BOOK REVIEW

We are not born submissive: How patriarchy shapes women's lives

Manon Garcia


As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie proclaimed in a pamphlet of 2014, and as various T-shirts from high-street retailers have reminded us, “we should all be feminists,” but there are many men, and many women, who are not. Thomas Hill’s deferential wife; Andrea Dworkin’s “right-wing woman” who opposes reproductive choice and upholds patriarchal norms and standards; women who protest against #MeToo, or participate in their own sexual objectification. These are all sticky figures for contemporary feminism. How should we explain their behaviour and their actions? Why do some women appear to reinforce rather than resist their own subordination and how should these “choices” be understood and evaluated? These are the questions Manon Garcia takes up in We are not Born Submissive: How Patriarchy Shapes Women's Lives.

One can see from the title both Garcia’s preliminary answer to the question (patriarchy), and a hint at the approach she will take—the title nods to Simone de Beauvoir’s famous statement that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman”. Similarly, for Garcia, women are not born, but rather become submissive as a result of finding themselves in a situation where submission appears to them as their “destiny” (p. 42). Through patriarchal oppression, Garcia argues, women are objectified and alienated, “the social dimension of women’s bodies structures the situation and the experience of women in such a way that they are destined to submit themselves” (p. 135). For Garcia, this does not mean that submission is inevitable, but it does mean that there are strong benefits and even “pleasures” in complying with one’s submission (p. 159) and high costs to resisting (p. 193). As a result, she argues, “women’s decision to submit is not, strictly speaking, a choice” (p. 196). Rather, “submission is a consent to one’s destiny as it is pre-determined by social norms” (pp.193–194).

To make these arguments, Garcia draws heavily on Beauvoir’s analysis in The Second Sex. The book endeavours to offer an account and an explanation of female submission, but a joint and perhaps more thoroughly articulated aim is to illuminate Beauvoir’s distinctive philosophical methodology, and demonstrate her contemporary relevance for addressing the question of female submission. To this end, the book makes an important contribution to the recent revival in Simone de Beauvoir studies, demonstrating Beauvoir’s importance as a philosopher in her own right, and her unique adaptation and deployment of phenomenological methods, in a thorough and yet accessible way.

Garcia sets up the problem of understanding women’s submission in terms of two unattractive options: either submission flows from women’s female nature or women are the passive victims of men’s domination (p. 4). The first suggests there’s something natural about women’s submission, and thus “places us on the side of the sexist tradition” (p. 4), while the latter deprives women of their agency and presents women as “passive victims or submissive beings that are guilty of not cherishing their freedom” (p. 4). Garcia rejects both, endeavouring to carve out a middle way between the two by taking a bottom-up approach to female submission and analysing it from the perspective of the submissive.

The first half of the book is dedicated to getting the concept of submission into view. After setting the scene in Chapter One and arguing why a philosophical analysis of submission is lacking and why it is important, Chapter Two
charts how submission has been conceptually linked to femaleness and femininity in the works of key thinkers like Freud, Rousseau and Catherine MacKinnon. In these works, Garcia argues, it is suggested that “there is something intrinsically feminine in submission and intrinsically submissive in femininity” (p. 39). However, Chapter Three takes up Beauvoir’s notion of “situation” to show that although there may be a connection between femininity and submission, submission is not in women’s nature, it is “the result of historical power relations, and therefore that it can change” (p. 42). Chapters Four and Five then address themselves to applying this approach to submission. Chapter Four offers an analysis of why submission is so hard to get into view, because it is something ordinary, mundane and ubiquitous, and thus requires “an inversion of perspective on power” (p. 86); whilst Chapter Five deepens the account of Beauvoir’s phenomenological method and turns its attention to her descriptions of women’s lived experience of submission as something that is prescribed to them (p. 103).

