

Women and some Men against Naturalness

History and Topicality: Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler

Simone de Beauvoir is one of the more colorful personalities to denounce the social limitations for women and demanded equal rights for men and women in the twentieth century. Her *Le Deuxieme Sex* (1949, English as *The Second Sex*) is a monument of feminist literature. There, she also radically argued against notions of »naturalness« which warranted the discrimination against women in society. Beauvoir's assertions in this context are rather well-known: »No biological [...] classification determines the shape of a female human in society« (Beauvoir 2008 [1949]: 334; The English translation follows the German one). In *The Second Sex*, she repeatedly questions that biological factors – she specifically refers to gonads and hormones – shape women and predefine their position in society. Beauvoir emphasized her stance again in an interview with German feminist Alice Schwarzer in 1976:

»Female« qualities are thus not inherent but rather the result of our suppression. Yet we may preserve them following liberation – and men would have to acquire them. One must not resort to the other extreme, though: say, woman had a special connection to the soil, felt in her blood the lunar rhythm and flood and tide, and all of that ... She had more soul, less destructive by nature et cetera. No! All of that is not incorrect, but it is not our nature. It is the outcome of our living conditions. These utterly »female« little girls have been created, not born that way. Many researches have proven that! A woman does not have any special value

just because she is a woman! This would be darkest biologism, and in stark contrast to everything I believe in« (Beauvoir in: Schwarzer: 1986 [1983]: 77).

Beauvoir questions seemingly unquestionable differences of sex, as well as their »naturalness« and timelessness. She does not question the current presence of two sexes as a social reality, though:

»All it takes is to wander with open eyes to see that people are divided into two categories of individuals – distinctly distinguished by their clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, walk, interests, and activities. *These differences may be superficial; they may be destined to vanish. One thing is sure, though, they obviously do exist today*« (Beauvoir 2008 [1949]: 11; emphasis by HV).

Arguing against the current existence of »woman« and »man« as social subjects would not contribute to the liberation of women, as Beauvoir states. »Rejecting the concepts of the eternal feminine, the black soul, or the Jewish character just does not entail denying the existence of Jews, blacks, or women today: such denial would not mean liberation for those it affects, but *unfair subterfuge*« (Beauvoir 2008 [1949]: 10; emphasis according to the more accessible first translation into German: Beauvoir 1989 [1949, German 1951]: vol. I, 8).

Beauvoir is surprisingly up to date. We currently do witness heated debates between proponents of the factual, real existence of women and men and those of a deconstructionist criticism of assuming the existence of an »eternal feminine« and »eternal masculine.« The most current debate followed the publications of Judith Butler. In her *Gender Trouble* (1990), she outlined that society interprets bodily features as well. A sexual body thus is not pre-defined as well, but first read, interpreted, and valued by society. Reading, interpretation, and valuation follow modes the society largely agrees upon, but which also require being brought up to date. This, in turn, is achieved by constantly reciting – seizing and repeating – these modes. Modern interpretations are based on traditions but also innovations. The fact that they are brought up to date essentially harbors the potential for change.

Butler questions the existence of such timeless and ubiquitous categories of »woman« and men, thus a common basis for all women. In

consequence, she was criticized for her stance that allegedly renders it impossible to effectively fight the suppression of women in society. Returning to Beauvoir helps. She proves the opposite in a different way: on the one hand, and very practically, her book fueled the fight for the equality of women and men. Fundamentally doubting the existence of a »natural« – pre-determined, unchangeable, and timeless – basis of sex, on the other hand, the book does not disqualify the factual existence of and reality for women and men in this society. It also does not disqualify the necessity of constant aggressive quarrel to end the discrimination and violence against women. Bringing those two perspectives together is therefore essential if the goal is to have regard for the needs of people today (and thus fight against today's discrimination and violence) but also to strive for a brighter future in which patriarchal and capitalist power structures will be overcome.

