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Feminist Futures and Campus Changes: Dismantling Ursinus College's Greek Life

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Schellhase Essay

Feminist Futures and Campus Changes: Dismantling Ursinus College's Greek Life

Introduction

The subject of feminism in 2015 continues to be, to draw from Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 book *The Second Sex*, "irritating".¹ Many people simply refuse to acknowledge that gender issues persist, and even when they do, they fail to recognize their own connections to such problems, focusing instead on the horrific violence occurring in faraway places. For feminism to flourish, we all need to embody the same paradigm as was needed in 1949. Feminists must analyze the problematic aspects of the here-and-now, recognizing their personal if subconscious compliance in a systemic problem. For systems exist only as collections of smaller subsets, and tackling these subsets proves the only effective method of destabilizing the superstructure of the patriarchy.

Our here-and-now is Ursinus College, 2015. While many troubling factors related to gender and sexuality persist on our campus, I argue that Greek Life, particularly in its gendered form, constitutes one of the biggest threats to feminism and constructive gender relations at Ursinus. Fraternities propagate rape culture and hyper-masculine environments, sororities comply with the ideal form of Woman enforced by the male gaze, and Greek life as an institution supersedes the freedom of an individual and replaces it with a fetishization of the collective. For Ursinus to move forward with more amicable gender relations, it must ban Greek Life. I will argue this by examining the history of Greek Life, exploring the modern problematic elements of Greek Life through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011), 3.

Woolf 's writings, and by juxtaposing our current situation with several proposed alternatives.

I. The History of Greek Life

To the extent that understanding the past often facilitates a better understanding of the present, I offer a brief overview of the history of Greek life. Greek-letter organizations started as collectives of wealthy white males, with the first appearing in 1776 at the College of William and Mary in revolutionary Virginia. Several other Greek-letter fraternities appeared in various universities throughout the east coast during the latter part of the 1700s, with their main purpose “the rivalry of public exhibitions,”² (209). Secrecy has been an integral part of the fraternity experience since its inception, with formal vows of absolute silence a membership requirement for many fraternities regardless of their other purposes. During the early 1900s fraternities were transformed into an aspect of college life that University administrators acknowledged and respected, which included official on-campus housing.³

The history of the sorority or “women’s fraternities” starts much later than that of the men’s. In 1851 several women founded the Aldelphian Society, thereby creating the first sisterhood. While a handful of accounts show the membership of several women in all-male fraternities, Greek-life organizers quickly recognized the separate institution of a woman’s fraternity. These organizations expanded during the late 1800s, with women’s fraternities appearing throughout the east coast. Despite the suggestion of the word sorority by an advisor in 1882, the term fraternity remained as the official designation due to its official

² Clarence Frank Birdseye, *Individual Training in Our Colleges* (New York:Macmillan, 1907; Google eBooks)

³ Ibid.

incorporation, which utilized the term.⁴ Simone de Beauvoir's lamentation of "the man represents both the positive and the neuter"⁵ clearly applies here.

Since 1907 Ursinus has been host to Greek Life organizations. Ursinus currently maintains 5 sororities and 8 fraternities (including one gender-neutral fraternity), which constitutes roughly 20% of the Ursinus student population. Greek life at Ursinus has several unique aspects, as not all Greek members live together and first-year students cannot pledge.⁶ Mirroring Greek-life on the national level, the history of Ursinus Greek life is fraught with successes but also many disturbing failures, including several disturbing hazing incidents in recent years, the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol, and offenses related to gender and sexuality. What I argue below is that while benefits to the Greek system certainly exist, the costs of such a system, on both a national and local level and with particular deference to gender issues, expose the system as destructive and ultimately unmaintainable.

II. Modern Problems

The vast majority of Greek life organizations on our campus contribute to the harmful, cisnormative bifurcation of gender. Fraternities, the epitome of inner-circle male privilege, inherently harm women because women are not allowed access to the organization. How can frats be expected to truly respect a group of people if they are never given full and complete access to their perspective? We don't expect Congress, composed of less than 20 percent women, to be fully cognizant of women's issues, so how could we expect the self-governing body of a frat to do the same, composed of 0 percent women?⁷ Gender exclusive frats truly

⁴ San Jose State University, "General History of Fraternities and Sororities in the United States." *Student Involvement*, accessed May 6, 2015.

