

Compliance and the Second Sex: Analyzing Women’s Participation in the Far Right through de Beauvoir

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ABSTRACT: As women’s participation becomes increasingly visible within far-right movements, the question of agency is often brought up; are women in the far-right agents? Although this question has been explored before, only a limited sect of this literature has analyzed this phenomenon through a feminist theoretical lens. This is notable considering much of women’s participation stems from an initial rejection of feminist values, often citing feminism as being the root cause of their lack of quality of life.

Throughout this paper, I will argue that women’s agency in far-right movements can be better explained through the application of Simone de Beauvoir’s theoretical framework. I will situate this argument within a literature review that analyzes the previous understandings of women’s agency within the far-right. Following this, I will additionally present literature on hegemonic masculinity and its relationship to far-right women’s complicity. Furthermore, the strength of using de Beauvoir’s theoretical framework to analyze women of the far right will be asserted through an analysis of the case study of Ayla Stewart, an infamous far-right online influence. This paper ultimately aims to answer the following: *How can de Beauvoir’s theoretical framework help better understand the agency of women within far-right political and social movements?*

Introduction

As women’s participation becomes increasingly visible within far-right movements, the question of agency is often brought up: are women agents in the far-right? Although this question has been explored before, only a limited sect of the literature

has analyzed this phenomenon through a feminist theoretical lens. This is notable, considering much of women’s participation stems from an initial rejection of feminist values; often citing feminism as being the root cause for their quality of life, or lack thereof. Nancy Love argues in her academic paper “ShieldMaidens, Fashy Femmes and TradWives: Feminism, Patriarchy and Right-Wing Populism” that far-right women claim feminism has functioned as a tool to rob them of “the opportunity of having a male provider, a happy family and a nice home” (Love 2020, 2). Women who uphold this perspective consequently believe that feminism has failed to provide women with the security, rights, and privileges that traditionalism once promised. Analyzing this phenomenon through a feminist lens provides a stronger foundation of understanding, particularly as the rejection of feminism becomes a tool for the recruitment and mobilization of far-right female actors.

Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* presents a plausible explanation for women’s involvement in movements that undermine their rights and freedoms. Throughout this paper, I will argue that women’s agency in far-right movements can be better explained through the application of de Beauvoir’s theoretical framework. I will situate this argument within a literature review that analyzes the previous understandings of women’s agency within the far-right. Following this, I will present literature on hegemonic masculinity and its relationship to far-right women’s complicity. Furthermore, the strength of using de Beauvoir’s theoretical framework to analyze women of the far right will be asserted through an analysis of the case study of Ayla Stewart, an infamous far-right online influence. This paper ultimately aims to answer the following: *How can de Beauvoir’s theoretical framework help better understand*

the agency of women within far-right political and social movements?

An Illusion of Female Agency?

Considering this paper will be using de Beauvoir's theoretical framework, agency must be defined first. Agency in this work will be defined through an existentialist lens found within *The Second Sex*, which suggests that agency is to have the ability to seek transcendence, or rather to posit the *Self* as sovereign (de Beauvoir 1949, 74). Further, the term 'far-right' will be simply defined as a right-wing political and social movement that exists outside of mainstream conservatism and is often more radical than mainstream conservatism.

Scholars have recently begun to address the concept of women's agency through their involvement within far-right movements, as well as the increase in their positions as leaders and organic intellectuals (Kisyova 2022; Tebaldi & Baran 202). Early research on the fringe of the right-wing spectrum often failed to address gender at all due to the ideology's association with masculinity and whiteness (Kisyova 2022, 38). It was not until the 1980s that women and gender became a prevalent aspect of extreme right-wing studies (Blee 2020, 418). This was primarily the result of gendered assumptions and stereotypes including, but not limited to, the assumption of women as "incidental political actors", or non-violent, heteronormative mothers and wives (Blee 2020, 418). Early scholars who focused on the gendered aspects of the far right suggested that women's role in the far right is limited to that of being supporters of their male counterparts within far-right movements (Kisyova et al. 2022, 39). Ultimately, this encourages a conclusion that their participation was a result of close relationships and compliance, rather than their own ideological beliefs and convictions.