Excursus 1: Introduction – Woman as Other

The first pages of the introduction to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*⁶:

»FOR a long time, I have hesitated to write a book on woman. The subject is irritating, especially to women; and it is not new. Enough ink has been spilled in quarrelling over feminism, and perhaps we should say no more about it. It is still talked about, however, for the voluminous nonsense uttered during the last century seems to have done little to illuminate the problem. After all, is there a problem? And if so, what is it? Are there women, really? Most assuredly the theory of the eternal feminine still has its adherents who will whisper in your ear: >Even in Russia women still are women<; and other erudite persons – sometimes the very same – say with a sigh: >Woman is losing her way, woman is lost<. One wonders if women still exist, if they will always exist, whether or not it is desirable that they should, what place they occupy in this world, what their place

6 1949; the English translation is taken from Simone de Beauvoir, »Introduction«, in *The Second Sex*, Philosophy Archive @ marxists.org, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/de-beauvoir/2nd-sex/introduction.htm> (accessed July 14, 2020).

should be. >What has become of women?<, was asked recently in an ephemeral magazine.

But first we must ask: what is a woman? >Tota mulier in utero<, says one, >woman is a womb<. But in speaking of certain women, connoisseurs declare that they are not women, although they are equipped with a uterus like the rest. All agree in recognising the fact that females exist in the human species; today as always they make up about one half of humanity. And yet we are told that femininity is in danger; we are exhorted to be women, remain women, become women. It would appear, then, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity. Is this attribute something secreted by the ovaries? Or is it a Platonic essence, a product of the philosophic imagination? Is a rustling petticoat enough to bring it down to earth? Although some women try zealously to incarnate this essence, it is hardly patentable. It is frequently described in vague and dazzling terms that seem to have been borrowed from the vocabulary of the seers, and indeed in the times of St Thomas it was considered an essence as certainly defined as the somniferous virtue of the poppy.

But conceptualism has lost ground. The biological and social sciences no longer admit the existence of unchangeably fixed entities that determine given characteristics, such as those ascribed to woman, the Jew, or the Negro. Science regards any characteristic as a reaction dependent in part upon a situation. If today femininity no longer exists, then it never existed. But does the word woman, then, have no specific content? This is stoutly affirmed by those who hold to the philosophy of the enlightenment, of rationalism, of nominalism; women, to them, are merely the human beings arbitrarily designated by the word woman. Many American women particularly are prepared to think that there is no longer any place for woman as such; if a backward individual still takes herself for a woman, her friends advise her to be psychoanalysed and thus get rid of this obsession. In regard to a work, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, which in other respects has its irritating features, Dorothy Parker has written: >I cannot be just to books which treat of wom-

an as woman ... My idea is that all of us, men as well as women, should be regarded as human beings<. But nominalism is a rather inadequate doctrine, and the antifeminists have had no trouble in showing that women simply are not men. Surely woman is, like man, a human being; but such a declaration is abstract. The fact is that every concrete human being is always a singular, separate individual. To decline to accept such notions as the eternal feminine, the black soul, the Jewish character, is not to deny that Jews, Negroes, women exist today – this denial does not represent a liberation for those concerned, but rather a flight from reality. Some years ago, a well-known woman writer refused to permit her portrait to appear in a series of photographs especially devoted to women writers; she wished to be counted among the men. But in order to gain this privilege she made use of her husband's influence! Women who assert that they are men lay claim none the less to masculine consideration and respect. I recall also a young Trotskyite standing on a platform at a boisterous meeting and getting ready to use her fists, in spite of her evident fragility. She was denying her feminine weakness; but it was for love of a militant male whose equal she wished to be. The attitude of defiance of many American women proves that they are haunted by a sense of their femininity. In truth, to go for a walk with one's eyes open is enough to demonstrate that humanity is divided into two classes of individuals whose clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, gaits, interests, and occupations are manifestly different. Perhaps these differences are superficial, perhaps they are destined to disappear. What is certain is that they do most obviously exist.