⁵ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 5.

⁶ Ursinus College, "Greek Organizations", *Student Organizations*, accessed May 5, 2015.

⁷ Center for American Women and Politics, "Women in the US Congress 2015", accessed May 5, 2015.

are the worst of the bunch, with, according to CNN, three scientific studies proving that men who join frats are three times as likely to rape as those who don't.⁸

To further identify the gender issues that abound in Ursinus's fraternities, I turn to two specific personal anecdotes regarding the fraternity with which I am most familiar: Phi Kappa Sigma. Known as the "nerd fraternity" or the "non-frat fraternity", this organization in reality propagates a cult of hypermasculinity. One example of this can be found in a song that fraternity leaders strongly encourage new members to sing: "My Phi Kap Girl". Written in 1919, the song clearly encapsulates outdated ideas of gender and romance.

Dearest girl, My Phi Kap girl,
I love but you alone.
When you are near, Blue skies appear,
Tell me that I may call you my own.

Within my heart, enshrined apart,
Your image seems to shine.
You'll always be a sweet heart to me,
Phi Kap girl of mine, mine.⁹

The song is clearly problematic for a variety of reasons. First, by encouraging the fraternity to sing the song together, they in effect make a heteronormative assumption about the group's membership—as men, they naturally like women. This Otherizes and in fact erases other ways of being, primarily being a gay man. The song also infantilizes and objectifies women in one fell swoop just by saying "girl of mine, mine". Instead of using language more appropriate for college-aged people—woman—the song uses girl. Both stanzas make references to the girl as being the property of the singer, and the girl's proximity to the presumably male singer adds value to her "When you are near [to me], Blue skies appear." The few inherent values given to the girl further reflect misogynistic gender expectations and hardly constitute praise. "Your image seems to shine" exemplifies the male

⁸ John Foubert, "'Rapebait' email reveals dark side of frat culture," *Time*, October 9, 2013.

⁹ Penn State Skull House, "Phi Kap Songs", accessed May 6, 2015.

gaze's obsession with looks versus the content of the girl's character, and the line "You'll always be a sweet heart to me," perpetuates the notion of an ideal female as docile, and at no part in the song is the girl praised for her bravery, integrity, intelligence, or grit.

Another anecdote that I shall share happened to me just a few days ago. I was walking past Omwake when I noticed that the fraternity members had started to gather, those of higher rank on the porch (atop two flights of steps) and other members at the bottom, looking up. The only thing I heard while walking past was a senior member who addressed the group as follows: "You guys have been bitching a lot. You need to stop bitching." Since the term "bitching" denotes a negative, feminized style of complaint, the frat leader, consciously or not, was using masculine peer pressure to correct his "brothers'" behavior. The terms "bitch", "bitchy" or "bitching" cannot be separated from femininity and people rarely, if ever, successfully use these terms in a reclaimative sense. That was certainly not this frat leader's intention.

While these two incidents alone do little to condemn fraternities writ large, they replicate an unsettling trend that occurs across campus and indeed nationwide. Many of the fraternities at Ursinus and throughout the US have committed egregious crimes against many women. While statistics abound about the sexual violence perpetrated by male fraternity members, my job here is argue from a philosophical perspective that fraternities inherently harm women and gender non-conforming people. I shall do with the help of two canonical feminist texts.

In Simone de Beauvoir's introduction to her book *The Second Sex*, she explicates on the seemingly inexplicable reason for half of the population being relegated into a minority. She also provisionally defines the term "woman", and struggles with finding the true purpose of feminism. Most relevant to my discussion on fraternities, however, is her section on the

Other. “Alterity is the fundamental category of human thought. No group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself.”¹⁰ Fraternities clearly do just that; by creating the collective entity of a frat, they are adding a defining attribute to themselves, that is, they are “Phi Kaps,” as well as college students, men, Americans, etc. This unity dichotomizes their existence with those outside of the frat. This us-versus-them mentality is clearly seen in another Phi Kap song:

I'm a Phi Kap born, I'm a Phi Kap bred,
And when I die I'm a Phi Kap dead.

