler, J. (1987). *Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex*. Yale French Studies, p. 36

<sup>8</sup> Burke, Megan M. (2017). *Gender as Lived Time: Reading The Second Sex for a Feminist Phenomenology of Temporality*, Hypatia

Throughout *The Second Sex*, time and temporal dimension is alluded to constantly, always shaping, modifying or playing a role in woman's life, seeping into every facet of her life. Not only does this refer to what we discussed earlier, the process of becoming a woman, where attributes that are obtained through socialization or culturalization are continuously "stacking" inside the female psyche, and modifying her mode of being in the world, but it also refers to waiting:

"In songs and tales, the young man sets off to seek the woman; he fights against dragons, he combats giants; she is locked up in a tower, a palace, a garden, a cave, chained to a rock, captive, put to sleep: she is waiting"<sup>9</sup>

This metaphor casts a light over the whole experience of woman. Burke discusses how this breaks itself into each stand-alone experience that defines a woman for Beauvoir: girlhood, marriage, and sexual experience. Although starting from the same experience and anticipation of future, aging past first childhood and into adolescence presents to girls the "social pressure to assume herself as a passive object"<sup>10</sup>.

Her experience of the present is effectively robbed by a new, transformed existence of anticipation. The occupations, studies, hobbies of girlhood are devoid of any real substance, and only serve as time fillers. That is because gradually, through the enforcement of social norms and through simply existing in the world as female, she understands that time moves differently for each sex – Beauvoir tells us that "She is waiting for man"<sup>11</sup>, and by association, she is waiting for womanhood – although becoming a woman is a never-ending process, there is a age and status that is achieved which makes women present themselves as such to society. More often than not, this is tightly linked to man - how he perceives a woman, what his expectations and demands are, how he validates a girl's experience by finding her desirable and giving her attention.

The "sexual initiation" as Beauvoir calls it temporarily breaks this pattern of waiting established in girlhood and brings her into the present, in the "experience of time that comes to characterize the temporal horizon of a woman"<sup>12</sup>. This awakening is strikingly different from that of a man. First of all, it is not brought about by the ending of the waiting period and the

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<sup>9</sup> Beauvoir, Simone de(1949). *The Second Sex*, First Vintage Books Edition, p. 352

<sup>10</sup> Beauvoir, Simone de(1949). *The Second Sex*, First Vintage Books Edition, p. 353

<sup>11</sup> Beauvoir, Simone de(1949). *The Second Sex*, First Vintage Books Edition, p. 395

<sup>12</sup> Burke, Megan M. (2017). *Gender as Lived Time: Reading The Second Sex for a Feminist Phenomenology of Temporality*, Hypatia

arrival of the masculine into her life – sensual experience and desire pre-exist this moment, autonomous of the male’s narrative. Subject becomes object in this new experience<sup>13</sup>, where present becomes passive in nature: she has been defined by waiting up until this point, but through sexual experience the woman observes her own lived experience, in a phenomenological manner. However, “passivity is not pure inertia” – this break in the temporal dimension of waiting does not render her powerless. :

”To make oneself object, to make oneself passive, is very different from being a passive object: a woman in love is neither asleep nor a corpse; there is a surge in her that ceaselessly falls and rises.”<sup>14</sup>

Beauvoir’s telling of how marriage modifies the temporal dimension of woman is, in many ways, outdated – women’s liberation has come a long way since *The Second Sex* was published, and such today’s woman is no longer a satellite to her husband’s universe, as the philosopher puts it. It is interesting, however, to analyze the idea that womanhood is here defined by waiting, especially in marriage, the social status that once took over every aspect of female experience, that constitutes of a “rigid experience of an icy present”<sup>15</sup>. Burke calls this a *passive present*, a present that differs from the universal understanding of it, the dimension that truly holds any real, tangible meaning and that is ultimately the only given we possess in life. A passive present for the traditional woman – married, unemployed, devoid of ambition and subordinated to her husband – is a life of minutia and boredom, an intermediary that becomes second nature<sup>16</sup>:

“Her whole existence is a waiting since she is enclosed in the limbo of immanence and contingency and her justification is always in someone else’s hands: she is waiting for a tribute, men’s approval, she is waiting for love, she is waiting for gratitude and her husband’s or lover’s praise.”<sup>17</sup>

Although often overlooked when it comes to phenomenology of time and her contributions to it, Simone De Beauvoir opens a new dimension of understanding for how we perceive time in our lived experiences and how it affects them. Entangled with the experience

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<sup>13</sup> Burke, Megan M. (2017). *Gender as Lived Time: Reading The Second Sex for a Feminist Phenomenology of Temporality*, Hypatia

<sup>14</sup> Beauvoir, Simone de(1949). *The Second Sex*, First Vintage Books Edition, p. 448

<sup>15</sup> Burke, Megan M. (2017). *Gender as Lived Time: Reading The Second Sex for a Feminist Phenomenology of Temporality*, Hypatia

<sup>16</sup> Butler, J. (1987). *Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex*. Yale French Studies, p. 41

<sup>17</sup> Beauvoir, Simone de(1949). *The Second Sex*, First Vintage Books Edition, p. 736

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of time we find the experience of gender. As such, the notion of time as a universal, immanent reality can be questioned and re-analyzed and defined under the lens of gendered experience.

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