If her functioning as a female is not enough to define woman, if we decline also to explain her through >the eternal feminine<, and if nevertheless we admit, provisionally, that women do exist, then we must face the question >what is a woman<?«

Why considering »Naturalness«?

The dissimilar positioning of people within society as based on »naturalness« has been justified for a long time now. It is currently presented

as »natural« that some people enjoy better opportunities for access to education or to influential and profitable positions in various segments of society. It is presented as equally »natural« that others are limited to gloomy economic conditions which only provide for bad food, less education, or sometimes not even dwellings.

»God's« mighty authority was used in the past to justify the people's position in society, their class, their sex, their access to or exclusion from education as »god-given« and irreversible. Today, more emphasis is put on some theories of »biology« (see Lewontin 1988 [1984]). »Biology«, allegedly predetermines genetic information and thus the connotation of a »human's blueprint« which makes some more suitable for certain jobs, important positions, but more basically also for education at school or universities. It is rather moot to consider whether »God« or »biology« are the mighty authorities that determine an individual's opportunities for development (and thus limits society's influence over it). The curious fact, however, that an authority beyond the reach of mankind is stipulated is much more important. Because neither the individual nor society could possibly control those authorities, they »naturally«, and thus in a pre-determined and irreversible way, limit the opportunities of individuals.

There is a heated debate going on in Germany whether the differences of abilities that mark the classes of people are »natural.« Members of the German state assemblies keep criticizing the current three-tier school system of *Gymnasium* (the most prestigious academic-track high school), *Realschule* (comparable to junior high school), and *Hauptschule* (lower and least prestigious secondary education). The system benefits children from more privileged strata.

Children of economically less advantaged parents are less likely to enter a *Gymnasium*. The other two types, *Real-* and *Hauptschule*, are less funded, and opportunities to learn or being educationally stimulated are lower than at a *Gymnasium*. The »permeability« between those types of schools is also limited. Far from compensating for the limited learning conditions of children from poorer classes, the school system further amplifies those disadvantages. Poorer living conditions, for instance, entails limited space which also limits options for concentrated work. Children of more affluent classes have working material at their disposal that those of poorer ones lack. There is also an imbalance when it comes to super-

vision such as paid and professional support when doing homework, or fee-based leisure activities. Whereas financially well-endowed conservative politicians refer to their children's higher aptitude as reason for better educational achievements in that system, leftists and left-liberal ones refer to these dissimilar learning conditions. They further argue that an education in togetherness were for the benefit of all learners as it would boost the skills and social interactions of all involved. International research studies such as PISA support this claim. They have shown for Germany, that there is a more pronounced connection between the children's social background and the diplomas they receive.

The debates concerning »sex« are of a different nature. Here, even leftist and left-liberal circles rarely seriously question the biological basis of differences. While there are reservations concerning a difference in the mental abilities of the sexes – that girls are »naturally« better in the languages, or boys in logical thinking – the same difference in the physical abilities is largely postulated. Girls and women seemingly perform worse in sports than boys and men; at the very least do they seem to be better suited for different kind of sports. This must be rejected, too. It should be emphasized once more in accordance with Beauvoir: it is irrelevant if current differences between »woman« and »man« are detectable. What is relevant is the assumption that these differences are »natural.«

Anne Fausto-Sterling, for instance, provided some indications that differences in physical performance, too, are the product of social treatment. Referring to several types of sports, she points out that similar or the same performance result when given the same training. When (the American) Gertrude Ederle, for example, swam the English Channel as the first woman in 1926, the world was perplexed not only by the fact that she managed to do so at all. The people were astounded that she did it in 14 hours and 31 minutes – thus two hours faster than the (male) world champion then. Ederle learned how to swim at the early age of eight. By the age of twelve, she set world records for shorter distances, and collected medallions.⁷

7 See the obituary, for instance: Richard Severo, »Gertrude Ederle, the First Woman to Swim Across the English Channel, Dies at 98«, December 1, 2003, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/01/sports/gertrude-ederle-the-first-woman-to-swim-across-the-english-channel-dies-at-98.html> (accessed July 14, 2020).

