

Karen Vintges

A New Dawn for the Second Sex: Women's Freedom Practices in World Perspective
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In *A New Dawn for the Second Sex*, Karen Vintges draws on the ethical thought of both Simone de Beauvoir and Michel Foucault to propose a detailed and original account of feminism as a set of creative, critical, and situated ethical life practices. Vintges's book comes as a response to the pressing need to reconsider feminism in light of its transformations in a globally diverse and neoliberal political climate. On the one hand, feminisms springing from cultures and countries around the world, most notably Islamic feminist movements, have challenged certain understandings of the meanings and forms that women's liberation can take. On the other hand, Western feminism has faced an increasing and for some highly suspicious involvement with state and market imperatives. Vintges argues that her concept of feminist freedom practices allows for a global diversity of feminisms and at the same time challenges neoliberal tendencies in Western feminism.

Beginning with a brief introduction to situate her work in relation to the challenges feminism faces—with its global diversity and its cooptation by market imperatives being just two current "heads" of the "hydra" of patriarchy—Vintges proceeds in chapter 1 to construct her concept of feminist freedom practices as a response to these challenges.

Vintges demonstrates that both Beauvoir and Foucault propose a remarkably similar alternative to the state- and market-driven constructions of our lives as managerial projects geared toward personal success. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir argues that ethical subjects must live their lives in a continued series of attempts to contest power and become free by ensuring freedom for all. Foucault, too, moved in his later works toward an account of practices of the self that contest and criticize dominating power and create ethical alternatives for self and society. Beauvoir and Foucault, Vintges argues, also share the sense that these ethical freedom practices not only involve concern for others but also action and practice with others in groups or critical communities.

Having laid out its foundations in her discussion of Beauvoir and Foucault, Vintges constructs her concept of freedom practices as "distinct sets of critically creative ethical life projects" (48). Freedom practices are personal projects that involve concern for others, critique of domination, and creativity with respect to values. Moreover, they require action and behavior, rather than just a shift in attitude or a reflective maneuver. Yet, carefully avoiding political individualism, Vintges insists that freedom practices must be enacted within an ethical community or movement, drawing from the possibilities this community offers in terms of models and self-techniques, but also contributing creatively to those very possibilities.

Foucault and his followers tend to draw upon men or groups of mostly men for their examples of freedom practices. In contrast, Vintges cites many examples of women's freedom practices throughout the history of philosophy, from Hypatia to Beauvoir herself. These women were thinkers who "lived" their philosophy through political or religious practice within communities based on a critique of dominant models of life and on the creation of shared ethical and philosophical principles.

In the second chapter, Vintges defends her Beauvoirian-Foucauldian account of freedom practices, arguing that it allows for a plural approach to feminism that will be able to tackle the many-headed monster of modern patriarchy. As Vintges points out, liberal feminism's persistent emphasis on the value of rational choice and self-determination excludes many non-Western feminist projects. Citing Saba Mahmood's work on Egyptian Muslim feminists, Vintges argues that an inclusive understanding of feminism must be able to include values that are different from or even opposed to the value of autonomy and rationality, such as religious piety or cultural orthodoxy. Rather than seeing women who pursue such values as oppressed subjects in need of education and liberation, feminism must accommodate the different forms that agency can take in pursuing freedom from oppression.

With its inclusion of spiritual, mythical, and artistic aspects and its emphasis on community, the concept of freedom practices is, Vintges claims, much better situated to allow for plurality in feminism. Foucault drew heavily on various spiritual practices, including Christian ascetic practices but also Zen Buddhism and Islamic Sufism, in developing his notion of ethical self-formation. For Foucault, ethical life projects are not a matter of secularism or conformity to a certain (Western) set of values, but can involve a diversity of creative ways of life that are critical of domination. Beauvoir was heavily critical of religious and cultural practices that contributed to the domination of women. Nevertheless, she too recognized the importance of spirituality and culture for subjectivity, as evidenced by her analysis in *The Second Sex* of the role of myths in women's oppression. Feminist freedom practices are therefore not inimical to religious values; in fact, they require creating new myths in order to challenge the myths of patriarchy.

Thus Vintges defends her concept of freedom practices as one that can embrace a global diversity of feminisms. In the final two substantial chapters, Vintges applies her concept of feminism as culturally plural freedom practices to Muslim feminism and to Western pop culture, respectively.

The third chapter contains a discussion of Islamic feminisms as feminist freedom practices. Vintges first focuses on Muslim feminist movements that have arisen in Middle Eastern and North African Muslim countries. Rather than embracing Western ideals of women's liberation, these Muslim feminists work within their religious and cultural context to develop critical and creative stances on Islam. They do so, Vintges argues, by developing "ethical-spiritual life projects" that are characterized by a commitment to Islam and a concern for other Muslim women (109).

One example that Vintges provides is the use of female Sufi saints in some Muslim countries as role models for girls and women to develop their own lived relationship with ethics and spirituality. Embracing these ancient figures, Muslim women challenge contemporary restrictions on women's relationships to spirituality. Vintges also gives a thorough overview of modern movements in which, through rereadings of the Qur'an, women challenge patriarchal and oppressive traditions and propose new understandings of Islam. Vintges

argues that her concept of freedom practices does justice to the revolutionary aspects of these women's movements in which a critical and creative lived stance is developed and enacted in community with other Muslim women and men.