Chorus

Phi Kappa Sigma, Sigma
Phi Kappa Sigma, Sigma,
Phi Kappa Sigma, Phi Kap I!
And we pity him not a Phi Kap born,
For he alas, is a man forlorn.¹¹

While this exclusionary element should be found alarming in and of itself, when coupled with the fact that the Phi Kaps and most other fraternities are composed entirely of cisgender men, such Othering can clearly cause gender destruction and sexual violence. For when no members of the “opposite sex” are allowed entry into the frat, they inherently become a part of the Other. No woman, no matter how strong her desire, could ever obtain the allegedly enviable status of being a Phi Kap. No Phi Kap chapter, no matter how supposedly well-informed its members claim to be or are, can be fully cognizant of women’s or female issues if neither women nor females can constitute the organization’s inner-structure.

This othering and sexualizing of women understandably and expectedly leads to horrendous consequences. As de Beauvoir explains, drawing on Hegel, “a fundamental

¹⁰ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 6.

¹¹ Penn State Skull House, “Phi Kap Songs”.

hostility to any other consciousness is found in consciousness itself; the subject posits itself only in opposition; it asserts itself as the essential and sets up the other as inessential, as the object.”¹² Following this line of thinking, the existence of fraternities will set up women as inessential objects, to be utilized physically, sexually, emotionally, but not in a meaningful, respectful sense, at least not as an organization. Certainly members of fraternities can respect and give agency to women. Gender exclusive fraternities, on an institutional level, cannot.

Sororities, while not the echo chambers of male entitlement that are fraternities, also harm gender relations at Ursinus by welcoming only women identifying members. This propagates a cisnormative system of oppression that does little in the long run to help women. While sororities can often be a safe space for women, and while I argue that sororities should exist as long as fraternities do, sororities’ existence can also be problematized.

Created after the formation of the all-male fraternity, sororities are an attempt to subvert a system which was inherently created for men. This also relates to de Beauvoir’s discussion of the Other.

No subject posits itself spontaneously and at once as the inessential from the outset; it is not the Other who, defining itself as Other, defines the One; the Other is posited as Other by the One positing itself as One. But in order for the Other not to turn into the One, the Other has to submit to this foreign point of view. Where does this submission in women come from?”¹³

Clearly fraternities, the original form of Greek Life, have posited themselves as the One, the traditional and truer form of the Greek-letter society. Sororities are the Other, and while they too are clearly valued, they are valued for different reasons. Their purpose comes from their interaction with the male-led fraternities, and it is questionable to presume that a co-educational facility such as Ursinus would ever have sororities without first having fraternities.

¹² De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 7.

¹³ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 7.

As de Beauvoir continues to write, “Women’s actions have never been more than symbolic agitation; they have won only what men have been willing to concede to them; they have taken nothing; they have received.”¹⁴ If sororities served no purpose to men, if they did not entreat the male gaze, I argue that they would not be so popular. A quick Google search of the term “sorority girl” (even with the Safe Search on) results in a slew of hypersexualized images of white, thin, smiling women in bikinis. A systemic issue that impacts local and global affairs, this notion of sorority inferiority affects even Ursinus, making the sororities here a concession of the patriarchal power structure; they lack any of the true subversivity that could possibly be cited as giving them feminist value.

Sorority enthusiasts will of course find ample reasons to support the sorority system, citing community fostering and sisterhood as benefits to the woman’s fraternity. But just because we are able to find some benefits to a system does not mean that the pros actually outweigh the cons. As de Beauvoir points out, benefits will always be found in a system regardless of its ultimately oppressive nature. “the slave, on the other hand, out of dependence, hope or fear, internalizes his need for the master; however equally compelling the need may be to them both, it always plays in favor of the oppressor over the oppressed.”¹⁵ While it benefits women to have sororities while fraternities remain intact, sororities too harm gender relations and ought to be dismissed.

III. The Future of Ursinus Greek Life

What does the future hold for Ursinus College’s Greek Life Organizations, and how will this impact gender relations for our school’s students? Currently only one organization is officially gender-neutral, though various students are making an effort to increase this number. Angela Cuva and others are working at improving the Ursinus Greek system by

¹⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹⁵ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 9.

making inter-Greek communication more effective and required. I contend that these steps, while perceivably beneficial in terms of short term improvements, will not result in substantial long-term change. What I call for is a permanent ban of Greek Life on this campus.