The marathon is another of Fausto-Sterling's examples. Whereas the marathon as a discipline was introduced for males with the inception of the new Olympic Games in 1896, women were barred from officially taking part until the 1960s. Although women in general were excluded from participation, individual ones were accepted from 1964 onward. It was opened to all women later. Since then, however, the differences between the »best male« and »best female« times grew smaller until they virtually have become non-existent (Fausto-Sterling 1988 [Engl. 1985]: 300 et seqq.). Back in 1964, the difference was more than an hour – and was perceived as proof of a »natural« difference between the sexes. Today, it is closer to ten minutes.

These examples demonstrate practically what may have seemed theoretical above: the differences in performance between defined groups – women and men in high-performance sports in this case – are based in society. Women in general were perceived as incapable of competing with or even superseding men in sports. Some types of sport were allegedly too dangerous for them. Thus, girls were rarely encouraged to begin training in these, which led to inferior performance results. When living and training conditions of men and women became more and more comparable, so did their performances.

Excluding women from sports' competitions is not a matter of a dark past, by the way. Ski jumping for women entered a world championship as late as 2009. Soccer for women still remains beneath the shadow of its male counterpart. Female soccer players enjoy considerably less prestige, income, numbers of spectators, and time on the air – especially on professional TV-programs. The support of girls in many types of sports still begins at a later point than that for boys. Scouting is rather rare, also because there are hardly opportunities for women to pursue a lucrative career in professional sports. This, again, is in stark contrast to their male peers.

It is worth considering »naturalness« from a historically and epistemologically motivated perspective as well. Thomas Laqueur and Claudia Honegger have presented noteworthy and well-received works on the subject. They outline that arguments of »naturalness« – based in nature, biology, but not on a »god« – have been strongly infused into the justification of the social order according to sex from the enlightenment onward, particularly after the late 1700s.

Since the eighteenth century, bodily features apparently became the defining factors for presenting the differences between woman and man. Those seeking them found differences in and described them for all parts of the body: organs, bones, musculature, etc. Woman and man appeared as radically different on the basis of anatomy, physiology – as rooted »in their nature.« Differences were most often explained through the function of procreation. They were hardly limited to the act of procreation, though, meaning the »required« organs as well as possibly carrying the embryo and bringing it to term. No, they were rather assigned to be lifelong principles of being »women« and »men.« The purpose of women was to bear and take care of the offspring. By tending to the family, she was supposed to run interferences for the husband so he could turn to public activities, thinking, and possibly earning an income.

Let us tie in with Laqueur's and Honegger's views at this point. They offer much potential for approximating the »modern« order of sex, meaning since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, supplementing their views is essential, as further discussion here proves: the biological-medical considerations of the sexes did not merely focus on differences. There were also central considerations of the similarities, as well as the woman-man-being of every individual. Let us come back to that at a later point.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau is one important authority of the perspective that emphasizes the difference of the sexes. He is also considered, even today, as the author who founded modern pedagogics. Rousseau argued against showering children with dogmata and restraints as they would merely cause opposition. He rather favored a form of education which would bring to fruit the »natural aptitudes« of children. In *Émile ou de l'éducation* (1762, English: *Emile, or on Education*), Rousseau's important contribution to pedagogics, he is specifically concerned with male children whose individual, »natural« strengths required refinement. There is no more one chapter that discusses the education of girls and women – Rousseau rather explicitly includes them. The chapter is also rather well hidden in the back of the book.

There, Rousseau assigns the girls/women with the tasks of bearing and raising children, taking care of the husband, homemaking and housekeeping. Girls/women require a certain education: as very important proxies

for the education of the children. They were supposed to develop their own mind for the sake of the children and the husband, but also to understand the »dangers of the city« and being spared a life in debauchery.

Rousseau clearly defines and limits the role of girls/women. Those references to their »natural tasks« are quite interesting. In his pedagogical discussion of boys/men, he, too, refers to fostering »natural traits and skills« to completion, if possible.

More remarkable, however, is Rousseau's ardent opposition to any endeavors which seek the equality of women and men. He writes, for instance, vehemently against the

»vanity of the disputes concerning preferences or the equality of the sexes. As if each sex, pursuing the path marked out for it by nature, were not more perfect in that very divergence than if it more closely resembled the other! In those things which the sexes have in common they are equal; where they differ, they are not comparable« (Rousseau 1762, Engl.).⁸

He further assures that,

»[S]uch are the reasons that put appearance on the list of the duties of women and make honor and reputation no less indispensable to them than chastity. Along with the moral differences between the sexes these principles give rise to a new motive for duty and convenience, one that prescribes especially for women the most scrupulous attention to their conduct, to their manners, to their behavior. *To maintain vaguely that the two sexes are equal and that their duties are the same is to get lost in vain speeches. One hardly need to respond to all that*« (ibid., emphasis by HV).

Rousseau apparently sought answering to current developments that argued for the equality of women and men. They appear to have been strong enough to be recognized in writings rejecting such emancipatory strife of women. The emphasis on rejecting the emancipation of women will be a constant motive in the chapters to come. Whereas Rousseau's opinion was

8 For an English translation, see http://www.woldww.net/classes/General_Philosophy/Rousseau_on_women.htm

not singular in his times – as many women and men supported his theses – other perspectives emphasized the similarities of woman and man, and thus argued for altering the order of the sexes accordingly. With a keen eye on those perspectives, we will see that they referred to *the development and reversibility* of features (particularly the mind, and rationality versus ignorance) rather than construing »naturalness« beyond the control of society.

Contra »Naturalness« – Emancipatory Arguing for the Education of Women

According to Rousseau, girls and women are supposed to receive a simple education to be the safekeepers of their own morals, and because of their important role in the upbringing of children. Yet Rousseau indeed referred to simple education – he vehemently rejected the notion of women’s higher education and subsequently becoming a competition for males for positions of the state, economy, clergy, or military. This was a rather widespread understanding in enlightened circles: the binary order of the sexes with its separate tasks for women and men were widely accepted as the basis for a working society. A limited education of women was nevertheless championed just to guard her against immorality as it was identified in the nobility. Such education, however, was not supposed to transcend pre-defined limits which were set to the women’s »natural« tasks: needlework, housekeeping, and raising children.

The debate about women’s education was not a recent development, not even in Rousseau’s period. Women and men had repeatedly challenged those social limitations of women. Their criticism initially targeted the development of the mind: they demanded for girls the same quality of education and upbringing that boys enjoyed. They saw the existing ignorance and gullibility of some women as the result of social conditions. (In this, Beauvoir might be recalled: simply because there are »women« and »men« as well as differences between them, it neither means they are pre-determined nor eternal.) Some proponents of the perspective then did not simply call for a proper education and upbringing for women, but also for granting them access to all important positions in society.

Christine de Pizan (ca. 1365–1430) penned some of the most remarkable treatises on better opportunities for women. At the turn of the fifteenth century, she answered previous misogynist writings which emphasized that education was harmful to girls and women. Boys and man, however, were the only ones capable of a higher, scholarly education. Wielding an analytical and conceptual clarity, Pizan conclusively presented social inequality as the basis for the educational one. She assumed that every human has a »natural predisposition« to education – they are not limited by a »natural predisposition« to the *capability* for education. Even social discrimination could not cover such predisposition completely.

Destitution forced Pizan to write. Following the death of her father (1387) and her husband (1389), she found herself and her three children in a financial quagmire. She began writing to alleviate the situation, had some success and found influential benefactors.

