12 Existentialism and the Origins of Male Supremacy

Part II, Book 1 of *The Second Sex* is entitled 'History', and it is divided into the following five chapters: (1) 'The Nomads'; (2) 'Early Tillers of the Soil'; (3) 'Patriarchal Times and Classical Antiquity'; (4) 'Through the Middle Ages to Eighteenth-Century France'; (5) 'Since the French Revolution: the Job and the Vote'. Chapter 1 offers an account, from 'an existentialist' perspective, of the early origins of woman's relegation to the category of the Other, and for this reason I shall concentrate on it.

De Beauvoir opens her explanation of male supremacy with the following challenging sentences:

This has always been a man's world; and none of the reasons hitherto brought forward in explanation of this fact has seemed adequate. But we shall be able to understand how the hierarchy of the sexes was established by reviewing the data of prehistoric research and ethnography in the light of existentialist philosophy.

She gives the following three reasons for male supremacy in pre-history: (1) Women had to carry the burden of reproduction, and this made them heavily dependent on men for protection and food. Domestic labours are merely functions, not activities; such functions - traditionally and still largely carried out by women – imprisoned women in the sphere of repetition and immanence. (3) Early man's activity was often dangerous; it was concerned, not with giving life but with risking life, and it was this feature which gave it 'supreme dignity'.

De Beauvoir describes the burden of reproduction as follows:

Pregnancy, childbirth and menstruation reduced their capacity for work and made them at times wholly dependent upon the men for protection and food. As there was obviously no birth control, and as nature failed to provide women with sterile periods like other mammalian females, closely spaced maternities must have absorbed most of their strength and their time, so that they were incapable of providing for the children they brought into the world.
Besides the burden of reproduction there was also the burden of domesticity; what is more, these two burdens combined to imprison 'woman' in a realm of repetition and immanence. As de Beauvoir herself puts it,

The domestic labours that fell to her lot because they were reconcilable with the cares of maternity imprisoned her in repetition and immanence; they were repeated from day to day in an identical form, which was perpetuated almost without change from century to century; they produced nothing new.  

It was very different for the adult male, says de Beauvoir; he furnished support for the group, not in the manner of worker bees by a simple vital process, through biological behaviour, in other words, but by means of acts that transcended his animal nature. She develops this idea of distinctively human, and, historically speaking, distinctively male, activity as follows:

He did not limit himself to bringing home the fish he caught in the sea: first he had to conquer the watery realm by means of the dugout canoe fashioned from a tree-trunk; to get at the riches of the world he annexed the world itself; he set up goals and opened up roads towards them; in brief, he found self-realization as an existent. To maintain, he created; he burst out of the present, he opened the future. This is the reason why fishing and hunting expeditions had a sacred character. Their successes were celebrated with festivals and triumphs, and therein man gave recognition to his human estate.  

The final reason advanced from this existentialist perspective for male supremacy in prehistoric times was the danger inherent in the activities just described. De Beauvoir explains this point as follows:

If blood were but a nourishing fluid, it would be valued no higher than milk; but the hunter was no butcher, for in the struggle against wild animals he ran grave risks. The warrior put his life in jeopardy to elevate the prestige of the horde, the clan to which he belonged. And in this he proved dramatically that life is not the supreme value for man, but on the contrary that it should be made to serve ends more important than itself... For it was not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills.