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Why We Are Not in the Third Wave of Feminism: The Existentialist's Argument

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ABSTRACT

Feminism has deeply embedded itself into the ethos of society after several decades of political and civil unrest. Originally abolitionists, first-wave feminists fought for suffrage, but experienced tensions as black men received their right to vote before white women did. In the second wave, these divisions continued, as some feminist leaders segregated their marches. In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw diagnosed this issue as a lack of attention to intersectionality, a political framework that addresses a variety of social issues simultaneously. However, this ideology isn't novel. In the 1960s, Simone de Beauvoir created a definition of feminism that was inclusive of all women: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." As an existentialist, she believed that humans have socially constructed gender and thus could deconstruct or modify the social hierarchy. The 2017 Women's March seemed to indicate Crenshaw and Beauvoir's more inclusive spirit, as feminists of all backgrounds participated in a joint effort on a joint goal. But a deeper dive into the march reveals that the current generation of feminists has not tackled the root of the problem of intersectionality, hence perpetuating the same issues of the first and second wave. Both Simone de Beauvoir and a modern feminist named Koa Beck identify the cause of this immobility through capitalism and the commodification of feminism. Today, people claim that we are riding the third or fourth wave of feminism. But because we have not completely adopted an intersectional mindset, we have yet to leave the second wave.

On January 21, 2017, Washington D.C. was full of commotion. A drone's view of the city, but also New York City, Boston, Chicago, and Los Angeles, broadcasted a flood of pink hats sitting atop the heads of women—white and black, rich and poor, young and old, straight and gay—and men as well (Aerial Footage). Signs in every color and handwriting imaginable read, "The future is still female," "#SCIENCE IS REAL," and "Did I survive a dictator to be: deported for being a foreigner, registered for being a Muslim, grabbed for being a woman in America?" (Vox Staff). Collecting all kinds of people in its grasp, the 2017 Women's March claimed to finally be intersectional. As coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 paper *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, an intersectional approach entails addressing the unique problems which arise from the combination of multiple forms of discrimination, including sexism, racism, classism, ageism, and homophobia (Crenshaw 140). Yet among the sea of diverse messages, a black woman named Angela Peoples stood holding a different sign: "Don't forget: white women voted for Trump." Photographer Kevin Banatte captured Peoples, as well as three white women in pink hats behind her, posing, it seemed, for their phones (Dastagir).

Peoples highlighted an aspect of the march that some feminists seemed to have either unknowingly or intentionally left out. Although this march was supposed to represent all women and all issues, its reach was limited. Women of color criticized white women for only focusing on their issues. Instead of heeding their criticism, many white women who initially intended to attend the march refrained. They accused the women of color for being "divisive" while being exclusionary themselves (Beck 187). Another example of this division was evident when leaders

Tamika D. Mallory, Cameron Perez, and Linda Sarsour sidelined their Jewish followers by making anti-Semitic comments during the planning of the march (Beck 174). Though this demonstration seemed to unite the world on the surface, intersectionality had not fully been realized.

The issue of intersectionality—or rather the lack thereof—is not unique to this march. In 2016, native women were the leading assault victims in the U.S., with four out of every five native women experiencing physical assault per year and one out of two having been sexually assaulted (Beck 31). Today, many people still view fat women to be "savage," as they do women of color or women part of the LGBTQIA+ community (Beck 89). They believe them to be uncontrolled and thus uncivilized. Across generations, women of more privileged backgrounds have insisted on restricting feminist advocacy on the issue of sexism, thereby avoiding or ignoring other social issues that arise from aforementioned intersections. From white suffragists in the late nineteenth century to many of these marchers in 2017, history has revealed a consistent failure by many feminists to incorporate intersectionality in their efforts. Just as some people believed the 2017 Women's March to be intersectional, some made claims that we are in the third—or even fourth wave of feminism, an evolution from its discriminatory past. But because of the lack of attention to intersectionality, this is not the case.

Like the 2017 Women's March, the 1913 Women's Suffrage Procession in the second wave of feminism evidenced this lack of attention to intersections between sex and other social groupings. Organized by the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), it involved plenty of tension between white marchers and those of color. When *Women's Journal* and students of the all-black Howard University wrote to the head of NAWSA Alice Paul asking if they could join, Paul told her people to "say nothing whatever about the [negro] question" (Beck 26). And when pressured by both white and black marchers to make a more concrete decision, Paul announced to segregate the march (Beck 26). In doing so, she established that this procession would be about women and women only. They would maintain the status quo in race to eliminate what she deemed to be distractions.

This decision came as no surprise, considering NAWSA was founded much earlier in 1890 in the first wave of feminism on the same racist principles. However, first-wave feminism did not originally begin split from the race cause. Many feminists entered the political sphere as abolitionsts. But when Britain refused to seat female delegates of the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) at the 1840 World's Anti-Slavery Convention, attendees Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton resolved to create their own movement for women. This decision led to the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 (DeLuzio 58). Though Stanton included many radical claims about reproductive and divorce reform in the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, which was drafted at the convention, she did not specify whether those rights should be granted to all women (DeLuzio 72). The origins of the feminist movement at Seneca Falls set the tone for its legacy.