In her *Livre de la Cité des Dames* (1405, English: *The Book of the City of Ladies*), Pizan addresses the capability of women for education in the form of a dialog:

»>Do you know why women know less?< – >Not unless you tell me, my lady.< – >Without the slightest doubt, it is because they are not involved in many different things, but stay at home, where it is enough for them to run the household, and there is nothing which so instructs a reasonable creature as the exercise and experience of many different things.< – >My lady, since they have minds skilled in conceptualizing and learning, just like men, why don't women learn more?< – She replied, >Because, my daughter, the public does not require them to get involved in the affairs which men are commissioned to execute, just as I told you before. It is enough for women to perform the usual duties to which they are ordained. As for judging from experience, since one sees that women usually know less than men, that therefore their capacity for understanding is less, look at men who farm the flatlands or who live in the mountains. You will find that in many countries they seem completely savage because they are so simple-minded. All the same, there is no doubt that Nature provided them with the qualities of body and mind found in the wisest and most learned men. All of this stems from a failure to learn, though just as I told you, among men and women, some possess better minds than others. Let me tell you

about women who have possessed great learning and profound understanding and treat the question of the similarity of women's minds to men's« (Pizan 1982 [1405]: 63–64).⁹

She later explains:

»Thus, not all men (and especially the wise) share the opinion that it is bad for women to be educated. But it is very true that many foolish men have claimed this because it displeased them that women knew more than they did. Your father, who was a great scientist and philosopher, did not believe that women were worth less by knowing science; rather, as you know, he took great pleasure from seeing your inclination to learning. The feminine opinion of your mother, however, who wished to keep you busy with spinning and silly girliness, following the common custom of women, was the major obstacle to you being more involved in the sciences. But just as the proverb already mentioned above says, »No one can take away what Nature has given,« your mother could not hinder in you the feeling for the sciences which you, through natural inclination, had nevertheless gathered together in little droplets. I am sure that, on account of these things, you do not think you are worth less but rather that you consider it a great treasure for yourself; and you doubtless have reason to« (Pizan 1982 [1405]: 154–55).

Christine de Pizan's references to nature are as obvious as are Rousseau's, yet with an utterly dissimilar intention. For Pizan, »nature« endows every individual, man and women (in the city and in the »flatlands«) with gifts such as the capability for education; it is the upbringing which helps or hinders using those gifts. For the individual, as Pizan states, is it impossible to suppress such a »nature-given« property completely. She rather seeks presenting »the similarity of women's minds to men's« (Pizan 1982 [1405]: 63–64).

Another example of writers championing the women's right to education in their works was Moderata Fonte (the pseudonym of Modesta Pozzo d'I Zorzi, 1555–92). From Italy, she died when giving birth to her

9 The English translation is taken from Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. by Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea, 1982).

fourth child. Her family published *Il Merito delle Donne* (1600, Engl. *The Worth of Women*) several years after her death, possibly to answer a misogynist pamphlet that had appeared a year before.

Moderata Fonte emphasized the differences of women and men which, among others, she based on different temperaments (there following the four temperament or theory of humorism, respectively). Men were supposedly influenced by a hot and dry temperament, and thus under the control of savagery. Their anger, scorn, and rage were the result of it. Women, on the other hand, had a cold and wet temperament, rendering them passionate, naïve, gentle, and gullible. While describing the male and female »nature« as problematic, Fonte nevertheless calls to women explicitly to seek an education and train the mind, in order to control those problematic »natural« features and turn them into a strength. She writes:

»[...] where our natural disposition is at fault, we should bring our intellect into play and use the torch of reason to light our way to recognizing these lovers' masks and protecting ourselves against them. In fact, we should pay about as much attention to them and give them about as much credence as the sensible little lamb gave to the wolf when it was imitating its mother's voice and begging it to open the gate« (Fonte 1997 [1600]: 83).¹⁰

Women – as well as men – appear capable of intellect and reason according to Fonte. For her, reason is important inasmuch it guards against the dangers of immorality for women and men, as Fonte perceives them. Reason, but also bodily strength, has to be trained through upbringing:

»[...] for if women do not bear arms, that isn't because of any deficiency on their part, rather, the fault lies with the way they were brought up. Because it's quite clear that those who have been trained in military discipline have turned out to excel in valor and skill, aided by that peculiarly feminine talent of quick thinking, which has often led them to outshine men in the field. And, as proof, just think of Camilla, of Penthesilea, the inventor

10 English translation: Moderata Fonte, *The Worth of Women: Wherein is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Their Superiority to Men*, ed. and trans. by Virginia Cox (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

of battle-axes, of Hippolyta, Orithya, and all those other warlike women whose memory not even history written by men has been able to suppress. And where letters are concerned – well, that's obvious: it was a woman, Carmenta, who first invented the alphabet, and poems are called *carmina* after her« (Fonte 1997 [1600]: 100–01).

