

BOOK REVIEW

## We Are Not Born Submissive: How Patriarchy Shapes Women's Lives

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Manon Garcia's *We Are Not Born Submissive* investigates the role of women's submission in the perpetuation of patriarchy. Garcia's argument focuses on 1) defining submission; 2) investigating the epistemological issues that stand in the way of understanding women's submission; 3) describing the lived experience of submission and its manifestations; and 4) examining the allure of submission for women. Garcia concludes by discussing the prospects for a future where women will no longer be tempted into submission.

Garcia defines women's submission as a form of *consent*. In her words, it is the "decision to stay in a childlike situation, that is to say, to not actively pursue freedom" (188). In essence, it is a "passive *attitude* of not actively pursuing freedom" (188, my emphasis). As this definition evidences, submission poses a philosophical problem if we think of it as an active decision to embody a passive state. To resolve it, Garcia claims that submission is a way—to put things colloquially—of "going with the flow": submission has its material and psychological rewards, and consenting to submission enables one to benefit from them. In the case of women, the attitude of submissiveness manifests itself in beauty work, the focus on romantic love as a form of fulfillment, and the very structure of many heterosexual relationships.

For Garcia, it is crucial for feminism to grapple with this phenomenon. If feminism consists in the project "to shine a light on women's oppression *as* women" and "to fight this oppression" (3), and if submission plays an integral role in the perpetuation of this oppression, then it behooves feminists to study it. According to her, little has been said about submission in feminist philosophy. With the exception of Simone de Beauvoir, we do not have good models for understanding women's submissiveness. Hence the importance for feminists to analyze this central aspect of women's lives.

According to Garcia, feminists have not written sufficiently about submission out of fear of "adding grist to the conservatives' mill" (8). In other words, studying the prevalence of women's submission may lead us to think of women's submission as *natural*. By contrast, as the title of her book indicates, for her, "we are not born submissive." That is to say, women are socialized into consenting to their subordination. Garcia judges that writing about submission is a risk worth taking since submission is still predominant in women's lives.

Garcia rightly explains that understanding submission presents an epistemological conundrum. Because silencing plays a major part in submissiveness, how can we learn about submissiveness from the point of view of those who submit? As she puts it, “an analysis of submission is crucial in order to *think power*. If we proceed without a concept of submission—if we only study asymmetrical power relations from the perspective of domination—we deprive ourselves of a complete understanding of power relations, especially of asymmetrical power relations, as they are considered from only one point of view” (73–74). In response, she argues that, in the case of women’s submission, a solution to this problem lies in appealing to the lived experience of *some* women—namely, those who have a measure of social privilege such that they will be listened to. This strategy, she explains, is exactly that adopted by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. There, Beauvoir argues that, on the one hand, as a woman, she has a privileged understanding of women’s world—one that a person who is not a woman could not have. On the other hand, her own position as a woman who is largely emancipated affords her some impartiality as well as the status to speak on behalf of women. Beauvoir’s strategy justifies the central place that she occupies in *We Are Not Born Submissive*.

Before commenting on Garcia’s use of *The Second Sex*, I should pause to comment on the validity of Beauvoir’s approach. First, doesn’t this approach replicate the epistemological problem at a different level? Beauvoir may have some insight into women’s condition. But isn’t she limited to that of *only* women who share her social status? For example, can she elucidate the condition of women who are not economically privileged or who are members of oppressed racial groups? Beauvoir has faced numerous criticisms for not incorporating the lived experience of working-class women or women of color (Spelman 1988; Gines 2010; Gines 2017). Given these criticisms, doesn’t Beauvoir’s strategy and, by implication, Garcia’s, fail?

The problem raised by Beauvoir’s positionality leads to a related issue about Garcia’s own standpoint as a scholar. In the first chapter, Garcia cautions that she will restrict her analysis to Western women (13–15). There is some merit to this stance since, as she notes, feminists in her position may harbor imperialist representations of non-Western women that can harm such women. However, the Western world is vast, and a multitude of women’s experiences are part of Western societies. Why not bring in authors other than Beauvoir? In focusing on *The Second Sex*, Garcia risks replicating Beauvoir’s marginalization of certain Western women. Anticipating this issue, however, Garcia points to the enduring appeal of *The Second Sex* to women of a variety of backgrounds; this observation speaks to the viability of her own project.

For Garcia, the merit of discussing Beauvoir lies in the phenomenological method employed in *The Second Sex*. As readers might know, the book is divided into two volumes: “Facts and Myths” and “Lived Experience.” Whereas the first volume adopts a seemingly objective, but truly masculinist, point of view, the second volume gives a voice to women—in particular, their experiences of submissiveness. Garcia argues that other approaches to domination/submission—whether naturalist ones, such as Rousseau’s, or social-constructionist ones, such as Catherine MacKinnon’s—end up tying femininity to submissiveness. In the case of naturalism, women are naturally submissive, whereas the type of social constructionism MacKinnon endorses views submissiveness as essential to the social construction of womanhood. Submissiveness, for Garcia, arises from women’s situation and is not intrinsic—whether naturally or socially—to femininity. This is a position Beauvoir endorses and, hence, a motive for returning to her work.

