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Regional

Self-proclaimed hippie inspired by existentialist

Although philosophy and feminism may seem like two different fields of study, the fact of the matter is that they have been intimately related by scholars in both disciplines. One such person is Margaret (Peg) Simons, who for many years was a faculty member and former chair of the department of philosophy at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Simons initially wanted to be a medical doctor, but switched her ambition after taking an undergraduate English class.

"It was my English comp class, my English 101 class at the University of Michigan," Simons said. "The guy was a former priest. He showed off the calluses on his knees one day in class."

A native of Wyandotte, Mich., she obtained her doctorate from Purdue University in Indiana. Simons came from a big industrial arts high school outside of Detroit and had never had much liberal education. She just lived for dancing and music.

"It was Motown," Simons said. "It was a wonderful time, but I didn't study very much. So when I got to the University of Michigan this guy gave us an assignment to write a paper on liberal versus practical education. I was sucking up to the professor. I knew he believed in liberal education so I wrote about liberal education and I convinced myself."

She then became interested in a woman whose path was quite unique in terms of her public persona, her philosophy and her outlook on life: Simone de Beauvoir, a champion of existentialism.

Existentialism is a philosophical current that emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent, determining his or her own development through acts of the will.

"Beauvoir was an important existentialist writer in post-war France. Her major period of fame was in the 1950s and 60s, the heyday of existentialism worldwide," Simons explained. "In the 70s she became very active in the women's movement. In 1949 she wrote a book called 'The Second Sex,' which interested me because I became part of the women's liberation movement."

Simons calls herself "an old hippie," and in the 60s she was in the women's



Dr. Margaret Simons (far left) and colleagues.

liberation movement while at Purdue University. "Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex,' which was very philosophically dense, had a terrible translation," she said. "You had to read it in French to get all of the philosophy. But it was very intriguing. It was sexual liberation, which I liked, of course, being a hippie and a Marxist. It was the anti-Vietnam war era, so it was very timely in the 70s."

Another important book by Beauvoir was "Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter," a

book about her mother's death. "Beauvoir was raised very Catholic so she struggled with this romantic denial of women subjectivity that she was taught as a child and the denial of her sexuality. She became an important leader for a sexual liberation movement in the 50s. I didn't know about that until recently when I was working on a volume of her feminist writings." Beauvoir never married or had children, and one wonders if the lack of those experiences influenced her views on sexuality.

"I bet," said Simons. "Your ideas are going to flow from what you experience. I don't have any children. I am married, but I don't have any children and that was a choice, but my mother was what they call a career woman in the days before they had daycare centers. It was very hard for her to find childcare and I took care of my younger sister and I realized how hard that was." Simons is very sympathetic to women of this younger generation who are determined to have children and a

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career.

"You must realize that it is very difficult to move these institutions that were founded on the model of an individual male who didn't have those responsibilities," Simons said. "So a lot of people responded to Beauvoir very positively even though you'd think they might be really opposed to each other because she wanted liberation and equality for women." Another aspect of the personal life of Simone de Beauvoir is the fact that she had many lovers, of both sexes.

"In a sense she was an heir to the 19th century tradition of women having a culture among themselves," Simons said. "She attended a Catholic girls school, no boys were there. In the 19th century they had very different spheres, women in one and men in the other, and these female friendships, this intense emotionality, was what was encouraged." At the time women were supposed to be the moral leaders and the heart was in the home.

"That's where women were supposed to be, and there was no room for morality and cutthroat capitalism, so you had these separate spheres," explained Simons. "In a sense those intense emotional, and for her sexual, relationships grew out of really a 19th century experience. But she denied all that. She denied the philosophy. She denied the sexual relationships with women. And she continued to deny her work in philosophy after I met her." Yes, Simons interest in Beauvoir was so intense that she decided to go to Paris to meet her.

"She never, in all the years I met with her, and I met with her probably a dozen times, she never answered a question from me about her philosophy in 'The Second Sex.'"

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.

Photo courtesy of Margaret Simons