Marie le Jars de Gournay (1565–1645) was a Paris-born contemporary of Fonte. Her mother, too, installed in her the notion that women merely needed to learn the basics, meaning running the household and needlework. De Gournay acquired skills in the languages and in several branches of the sciences on her own. She became famous for repeatedly (and posthumously) publishing the *Essais* of Michel Evquem de Montaigne. She did so quite critically as an editor and included some remarks on the limited opportunities of women in society into her first edition of the re-prints. She intensified her criticism in her own writings, dated 1594 and especially those of 1622 and 1626. Thus, she took part in a heated debate that had followed the publication of a misogynist treatise in 1617. Tying in with her foreword to the *Essais* of 1595, she states in her *Grief des Dames* (1626, Engl. *The Ladies' Grievance*):

»You are fortunate, dear reader, if you are not of the feminine sex who is forbidden from all properties by denying freedom, well, who is even forbidden from all virtues, by denying all rights and duties and public offices: in short, by excluding her from power[. E]xercising moderate power, however, shape most virtues. She is rather assigned the following virtues as her highest and only happiness: ignorance, subservience, and the ability to present herself as a fool – if she is willing to participate in this game. You are fortunate, too, as your education goes unpunished, as your being a man entitles to you every action with a higher purpose, every noble verdict, and uttering exquisite theory – just as much as it is denied to women« (Gournay 1997 [1626]: 75).¹¹

Gournay criticized the bad education and upbringing women received, but also their socially limited opportunities. She does not line up the mer-

11 The English translation follows this German edition.

its of women in history, as Fonte did, for instance, but argues through an analysis of society. Neither does she accept the differences of the sexes the way Fonte did. Gournay rather emphasizes the equality of the sexes in all features, and only left room for the minor difference dedicated to procreation:

»To be precise, the human being is neither male nor female. The different sexes are not supposed to lead to differences in their manifestation. They just serve procreation. The only feature that essential is the rational soul. If a small joke is permitted: there is nothing that resembles the tomcat on the windowsill than – a cat. Humans were created as man and woman. Men and women are but one« (Gournay 1997 [1622]: 55).

The role of women (and men) in society has been disputed. France alone produced some 900 treatises in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. The rest of Europe equally saw numerous writings on the position of women in society. The debates continued, became virulent and reached new peaks. As the three representatives mention above prove: female authors argued on a sound basis and against any »natural« differences between the sexes in matter of reason. They demanded education to alleviate a social and social ill. It is also quite clear, that those works appeared in a direct or indirect context of explicitly misogynist publications of their time. They also had a voice in the debate. Those publications are specifically referred to a »misogynist« here – they did not merely counter the women's strife for emancipation, but rather rants to degrade and insult them. Yet those publications provoked swift and vehement opposition – such as the opposition of Pizan, Fonte, or Gournay.

Works in favor of the emancipation of women, and strongly criticizing the bad education and upbringing of girls, appeared in France (e. g. by Francois Poullain de La Barre, 1670s), England (Mary Astell, 1690s), or Spain (Benito Jerónimo Feijóo y Montenegro, 1720s/30s). The struggle for the order of the sexes reached a peak with the French Revolution. Then, people expected the revolutionary calls were intended for all and thus bring the equality of women and men. Mary Wollstonecraft sought helping to stir the French Revolution into that direction when she published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. It was polemic

publication demanding, among others, education for women. Equally often-quoted is also the *Déclaration des Droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne* by Olympe des Gouges, 1791: the *Declarations of the Rights of Woman and Citizeness*, as a reaction to the iconic *Déclaration des Droits de l'homme et du Citoyen* of 1789. She demanded the equal human and civil rights for men and women.