The final four chapters of the book are designed to explain why women submit. Chapter Six aims to show that submission is a result of patriarchal conditions. The central argument here, again found in Beauvoir, is that women are objectified by men, which leads women to encounter themselves in this objectified way “seeing themselves as the Other and not primarily as subjects” (p. 112). But the full explanation of why this leads to women’s complicity in submission is deferred. Chapter Seven focuses on the objectification of women’s bodies, arguing that women are thrown into bodies from which they are already alienated because of the way society interprets and structures the meaning of women’s bodies. Garcia emphasises that because of these strong social forces, the “choice” of submission—conforming to the norms of femininity, beautification, bodily discipline, in short, the submission that is required of women by the patriarchal social context in which they find themselves—“can hardly be seen as a sign of moral vice, since the experience she [woman] has of her body as always already objectified gives her good reason to think she has no other choice than being other” (p. 156).

Chapter Eight layers upon this Beauvoir’s analysis of the social expectation to comply, and the “delights” and pleasure that can be found in submission. Chapter Nine, which finally addresses the question not just of how submission is imposed upon women, but “why do women submit themselves” (p. 177), opts for an analysis of submission in terms of adaptive preference, and as a kind of “cost–benefit analysis” (p. 193), arguing that although women are not naturally or essentially destined for submission, “freedom [is] much more costly for women than for men” (p. 193). Therefore, in many cases, as Garcia argues in Chapter One, “submitting to men may be a rational choice” (p. 10).

The book presents the issue of submission as a relevant and an important topic for philosophy and for contemporary feminism. It offers a compelling methodological account of how such submission should be approached, and highlights interesting examples of female submission beyond the normal examples of sexual self-objectification, for instance in Chapter Eight’s explanation of Beauvoir’s conception of heterosexual love as a central site of female submission. It is written in an accessible manner and offers a clear introduction to complex thinkers like MacKinnon, Hegel and Foucault for those who may be less familiar with their work. However, for those more well versed, the quick glosses may at times be frustrating (I did find myself wanting more justification for the “harmonious” reading of Heidegger’s das Man and Being-with others to which Garcia subscribes).

The analysis of submission Garcia offers is broadly convincing. The oppressive situation of woman and the way it shapes one’s self-experience and possibilities for Being-in-the-world arguably do play a significant role in explaining female submission. Norms of submission are prescribed to women through various means, and there are social and material benefits to complying, as well as costs to resisting, as Beauvoir adeptly describes in The Second Sex. But the conclusion for which the book plumps, that ultimately female submission is explained by a kind of cost–benefit analysis, is somewhat unsatisfying.

One wonders if this is because Garcia’s account is perhaps hobbled by the worry of what offering a more nuanced account of active complicity might involve. Garcia is keenly aware that Beauvoir is often seen as judging women overly harshly for their participation in patriarchal ways of life, and has even been accused of misogyny and victim blaming. To counter this worry, Garcia argues that “Beauvoir does not judge real women... she severely judges the female behaviour that is prescribed by the way men structure women’s destinies” (p. 104). Garcia argues that “most of the time, woman does not actively choose her submission, she merely accepts what is suggested to her”
For Garcia, submission is a more passive form of consent, rather than an active choice, a characterisation which enables her to avoid seeing women as responsible for their submission in any substantial way. As she puts it:

Yes, women, insofar as they are human beings and thus can choose their freedom, are responsible for not choosing it; but the way in which their situation is determined from the outside by male domination to the extent that submission is made their destiny is such that they cannot be held liable for this submission (p. 198)

The emphasis throughout the book is on the external forces that demand submission from women, but by attending primarily to these and for the most part passing quickly over the more active submission to which Beauvoir herself does attend, the book avoids engaging with some of the most interesting and underexplored issues of submission, or what—to avoid prejudging the explanatory mechanisms at play—I would call “complicity”.

This is not to say that oppressive social conditions are not a central explanatory feature of women's submission, but this is something that has been emphasised by many other writers, usually under the heading of “adaptive preferences.” The explanation from adaptive preference, like Garcia's account, is an explanation of submission that primarily emphasises the external oppressive situation of the agent to explain their compliance with oppressive norms and practices. Garcia aligns herself with this school of thought when she uses the explanation from adaptive preference to explain how Beauvoir accounts for submissive women appearing to be happy with their situation (pp.182–183), and the “cost–benefit analysis” in terms of which she ultimately explains female submission (pp.176, 195–197). This enables her, as it does the adaptive preference theorist, to avoid the issue of victim blaming, whilst also recognising women's agency, in a similar way to the work of Ann Cudd, whom she specifically references (pp. 195–6), and Serene Khader (2011), whom she does not. However, plumping for this as the ultimate explanation for female submission leaves certain key questions unanswered.