I argue that even by making Greek life gender neutral we would not solve all of its problems, not even all of its problems related solely to gender and sexuality. Most of the Greek organizations that I know are little more than glorified drinking clubs. While many operate under a guise of community service, the thinly veiled true purpose of these organizations remains comradery and socialization. Comradery and socialization alone harms no one, but the exclusivity and the secretive regimens of cult-like Greek societies have the potential for damage.

Pledging, for example, is an issue in and of itself. A rose by any other name, New Member Education requires students to spend inordinate amounts of time learning about their organization and its members. Students undergo secret rituals and must perform a variety of tasks in order to be made a part of the group. Even if all Greek Life organizations were gender neutral, gender power dynamics would remain and the leadership of such organizations could easily become male-dominated, mirroring, as it were, the problematic power dynamics of the world outside of Ursinus.

The secrecy inherent to Greek life has proven to be an especially problematic. Transparency fosters accountability, something Greek life organizations clearly lack. Hazing remains the biggest issue caused by this lack of transparency. According to stophazing.org, 90 percent of victims of hazing don't recognize that they are being hazed and 95 percent said that they did not report hazing to a campus official.¹⁶ Greeks clearly have shown themselves

¹⁶ StopHazing.org, "Hazing in View," accessed May 5, 2015.

incapable of conducting pledging in an appropriate fashion. Even if done correctly, I argue that pledging—a fixture of Greek life—is unnecessary and inherently exclusive.

And what of the sense of community that proponents credit Greek life with? What of “Once a Greek Always a Greek”? Well, people change. People make mistakes. Organizations should structure themselves so that members are free to leave or remain as they please without serious social consequences, something Greek life fails to do. Because when groups become so tight-knit and cultish that membership is expected for life, nasty consequences arise. Greek life offers protection for people that commit egregious errors and morally despicable crimes. We cannot keep grasping at straws, pretending that rape culture is a separate issue from Greek life.

People I know argue that Greek life provides a support system for those who might not otherwise have one. As a queer man who struggles with depression and anxiety, I recognize the importance of a support system. But the nearly 100 other clubs and organizations on campus fulfill this role without the exclusivity, gender discrimination and hazing present in Greek life. What’s more, the Wellness Center, Active Minds, and the RAs serve as resources for emotional wellbeing.

Even sororities, the well-intentioned reaction to the all-male-fraternity, damage the feminist cause. These groups propagate the cisnormative construction of gender which inherently complies with the masculine construction of what it means to be feminine. They build an identity and sense of community based on those specific performances of gender and they emphasize the collective of their organization at the loss of the individual voices of the women involved. In short, they are thinly viewed products of a patriarchal culture that seek to subvert but instead solidify the status quo. What women need, in the words of Virginia

Woolf, are rooms or their own, not rooms with a few dozen people who are somewhat similar to them. She writes this on the necessity of individuality:

If we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; if we escape a little from the common sitting room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality...that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women, then the opportunity will come.¹⁷

Sororities maintain womens' focus on men and other women. Transcending Greek Life altogether moves past these simple bifurcations and allows women as individuals to see their individual relation to the world of reality.

IV. Conclusions

Keeping Greek life around will only continue to harm our campus and its students. I recognize that banning Greek life won't eradicate rape culture or wipe out cissexism. These issues will continue to haunt our campus, to some extent, forever. However, critical examination shows that Greek Life contributes heavily to these problems and by banning it, gender relations will improve considerably. This will be a challenging action to take, especially considering the numerous benefits of such as system. As de Beauvoir writes, "Refusing to be the Other, refusing complicity with man, would mean renouncing all the advantages an alliance with the superior caste confers on them."¹⁸ But we must call out these advantages as the poisoned chalices that they are. For the greatest threats to a better future, a future less plagued by patriarchal oppression, is not some faraway ideology or distant demon. The greatest potential for growth or destruction has been and always will be that which is nearest and dearest to us. Banning Greek Life at Ursinus will not win over friends or single-handedly explode the patriarchy, but it will chip away at harmful patriarchal sub-sets and foster greater gender relations for generations to come.

¹⁷ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 1344.

¹⁸ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 10.

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