It is important within this research to explore more recent literature on this topic. Moreover, Catherina Tebaldi and Dominika Baran in "Of TradWives and TradCaths: The Antigenderism Register in Global Nationalist Movements" suggest that the use of traditional gender roles within the far-right allows for a perverse type of agency to be fulfilled by these female actors. Rather, white women who take up this stereotype of being the traditional wife gain agency through upholding their nation's "purity" through their own sexual and social restraint (Tebaldi & Baran

2023, 8). Similarly, Maria-Elena Kisyova suggests that liberation and agency, in the perspective of far-right women are gained through their commitment to "femininity, traditionalism and reverence for gender complementarity" (Kisyova 2022, 37) Hence, these academic sources suggest that women's participation in the far-right is an active choice. Kisyova's paper furthers this argument that "women not only have agency but also are actively working as ideologues; creating content and mainstreaming ideology in efforts to recruit followers." (Kisyova 2022, 60). Similarly, Kristy Champion in "Women in the Extreme and Radical Right: Forms of Participation and Their Implications" examines the various forms of participation women may take, which she concludes include being violent actors, thinkers, facilitators, promoters, activists, and gendered exemplars (Champion 2020, 2). Recognizing the diverse and multiple ways in which women organize themselves within far-right movements implies that women are not passive actors. Moreover, Champion argues that "the ideology itself is adaptive and can be shaped and reshaped by female participants", thus allowing for these women to lead and mobilize these ideological movements (Champion 2020, 14).

Although this literature review presents two opposing positions on women's agency within the far-right, much of it remains based on the difficulty comprehending why women may participate in an ideological ecosystem that champions heteronormative, anti-feminist and male supremacist ideals. This paper consequently presents a novel way of understanding this phenomenon. Through the use of the existential lens and de Beauvoir's phenomenology of gender, this paper plans to situate far-right women as agents in their own complicity. This will be further explored later in the paper.

Defining the Relationship Between Far-Right Women and Hegemonic Masculinity

It is critical to define the relationship between far-right women and hegemonic masculinity, considering far-right feminine identities are posited in contrast to a hyper-masculine archetype. Through recognizing the interdependence of far-right women on a hegemonically masculine ideology, de Beauvoir's phenomenology of gender can be further understood as a theoretical basis of analysis for this phenomenon. There is extensive literature that has identified the long-term relationship far-right movements have had

with hegemonic masculinity (see Kelly 2017; Worth 2021; Kisyova 2022; Purvis 2019). Historically, this term's definition has been debated and restructured, however, Mike Donaldson conceptualized this hegemonic masculinity as the following:

“Hegemonic masculinity, particularly as it appears in the works of Carrigan, Connell and Lee, Chapman, Cockburn, Connell, Lichterman, Messner and Rutherford involves a specific strategy for the subordination of women. In their view, hegemonic masculinity concerns the dread of and flight from women. A culturally idealized form, it is both a personal and a collective project, and is the common sense about breadwinning and manhood. It is exclusive, anxiety-provoking, internally and hierarchically differentiated, brutal and violent. It is pseudo-natural, tough, contradictory, crisis-prone, rich and socially sustained. While centrally connected with the institutions of male dominance, not all men practice it, though most benefit from it. Although cross-class, it often excludes working-class, gay and black-men. It is a lived experience, and an economic and cultural force, and dependent on social arrangements. It is constructed through difficult negotiation over a life-time. Fragile it may be, but it constructs the most dangerous things we live with. Resilient, it incorporates its own critiques, but it is, nonetheless, ‘unraveling.’” (Donaldson 1993, 645-646)

Donaldson's reference of hegemonic masculinity constructing “the most dangerous things we live with” provides groundwork for understanding the far-right (Donaldson 1993, 646). A concrete example of hegemonic masculinity in the far-right can include the prevalent sexual and physical violence rooted in heteronormative power dynamics. Using this framework, it is easily understood that the far-right advocates for the reconstruction, or rather amplification of hegemonic masculine ideals. The reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity within the far-right has been explored by Owen Worth in “Reasserting Hegemonic Masculinity: Women's Leadership within the Far-Right”. Worth asserts that hegemonic masculinity is reinforced by the far-right through two connected ideals. First, the rejection of the global political economy and contemporary neoliberal world order that promotes a culture of corporate capitalism and a heightened and aggressive consumerism that has fundamentally