A major part of Garcia's analysis implies that if the social conditions were different, women's submission would ultimately disappear because “submission, in sum, is the fruit of the situation” (p. 200). Garcia does note that there have been many developments and improvements in women's situation since the time Beauvoir was writing (p. 204), but she is equally at pains to stress that compulsory heterosexuality is still strong (p. 193), and emphasise the continued financial dependence of women on men (p. 175), thus bolstering her argument that “women are still in a situation in which submission appears as a destiny” (p. 204). But is this true of all women? There are many privileged women who it seems could refuse to consent to submission—or at least not submit to patriarchal norms to the degree that they do—but who nevertheless appear to embrace their submission. In situations where feminism has become more mainstream and the socially acceptable thing would be to reject patriarchal norms (at least in certain instances), how do we explain those women who do not? I'm thinking, for example, of Catherine Deneuve speaking out against the #MeToo movement and the backlash she received, or the highly educated and affluent women who engaged in the “raunch culture” of the early 2000s where, as Filipa Melo Lopes has argued, “No one was expecting them to go pole dancing on Friday night and there were no foreseen penalties for not doing it” (Melo Lopes, 2019, p. 2528). In these instances, the appeal to adaptive preference or a cost–benefit analysis does not seem to give us the whole explanation.

The cost–benefit explanation of female submission Garcia opts for is perhaps frustrating because it repeats the well-worn ground of explanations from adaptive preference, and because the resources for addressing the issues raised above and offering a different explanation for submission that better explains the submission of women in relatively privileged situations are there in Beauvoir. At points Garcia gestures towards these, for example, when she indicates Beauvoir's claims about the “general temptation” of submission (p. 189). She observes that Beauvoir does make a distinction between “forced submission, in which agency almost completely disappears and for which, therefore, the individual cannot be held accountable, and complicit submission... [where] there is, in Beauvoir's view, moral fault” (p. 190). However, Garcia veers away from the latter half of this analysis by emphasising that it is as a result of their situation that women are more tempted to submit (p. 191), quickly following this up by stressing again that
“Beauvoir opens the possibility of understanding female submission as the result of a cost-benefit analysis” (p. 193). Moves like this gloss over the distinctive kind of agency involved in becoming or remaining submissive to patriarchal norms, and obscures the broader account of complicity in one’s own submission—how it comes about and how it may be overcome—that might otherwise be drawn from Beauvoir’s text.

Although the book addresses an important and urgent issue, and makes many points with which I agree, particularly the idea that submission is “primarily a submission to a set of social norms” (p. 204), overall, I found myself left wanting more. This may be because the book was initially intended for quite a general audience, as Garcia wrote in a blog for the American Philosophical Association, she wanted something her grandmother and the construction painter could read (Garcia, 2021). In its revised and expanded English edition, however, the attempt has been made to address the book to a more academic readership. As a result, the text sometimes feels pulled in two directions, avoiding the more technical questions a full analysis of submission demands. I agree that women's submission is often a submission to social norms, but it is unclear from the text whether this submission is supposed to be conscious or unconscious, and on what level the “cost–benefit analysis” is taking place. Moreover, we might ask what kind of relation to norms is at stake here, and how this is differentiated from norm following that does not count as submission. These questions are important in order to understand the various levels at which complicity in submission can function, and to work out the best strategies for combatting it. The question of what it would look like not to submit, or whether this is even possible in women's current situation, is also one that remains largely open. Although Garcia emphasises that resistance is possible, it’s not totally clear what this resistance would look like and how it would come about, save a brief mention of “working outside the home” (p. 200). The book works well as a defence of Beauvoir, and an interesting insight into her methodology. It also makes a strong case for why submission is an important topic, and one that has been underexplored, as well as making a persuasive argument for why a phenomenological approach is an apt medium for pursuing such an analysis. But as an explanation of why women are complicit in their own submission, there is still more to be said.

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REFERENCES