Yet, given that *The Second Sex* was published in 1949, Garcia's choice to take her lead from Beauvoir raises several questions. First, are there other feminist thinkers who avoid both the naturalist and radical-constructionist theses and who might provide fresher insights than Beauvoir's? Sandra Bartky is a prominent feminist philosopher who comes to mind. Although her work is not contemporary, it is still more recent than Beauvoir's. Indeed, *Femininity and Domination* is a landmark study of the phenomenology of women's submissiveness—whether one considers Bartky's discussions of feminine narcissism or women's shaping of their bodies under modern patriarchal power (Bartky 1990). Garcia's failure to cite Bartky is a notable lacuna. Second, would it not be more fruitful to offer a phenomenology of women's submission today over an extensive recapitulation of Beauvoir's philosophy? After all, the condition of women has changed since 1949, so the heavy focus on Beauvoir might strike one as unnecessary. More specifically, one might ask Garcia whether there are any novel ways in which women embody submission today. Or is it simply the case, for example, that beauty work has new trends? How have different forms of submission evolved since the time of Beauvoir's writings? These questions deserve greater scrutiny.

Garcia's discussion of the connection between submissiveness and patriarchy raises another pressing question—namely, the applicability of her argument to other forms of oppression. One of the overarching themes of *We Are Not Born Submissive* is that women's submissiveness and the perpetuation of patriarchy are deeply intertwined. Although in Western societies women are encouraged to be independent, according to Garcia, they still consent to submission in many parts of their lives. The pleasure of beauty work illustrates this claim. Although men may subject themselves to demanding aesthetic standards, women still spend more time and money on shaping and adorning their bodies. In short, women submit to the patriarchal norm that they should be aesthetic and sexual objects. By and large, they still view themselves through the male gaze and beautify themselves accordingly.

Garcia makes a convincing argument that submissiveness plays an important role in women's oppression. Still, one wonders to what extent women's submissiveness is distinct. Could someone not have written a book with the title "We Are Not Born Submissive: How X-Form of Oppression Shapes Y-Group's Lives"? It would have been interesting if Garcia had addressed these questions: Does women's submissiveness differ from that of other oppressed groups? Is it distinctive in quality? Or is the issue one of quantity? In other words, is the extent to which women consent to their submission greater than that of members of other oppressed groups?

A few words to conclude about Garcia's view of women's emancipation. The thesis of *We Are Not Born Submissive* is that submissiveness is not an essential trait of women. This statement entails this question: If women are not born submissive, will they ever adopt nonsubmissive attitudes? Garcia's vision of women's emancipation centers on a future when women will not be submissive. As she explains, "submission is not inevitable" (198). There may be certain localized practices that women may engage in and embody submissiveness, such as BDSM sexual relations, but this attitude will no longer be part and parcel of their condition. This vision for women's future raises practical problems. What will it take for us to reach this state?

Garcia homes in on sexual consent at the end of her book to delineate three related obstacles to this future. First, she tackles legal issues raised by sexual consent and dwells on the appalling figures concerning sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape. This issue relates to the problem of believing the testimony of women who have had these experiences. How does this relate to submissiveness? As Garcia describes, "this doubt

has to do with the norm according to which women should submit to men: in a way, to complain about men's sexual violence is a deviation from the norm of femininity" (205–6). Second, Garcia notes that traditional views about eroticism, according to which women's submissiveness is conceived as natural, stand in the way of emancipation. If women were liberated, wouldn't heterosexual relations "lose their spice"? Third, she discusses what she calls a "political issue"—the fact that women are socialized into submissiveness, such that "women have a hard time saying 'no' to men" (206). These three issues related to consent may have their counterparts in other manifestations of submissiveness. For example, with regard to beauty work, some might complain that if women did not submit to demanding aesthetic ideals, they would lose their allure. Garcia concludes that part of challenging patriarchy depends on creating a world where women no longer feel the temptation of submission, and this will in itself transform women's sexual lives, their relation to their own bodies, and other aspects of their condition.

Overall, Garcia brings an insightful perspective to two main areas of philosophical research. First, her work will appeal to Beauvoir scholars since it showcases how *The Second Sex* helps us better understand submissiveness. As such, her book contributes to the long-standing endeavor of highlighting Beauvoir's distinctive contributions to feminist discourse. Second, Garcia adds to feminist philosophy by extending the task of exploring women's submission. In particular, scholars searching for up-to-date research on domination, misogyny, and definitions of oppression will find useful insights in her book. On this point, let me conclude by drawing attention to two of the singular merits of *We Are Not Born Submissive*. The first lies in Garcia's efforts to define submissiveness in a way that dispels its apparently paradoxical character. Another of its merits lies in identifying why and how women consent to their submission. Although her reliance on Beauvoir might appear heavy-handed, the timeliness of Garcia's topic and the analytical clarity of her research compensate for it. *We Are Not Born Submissive* will undoubtedly enrich our conversations in feminist philosophy.

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