The events of the French Revolution also inspired the latent debates concerning the social positions of men and women in the neighboring German states, and supported the call for equality. Mary Wollstonecraft's publication appeared in German merely one year after the first print (in 1793). Theodor Gottlieb (von) Hippel also revised his considerations on the social order of the sexes. In the 1770s, they had been far from an emancipatory character. When publishing his *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Weiber* (1793, Engl. *On Improving the Status of Women*), he now championed the equality of women and men, as well as equal civil rights for both.

Although the French Revolution did not live up to those demands, and in later stages even saw the revocation of opportunities for women which have been hard-won by women, these demands had reached a new intensity of struggle with the order of the sexes.

The notion of an equality for all humans, thus also of women and men, had entered the utopia of striving for a future, better social order with a vengeance. It had come to stay. Several publications appeared which broadened the thinkable framework of theories. They became the pillar on which rested later works on the emancipation of women.

The way women participated in the French Revolution was likely more important than those publications. Women played an especially important role in mass protests and hunger strikes. Thousands of women ventured from Paris to Versailles on October 5, 1789, following the increase of prices at the bakeries that morning. Women demanded that the king ensured stable prices for grain and flour – which he granted under duress. They were equally successful with their second demand: the decree abolishing feudalism and acknowledging the Declaration of Human Rights as it was passed in the National Assembly. The royal family had to accompany those women back to Paris to guarantee the demands were met (Petersen 1990; Stübiger 1990).

Excursus 2: Some biographical glimpses at the families of those mentioned

Christine de Pizan was born in 1365. Her father held the chair for astrology in Venice, and later entered an influential political career. He was called to the court in Paris the year Christine was born, the family followed in 1368. There, Christine received a good education, and was married at the age of fifteen. Following the death of King Charles V, her own father's death in 1387, as well as her husband's two years later, led to her financial destitution. In order to raise money in support of herself and the three children, she began writing.

Moderata Fonte was born in 1555. Her father was in the legal professions, her mother had been born into an influential upper-class family. Upon her parents' early death, she came to relatives, later into a convent where she was quick and eager to learn. When she was nine years old, her relatives took her in once more. She was supported by the family – particularly her uncle – to further her education in poetry and Latin. She married an official representative and died at birth of their fourth child

Marie le Jars de Gournay was born in Paris in 1565 and grew up in the capital's vicinity. Her father died early, prompting her mother to go into debt and Gournay to live in the conditions of the impoverished nobility. Whereas her mother foresaw nothing more than a basic education »suitable for women«, Gournay acquired Latin and other languages, as well as subjects, as an autodidact. She came into contact with Montaigne who became a friend and whose *Essais* she repeatedly published upon his death.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born in Geneva in 1712. His mother passed away shortly after giving birth to him. He initially grew up with his father, later an uncle who provided for his nephew's education at a vicarage. Rousseau became the apprentice of a clerk of the court in 1724; a position he soon left. He escaped from another apprenticeship. Madame de Warens first became Rousseau's benefactress, later his lover although she dissolved the relationship in 1738. In 1768, Rousseau married his long-term consort, Thérèse Lavasseur. Their five children were all sent to the orphanage. While

initially being interested in musicology, Rousseau turned to social matters from the 1760s onward. The French kingdom banned his works soon after publication – such as his *Du contrat social*, 1762, Engl. *The Social Contract*. Protestants in Geneva burnt his *Emile, or on Education*, which also appeared in 1762. During the French Revolution, Rousseau was celebrated posthumously.

For biographical overviews of noteworthy women and continued reading, refer especially to *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://iep.utm.edu>.

Another noteworthy reference is www.lesbengeschichte.de. The website is German but accessible in several languages, including English.