With those like Stanton at the helm, the feminist scene at midcentury either outright rejected or was ignorant to issues that affected black women specifically. In 1851, a black activist named Sojourner Truth attended the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio (Washington 17). According to an account by her friend and fellow feminist Frances Gage, Truth gave an impassioned speech in which she continually punctuated the question: "Ain't I a woman?" She pointed out that "Dat man ober dar say dat women needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to have de best every whar. Nobody eber help me into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or gives me any best place, and ar'n't I a woman?" (Moss 26). By repeating "Ar'n't I a woman?", or "Ain't I a woman?", throughout her speech, she challenged the other first wave feminists, asking if they were truly fighting for all women. Truth's question exemplified the antithesis to the feminist movement at the time—an inclusive definition of a woman that crossed racial barriers. Yet many white feminists continued to work in a narrow framework, evidenced by Stanton's racist remarks in an address to the New York Legislature on Women's Rights in 1854: "We [white educated women] are moral, virtuous, and intelligent, and in all respects quite equal to the proud white man himself. And yet by your laws we are classed with idiots, lunatics, and Negroes" (DeLuzio 97). Stanton fought for her own equality while bearing white supremacist views.

With the ratification of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments in 1868 and 1870, what feminists like Stanton feared became true—the male, black population received the right to vote before the white, female one. The fourteenth amendment limited voting rights to adult men. The fifteenth declared no voting discrimination on the basis of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude" but not sex (DeLuzio 97). Stanton and Anthony believed it was unjust that their pleas were ignored. These amendments, while offering freedom to many Americans, inflamed the racial divide.

Wanting to strengthen the feminist cause, Stanton and Anthony founded the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) in 1869 to emphasize that feminism would be kept separate from the race cause. Shortly after, NWSA combined with the more conservative American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) to form NAWSA. In its founding, Anthony passed a resolution asserting native-born white women's right to vote because there were "more white women who can read and write than all negro voters" and "more American women who can read and write than all foreign voters" (Beck 27). The dissatisfaction that leaders like Anthony and Stanton felt from the ratification of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments led to the beginnings of feminism with a heavy undertone of racism and classism. These underlying themes would continue to follow the movement through today.

The division that carried over throughout the waves of feminism could have been better addressed if the movement had more closely followed the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, a second-wave feminist in France. As a renowned existentialist, Beauvoir believed that existence precedes essence. In other words, all humans are equal because nothing about human nature is predetermined. Everything important about one's identity is created as one progresses through life. For this reason, she says in her book *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (De Beauvoir 283). With this logic, she dismantled presumptions about women, often in relation to men. "We are social beings," she asserted in a 1976 interview with Alice Schwarzer. "A woman has no particular value *a priori* simply because she is a woman. That would be the most sinister biological distortion, and in total contrast to everything I think" (Schwarzer 79). Not only does this philosophy disprove any notion of male supremacy, but it also ensures that no woman is inherently more feminine than another—that no woman is by nature less deserving of certain rights.

In the same Alice Schwarzer interview, Beauvoir pointed out that problems of misogyny like violence affected all women regardless of social class, whether they are "beaten by husbands who are judges or presiding magistrates as well as husbands who are laborers" (Schwarzer 69). Yet, she noticed that working-class struggles were not being treated with the same attention as those for the middle class or the elite. She identified the weakness of the feminist movement in both France and America as the lack of working-class representation (Schwarzer 44). Seeing this narrow scope, Beauvoir initially did not believe in the feminist movement. She turned to socialism as the solution to all types of inequality and believed many of those imbalances stemmed from and were perpetuated by the rampant capitalism and industrialization of her day. Sadly, Beauvoir's fear that feminism would not truly take in intersectionality became true.

In the modern feminist movement, advocate Koa Beck similarly points to capitalism and consumer culture as the reason why intersectionality is being buried. Beck calls into question processes like executive feminism that places the onus on women. Rather than targeting sexist treatment, big corporations suggest that female workers should abide by the patriarchal world for financial freedom. Articles like "10 Wardrobe Staples That Will Make You Look and Feel Like a Boss" or "Boss Lady: 15 Chic Desktop Accessories" are released by these corporations to try to inspire a sense of empowerment in their female workers based on the desirable image of the female boss (Carreon; Fisher; Beck 111). High achieving women continue to expound these sentiments in career-building talks and events like the *Cosmopolitan* Fun Fearless Life conference in 2014 (Beck 104). Instead of being about how to deconstruct the patriarchy, feminism became more focused on how to take advantage of the social mobility that capitalism claimed to offer. Thus, feminism gradually moved away from the root of the problem. By only speaking to those who are members of the corporate world, these companies and leaders continue the tradition of leaving marginalized women out of these important conversations.