erased “golden-age” attitudes, culture and world order. (Worth 2021, 509). Second, the representation of a new “elite-driven globalism” that situates feminism as a significant part of the feminization of the workforce and destruction of “everyday culture, life and social normality” (Worth 2021, 509). Through upholding these inherently contradictory beliefs, the far-right asserts the need for a return to structures of gender that are based within traditionalism and the patriarchy. Moreover, Felix del Campo in “New Culture Wars: Tradwives, Bodybuilders and the Neoliberalism of the Far-Right” asserts that women's acceptance of these values is developed through gender panic that is ubiquitous in the heterogeneous political ecosystem of the contemporary far-right (del Campo 2023, 690). More specifically, del Campo's argument recognizes the visible need for the far-right to reinstate patriarchal social relational ties, resulting in anti-genderism becoming a tool of empowerment for women supporting this ideology. According to Kisyova et al., far-right women construct a narrative where the traditionalism and hegemonic masculinity of this ideological movement can function as a further path to women's liberation in comparison to previous and current feminist movements (Kisyova 2022, 37). This results in their roles as traditional women to be posited as “the key to racial salvation or endangered womanhood, legitimizes violent and non-violent action, and enables them to select and project an idealized and ideologically loaded expression of femininity.” (Campion 2020, 15). Women's acceptance of hyper-femininity and their consequential rejection of feminism functions as both tools of recruitment and mobilization, which suggests that the relationship between the far-right and its acceptance of hegemonic masculinity need to be examined to effectively apply de Beauvoir's theoretical framework as a point of analysis.

De Beauvoir's The Second Sex and Women of the Far-Right

De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* offers a critical perspective into women's subservience to men. Straying away from common biological, psychoanalytic, or economic explanations, she presents an existential framework to determine what a woman is and why women remain oppressed? Her objective in forming her phenomenology of gender is to understand why women are not autonomous, equal human beings to men, but instead the secondary ‘Other’. As de Beauvoir developed this theory, she

argued that women's subservience is a result of their immanence, in contrast to man's transcendence. Transcendence in this context is to extend towards the future through seeking to surpass a current condition; whereas immanence is to be within a stagnant state, or to not be able to seek projects that realize the self as an existent. Men's ability to posit themselves as the 'Self', in contrast to women's 'Otherness', is achieved through women's ability to reproduce. This leads to their inability to seek any condition beyond the biological human state (Beauvoir 1949, 72). Her human state is shaped by her body's ambiguity which dismisses her consciousness in favour of her body's commitment to the survival of the human species. De Beauvoir recognizes that it would only be natural for women to be recognized as superior due to this "supernatural" ability, however, women's ability to reproduce instead limits her autonomy. Her autonomy is restricted by the biological confines of her human state, the necessary domestic labour she takes on, and the responsibility of the continuation of humankind through reproduction and maternal care. Consequently, she is imprisoned by her biology, unlike men who are not imprisoned by the same biological responsibilities. Men, who can attempt to escape from their biological fate, can thus achieve transcendence and posit themselves as the 'Self', rather than the 'Other'.

What is important for this research, is not a woman's original immanent state, but rather her current one. Why do women continue, or rather choose to be subordinate to men when they are no longer limited by their reproductive abilities? According to de Beauvoir, women's current subservience is a result of their complicity. Using various archetypes of women (such as prostitute, mystic, and narcissist) as proof of this phenomenon, de Beauvoir identifies the internalization of 'Otherness' as a central reason behind women's continued subjectivity, as well as their lack of unity against their oppression. Simultaneously, she recognizes that this is in part a consequence of women's upbringing. She states that women "without ever being taught the necessity of assuming her own existence" rely on the support, protection, and guidance of the 'Self' instead of realizing their own transcendence (Beauvoir 1949, 757).

The relationship between far-right women's femininity and hegemonic masculinity situates itself strongly within de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Considering

de Beauvoir understood women's role as the 'Other' to be a consequence of her immanence, or stagnancy. It could be assumed that these women are chasing transcendence through their pursuit of right-wing traditionalism. Moreover, this assumption of perspective is supported by Tebaldi and Baran's aforementioned notion that women gain agency through upholding their nation's "purity" through both their own sexual and social restraint (Tebaldi & Baran 2023, 8). Yet, this perceived chance at agency (rather than posit them in a transcendent state) solidifies their role as the 'Other', as the women. In interpreting women's complicity to be the 'Other', de Beauvoir presents women's subjugation as both voluntary and involuntary, using Sartrean bad faith as a voluntary refusal of freedom and acceptance of domination (James 2006, 151). To expand on this despite de Beauvoir recognizing women's situation as being inherently affected by patriarchal societal structures, she also argues that:

"Refusing to be the Other, refusing complicity with man would mean renouncing all the advantages an alliance with the superior caste confers on them. Lord-man will materially protect liege-woman and will be in charge of justifying her existence: along with the economic risk, she avoids the metaphysical risk of a freedom that must invent its goals without help." (de Beauvoir 1949, 10)

De Beauvoir's variability on whether women are truly complicit in their subjugation presents an interesting position when analyzing women of the far-right, especially considering the impact that both socialization and contemporary accessibility have on women's choices. If we are to assume that women of the far-right are both a product of the complexities of male hegemony and the patriarchy, while also maintaining that she is an agent in choosing subservience, then a unique understanding of their participation is presented.

A Case Study: Tradwife Ayla Stewart, Wife with a Purpose

In order to argue that de Beauvoir's theoretical framework helps scholars better understand women's participation in the far-right, it is critical that it be applied to a case study. For this research, I will apply this framework to the case study of Ayla Stewart, a female far-right influencer who identifies herself

as a Tradwife. According to Love, Tradwives are a “group of white nationalist ‘mommy vloggers’ who promote the virtues of staying at home, submitting to male leadership [and] bearing lots of children” (Love 2020, 2). Tradwives are derived from the recent idealization of what Ashely A. Mattheis notes as “#Tradculture” (Mattheis 2021). Although Tradculture presents itself as a positive subculture that celebrates traditional values of marriage, homemaking, and family ideals, this far-right online culture has noticeably been connected to white supremacist and extreme heteronormative gender narratives. Tradwives mobilize a fabricated culture of traditionalism and gendered mechanisms to reproduce whiteness and white social dominance. More specifically, conceptions of white femininity are utilized to posit women’s primary roles as “caregivers and domestic managers” (Stewart 2020). The women who act as Tradwives, specifically as influencers online, perform traditional female gender roles through “visible presentations of hyper-femininity and articulations of the benefits of submission to men as their ‘head of household’” (Mattheis 2021, 93). Traditional conceptions of biology are consequently weaponized to create a stylised imagery of female subordination and restriction to the private sphere. According to Mattheis, “linking care and domesticity in this ideal with the stated desire to be a submissive helpmeet, reifies notions of women’s ‘natural’ roles as wife and mother.” (Mattheis 2021, 93). These idealized gender dynamics of benevolent paternalism result in a narrative that reinforces heteronormativity and masculine domination. More importantly, this subgroup of far-right women constructs hyper-femininity as an aesthetically pleasing fantasy, which is often in direct opposition to contemporary intersectional feminist values. Using an anti-feminist narrative of victimization, Tradwives, like Stewart, consistently lament “how white men have been robbed of their rightful status; their jobs and roles have been taken by women, people of colour, and immigrants in the workforce”, while also arguing that feminism solely exists to destroy the traditionally gendered sanctities of marriage and purity (Love 2020, 2). Understanding the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity within the gender dynamics of Tradculture allows for far-right Tradwives to be a critical case for analysis using de Beauvoir theoretical framework.

Tradwife Ayla Stewart is a Mormon mother of six children who began her blog in October 2015, which lasted until February 2019 (Gawronski 2019, 8).

Although she is no longer consistently posting on her blog, Stewart has consistently identified herself as maintaining “alt-right” or “far-right” beliefs. These beliefs were particularly represented through her willingness and plan to participate in the ‘Unite the Right’ white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017. Stewart and her status as a Tradwife is relevant to applying de Beauvoir’s theoretical framework, considering her claimed past as an educated feminist who saw the negative light in which feminist scholars viewed motherhood (Stewart 2015). More specifically, Stewart criticized her academic peers as rejecting the natural importance of female biological gender roles. As a result, her belief in traditionalism and her own complicity in traditionalism and hegemonic masculinity resulted in her separation from her previous feminist beliefs. Once she began vlogging, she maintained an increasingly influential position, acting as an influencer who recruited and encouraged women to celebrate far-right patriarchal values that reinforced hegemonic masculinity, white femininity, and called for further gender traditionalism. Stewart’s relevancy and uniqueness present a strong case study for analysis, particularly due to her emphasis on the importance of white patriarchal dominance, traditional gender roles, and racial purity.