Vintges also gives an overview of the situation of Muslim women in the Netherlands. Presenting it as an exemplification of their place in western Europe in general, Vintges discusses the subjection of Muslims to neoliberal government practices and the disadvantages they face in a system that prioritizes individual responsibility. In this context, Muslim women's practices and political actions, such as wearing the veil while engaging in what are considered typically Dutch or Western activities, can contest both their own representation within neoliberal political discourse and the patriarchal elements of Islamic culture. "Muslim women in Western Europe," Vintges points out, "challenge patriarchal traditions by simply leading their lives, a fact that is overlooked by many, including many 'feminists'" (123). Exercising agency in critical and creative ways through Qur'anic readings, intentional veiling, and subversive and playful self-representations, Vintges claims that Islamic feminists all around the world enact feminist Islamic freedom practices.

Turning to Western women's freedom practices, Vintges focuses in the fourth chapter on myths and attitudes surrounding women's sexuality in modern Western countries. As Beauvoir demonstrated in *The Second Sex*, myths are instrumental in constructing woman's relation to sexuality: women are typically offered the option of being either the passive prey for men's sexual domination or the sexual temptress who endangers men's freedom and lives. Although attitudes to women's sexuality appear to have changed since the publication of *The Second Sex*, Vintges points out that it is not clear to what extent these changes have liberated women's sexuality. Vintges follows Beauvoir in looking to popular culture, specifically film, for an analysis of current myths of sexuality that may be challenging traditional patriarchal myths and that may therefore play a role in women's freedom practices.

Somewhat surprisingly, Vintges chooses Stephanie Meyer's infamous *Twilight Saga* as her case study. Many have argued that *Twilight* presents a conservative message that woman's sole desire in life should be for the protection of men in the form of marriage, maternity, and domestic security. Acknowledging the conventional nature of the plot, Vintges nevertheless argues that *Twilight* still offers the potential for a new myth of sexuality. The female focus in the *Twilight* films combined with the apparently mutually supportive professional and romantic relationship of its co-stars, Vintges claims, present a new relation to sexuality for women in which personal, professional, and sexual satisfaction are not mutually exclusive in a woman's life. Vintges argues that these types of myths of sexual agency must be acknowledged as crucial elements of feminist freedom practices for feminism to maintain a connection to women's lives today and in the future.

In concluding *A New Dawn for the Second Sex*, Vintges describes herself as repairing the apparent absence in *The Second Sex* of a route for women to challenge the patriarchal structures in which they find themselves. More than just a rereading of or addendum to Beauvoir's classic work, Vintges's book presents a strong new account of pluralist feminist practices based on both the insights of Beauvoir's political and ethical thinking and Foucault's account of critical and creative ethical subjectivity. The concept of freedom practices is detailed and comprehensive, offering ample opportunity for further application to other political practices. Especially important is the balance that Vintges strikes between freedom and situatedness and between individual and communal aspects to political practice,

challenging the tendencies to view Foucault's ethical self-practices as overly individualistic and Beauvoir's account of oppression as leaving no room for agency.

Moreover, Vintges elaborates her concept with sensitivity to the diversity of forms that women's pursuits of agency and critiques of domination can take, providing an explicitly plural account of women's freedom practices in global perspective. Contrary to many Western models of feminist agency, Vintges's concept of freedom practices enables Muslim women's practices to be seen as more than the actions of oppressed subjects misled into supporting the very system that oppresses them.

That being said, Vintges perhaps dismisses too quickly the potential of concepts other than that of freedom practices to offer a less individualistic and more context-sensitive approach to what we should value. In associating feminist theories of relational autonomy with liberal feminism more broadly, for instance, Vintges misses the chance to discuss what a relational theory of autonomy could or could not offer for understanding women's practices that value cultural and religious context above or instead of individual free choice. This could have provided an opportunity to draw a stronger distinction between freedom practices and a nonindividualistic but nevertheless liberal understanding of autonomy.

Another shortcoming of the book is the discussion of contemporary myths of sexuality in the *Twilight Saga*. Vintges's attempt to provide a feminist sensibility to a film widely popular among young women is commendable, and aligns with her desire not to dismiss forms of women's lives that do not conform to traditional feminist values. However, it is unclear how a freedom practice might draw on the potentially liberatory elements of *Twilight* without at the same time taking on its patriarchal and conservative message. Further discussion of how such a freedom practice could be critical of dominating power or creative of new values or ways of life—two of Vintges's key conditions for freedom practices—would therefore be necessary to support Vintges's claim. Another choice of popular film, such as the more radical and by now extremely popular *Hunger Games* series, or even more attention to some of the popular female artists mentioned at the end of the chapter (such as FKA Twigs and Miley Cyrus, or, one might add, Beyoncé) would probably have provided a more convincing account of potentially liberatory changes in women's sexuality that might be involved in feminist freedom practices.

Nevertheless, Vintges's *A New Dawn for the Second Sex* represents a valuable addition to feminist scholarship. Replete with metaphors and imagery, Vintges contributes an original and detailed understanding of feminist ethical and political life projects that embraces a global plurality of critical and creative feminisms.