Due to this social stratification, certain women are naturally not given the same resources while building their careers. Hence, when leaders give step by step instructions on how to achieve success, some women will work their

entire lives without reaching the first step of the corporate ladder. Even the organization of the 2014 *Cosmopolitan* conference emphasized this inequality. The high prices of their tickets dictated who could join based on their class. Since the median wealth for black women and Latinas is $200 and $100 respectively while the median wealth for white women is as high as $15,640, white women also have greater opportunities to attend such events (Beck 105). The mainstream feminist movement seems to be making its efforts with a certain woman—white and middle-class—in mind.

Another quality of that specific woman is cisgender. Companies have made it a habit to absorb catchy phrases for commodification. When a few lesbian separatists promoted New York City's first women's bookstore, Labryis Books, in 1975, they coined the phrase, "The future is female," which would serve the feminist movement for years after (Beck 92). Popularized by celebrities like Cara Delevigne and St. Vincent, this caught the attention of big companies like Money 20/20 and *Marie Claire*, who then branded the phrase (McCall). However, they used strictly cisgender models and data to do so. Money20/20 released a financial report called "The Future Is Female" that only displayed the spending power of cisgender women. And on the May 2017 Fresh Faces issue of *Marie Claire,* five women who identified as cisgender at the time—Emily Ratajkowski, Aja Naomi King, Zoey Deutch, Janelle Monáe, and Alexandra Daddario—stood behind the words "The Future Is Female" on the front page (Sessums). Although these women represented a variety of backgrounds, Money 20/20 and *Marie Claire* still excluded individuals who did not fit in the traditional gender binary. By only catering to a certain group of women, they were ensuring that only those women reaped the benefits of these feminist efforts.

The effect of commodifying feminism can further be observed with the online lesbian magazine AfterEllen. AfterEllen had to cease regular publication in 2016 because of a lack of advertisers (Beck 128). Many advertisers saw lesbians as less profitable customers, as Money20/20 and *Marie Claire* may have viewed transgender women. A 2014 Gallup poll indicated why this may be: less than 30% of women in the LGBTQIA+ community were thriving financially compared to 39% of straight women (Beck 127). When companies decide not to prioritize those customers, they preserve this imbalance in the economy and try to limit the course of feminism.

To combat capitalism's divisions, a group of lesbians in New York called the New York Lesbian Avengers challenged traditional methods when they held the Dyke March in 1993. Rather than funding through corporate sponsorship, they accepted donations online and on the streets. They also refused a permit for this march, insisting the event to be a protest and not a parade (Beck 130). Because of this pivot away from brands and money, more people were able to attend. The Lesbian Avengers were inclusive in other ways, as well. Part of the first Dyke March was eating fire, a trick of extinguishing fire with one's one mouth by exhaling or closing one's lips around the fire to snuff the flame out (Jillette). Certain marchers did this as an homage to Hattie Mae Cohens, a black lesbian, and Brian Mock, a white disabled gay man, who had died from firebomb attacks (Eating Fire). Even today, the Dyke March continues to be aware of its intersectional responsibilities. The Buffalo Dyke March organizers have changed their name to Dyke+ to include people of different gender identities (Eating Fire). The fact that they keep changing their definition of a woman indicates their intersectional beliefs. As the Dyke March shows, removing capitalism from the equation broadens the impact of feminist activism.

The feminist movement in general still has a long way to go to fully actualize the kind of intersectional thinking that the Dyke March embraced, however. Although there have been improvements, there is still a strong divide. Can this generation of feminists really call themselves the third or fourth wave if some white activists are carrying signs like "Woman is the N***** of the World" at the New York City Slutwalk, a protest where women tried to reclaim the pejorative term? (Bilge 406). It is no different from early suffragists who believed illiterate black individuals to be less deserving of the right to vote than elite white women or their successors who segregated the 1913 Women's Suffrage Procession. The feminist movement has always excluded certain individuals when defining what a woman is. And as Simone de Beauvoir warned in the past and Koa Beck points out now, the capitalist approach to feminism prevents the movement from progressing past these intersectional struggles that were already present since the first and second wave. Capitalism has conditioned many feminist leaders to focus their support on more profitable consumers, the ones who fit the traditional definition of a woman. It teaches middle-class women how to climb their

way to the top of the business world, not paying attention to the working-class women who do not have the same resources available to them. It talks a big deal about abortion and pregnancy but buries issues like dementia or arthritis, topics associated with elderly women, whom the corporate world deems to be less profitable and thus less relevant (Beck 71). Capitalism has made feminism out to be an individualistic effort, but nowhere in history has change been made with just one person. To truly progress to the next wave, feminists must unite to address the unique issues of all women, not just those more likely to yield a higher profit.

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