In her YouTube video “Feminism- My History With It and My Rejection of It”, Stewart provides her audience with her background and how she came to accept her Tradwife views. Stewart suggests in this video that much of her life socialized her into being a feminist, stating:

“I went to a very liberal high school program. I had teachers who were former Black Panther members and things like this. So, I never questioned whether or not I was going to be a feminist” (Stewart 2015).

Stewart later discusses how she completed both a bachelor’s degree in Anthropology and a graduate degree in Gender and Spirituality studies. However, she cites her turning point away from feminism as its degradation of men, and natural gender roles (Stewart 2015). Interestingly, regardless of her claimed socialization as a child and young adult, Stewart maintained strict traditionalist ideological positions. However, using de Beauvoir’s theoretical framework, I would argue instead that it was Stewart’s later socialization and active choice to embrace these traditionalist gender values (and harmful white supremacist rhetoric) which led Stewart to her

Tradwife status. Moreover, Stewart states that “the [feminist] cultural reality is not that they want to be equal with men. The cultural reality is that they’re very degrading to men, to men’s instincts that have been placed in them, whether you believe by God or by evolution” (Stewart 2015). This demonstrates her active choice to value men’s rights concerning feminism as a critical part of her rejection of the movement. Considering that Stewart’s education during her graduate degree focused heavily on Mormonism, the religion she identifies with, and she became a mother of two during this period (Stewart 2015), her choice to reject feminism and embrace hegemonic masculinity was openly stated to be shaped by both her peers and her family values, that of which she believed was in direct opposition to second-wave feminism. Within this origin video, Stewart plays an active role in romanticizing an idealized, nostalgic facade of hetero-patriarchal dominance that exists within the gender dynamics she practices and encourages her audience to abide by. Mattheis argues that “traditional notions of white femininity are a modality through which white women have learned to assert power within white patriarchal culture”; this argument, understood through the lens of Stewart’s far-right advocacy and participation, can be posited within de Beauvoir’s critique of women’s complicity in patriarchal structures (Mattheis 2021, 95). As suggested by de Beauvoir, if women choose to reject patriarchal structures and relations, they risk further losing the limited privileges they gain through compliance (Beauvoir 1949, 10). This suggests that Stewart and other women among the far-right are both complicit, but also attempting to gain further privilege, or a similar transcendence, to that of men through a subjugation to men. In pursuit of this, they play a role in advancing traditional gendered roles and racial purity that maintains white supremacy and fascist nation-building.

What does this imply about women’s agency in the far right? The case of Ayla Stewart, showcased in her YouTube video, demonstrates that neither socialization nor choice acts alone when trying to understand women’s complicity in the far-right. It is clear throughout this video that Stewart was highly influenced by the patriarchal structures both during her graduate degree and after, despite her rejection of feminism beginning at a later date. Further, much of the discourse she presents in her video solidifies itself within far-right rhetoric; arguably making

it clear that she actively chose to discuss certain themes to normalize and soften this ideological position. Regardless, what Stewart’s case study makes clear is that de Beauvoir’s phenomenology of gender regarding her understanding of women’s complicity should be applied to further attempts at understanding women’s agency in the far-right.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the unique way in which de Beauvoir’s phenomenology of gender can be used to understand women’s increasingly visible roles within the far-right, both online and in the public sphere. In order to further this argument, a recognition of the role of hegemonic masculinity in the far-right is crucial to apply de Beauvoir’s theoretical framework. Although there remains a gap in the scholarly literature that addresses women’s involvement in the far-right, particularly in a feminist manner. The literature that does exist continues to debate whether women are independent agents when participating in politically extreme movements. Thus, the use of Ayla Stewart and her relationship to patriarchal, heteronormative far-right Tradculture as a case study provides a crucial insight into the potential de Beauvoir’s theory has in terms of analyzing the far-right through a feminist lens. Arguably, de Beauvoir’s framework allows for the complexities of women’s subservience to be recognized as having both voluntary and socialized dimensions. Where this paper falls short, is through its limitation to one case study. Considering the uniqueness of applying de Beauvoir to women’s far-right participation, it would be interesting to see whether this framework would still apply to other cases as well.

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