theories and methodologies

# Simone de Beauvoir, the Paradoxical Intellectual

LAWRENCE D. KRITZMAN

IN *THE ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY* (1947), SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR SUGGESTS THAT TO BE HUMAN IS TO BE SUBJECT TO CHANGE AND CONTRADICTION. Paradox, she claimed, was the only truth concerning human existence because of the tension created between mortality and the desire to give meaning to life. "Death," Beauvoir suggests, "challenges our existence. . . . [I]t also gives meaning to our life" (*Prime* 731). Unlike Albert Camus, however, she clearly refuses to conceive of existence as absurd. "To declare existence absurd is to deny that I can ever be given meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed" (*Ethics* 129). Recognizing the facticity created by the inevitability of death and the constraints death imposes on existence, she implores us, nevertheless, to seize our freedom and give meaning to it through ethical acts.

Based on the ontological freedom attributed to humankind and the responsibility that it entailed, Beauvoir's version of existentialism was characterized by ambiguity. The self, described phenomenologically as a subject destined to act, had to confront the facticity of its being and the obstacles over which it had no control. Accepting this paradox as a universal phenomenon, Beauvoir conceived of it as producing another paradox: our freedom can only be realized through the recognition of another's freedom. Far beyond the limits of the master-slave relation formulated by Hegel and subsequently adapted by Jean-Paul Sartre, Beauvoir engaged in what might be called an abstract idealism and believed that oppression can be overcome. She recognized the possibility of human relations leading to an ethical life through our ability to learn that we can be both separate from and dependent on the other. Beauvoir regarded freedom as relational and based on the need for reciprocation.

Beauvoir belonged to a generation of public intellectuals—such as Sartre, Camus, Paul Nizan—that subscribed to the values of the universal and spoke on behalf of those who were excluded from its privileges. Drawing on existentialist ethics, Beauvoir maintained an ambiguous relation to the universal. She addressed in her most fa-

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mous work, *The Second Sex* (1949), society's failure to treat women as equals, which undermined the universal and created asymmetry in human relations. Patriarchy's practice of othering women and viewing them as "particular beings" renders them separate from the universal. In her philosophical texts, Beauvoir conceived of freedom as a phenomenon belonging to humanity as a whole. To conceive of it otherwise would reify the male model as an absolute, albeit abstract, type and therefore make that which is female inessential. Trapped in a body destined for biological reproduction, women are described as objects of immanence. Yet at the same time it appears that the holy grail of women's freedom, transcendence, can only be realized if women reject society's construction of them to gain entry to the neuter world of the abstract universal.

Beauvoir reflected on the ontological status of human freedom and on the social construction of female oppression. Her analysis of these phenomena did not constitute a political philosophy, nor was its epistemological underpinning dependent on the objectification of human consciousness as it was in Sartre.

Examining women's role and place in society, the landmark publication *The Second Sex* spoke on behalf of those women who had yet to be mobilized and demand change. Critical of the myths that a male-dominated society had constructed, Beauvoir challenged the misogynistic representation of women. Although a great success in terms of sales, the book provoked degrading attacks on its author. Criticized by the left and right alike, Beauvoir's book was characterized with epithets such as "obscene" and "destructive of family values" because of its treatment of taboo subjects: the female body, lesbianism, abortion, to name but a few.

Famously declaring that "one is not born a woman, one becomes one" (301), Beauvoir challenged the constraints that essentialist social practices imposed on society. She viewed women's marginalization as a condition and not as an objective fact. The paradox of women's subjugation, in Beauvoir's reasoning, is that women are in an oppressive situation from which they cannot extricate themselves; they are therefore unable to exercise the freedom that Beauvoir assigned to them. What becomes clear in this context is that Beauvoir equivocated on the question of whether or not oppressed women are free and capable of liberating themselves from oppression. If Beauvoir questioned the idea of the "eternal feminine," she did so to recognize that female consciousness can, without sacrificing the specificity of women's condition, challenge institutionalized gender identities frozen in time. Perhaps her adherence to an originary concept of ontological freedom as a theoretical presupposition forecloses the recognition that a woman may be able to choose and still be unable to execute her choice. If the grammar and syntax of social organization are willed to women by patriarchy, how then may they become empowered and contest the position of otherness in which they have been situated? The book may not have offered political solutions, but it functioned as a kind of critical time bomb waiting to explode.

More than anything else, Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex* coalesces with her critique of capitalism and bourgeois humanism. A radicalization of society that would transform women's condition can only be accomplished through the work of women and men alike. Recognizing the lack of parity between the sexes, Beauvoir foregrounded the inequities that working-class women had been forced to cope with: poor employment conditions, the burden of negotiating between motherhood and work, and the lack of access to abortions when necessary. Women could only transcend their deprivation through the establishment of conditions in which they were no longer economically dependent on men. The imperative that Beauvoir suggested was based on the desire and commitment to transform a world dictated by the exigencies

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of capitalist men. Yet when questioned about the possibility of economic solutions to the oppression of women, Beauvoir rejected them for being too absolute and reductive.

Despite her polemical commitment to women's rights, Beauvoir's rhetoric in *The Second Sex* cannot be regarded as constituting a political manifesto per se; instead, it should be viewed as a philosophical descriptive analysis of women's lives and should only be treated as such. Imprisoned, at times, by the binary logic of her theoretical analyses, Beauvoir sometimes appears to prioritize the masculine and use it as a gauge against which the feminine should be measured. "When woman is engaged in an enterprise worthy of a human being, she is quite able to show herself as active, efficient, taciturn—and as aesthetic—as a man" (604). Claiming that women are often complicitous with male oppression, she states nevertheless that "man is in no position to blame her, since he has led her into temptation" (721).

For Beauvoir the path to woman's freedom may be achieved through the repudiation of the body and motherhood alike. To gain access to a world conceived as both phallocentric and universal, women must pay the price of leaving their bodies behind. Might one instead say today that it was not motherhood that should have been attacked but the institution of domesticity associated with it? Doesn't the claim that woman is essentially a sexual being, a physical body, destined to perpetuate the human species, suggest that child-bearing women are not conscious of their freedom and are consequently incapable of transcendence? The representation of the masculine body, on the other hand, is imbued with value, for it is described as being able to transcend biological reproduction, from which women cannot escape. Men, as Beauvoir suggests, can "take control of the instant and mold the future. It is male activity that in creating values has made of existence itself a value" (64).

The binary patterning put forth by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* appears to work at cross-purposes: can women paradoxically overcome their marginalization by joining the exclusive club of phallocentric disembodiment? To be sure, the sacrifice of the feminine to the exigencies of an abstract masculine ideal derives from a social system in which the natural is subjugated to cultural interpretation. Beauvoir's error here, if one is to call it that, should only be seen from the perspective of the etymological meaning of that word: to go off course. Yet if, as Judith Butler claims, for Beauvoir the other is the other face of man's "own alienated self" (43), the representation of the male body, signifying the return of the repressed, takes the form of a culturally coded entity that becomes a matter of choice. Is this Beauvoir's oblique way of suggesting that the female body might be able to speak otherwise and give new meaning to the question of gender? In spite of her intermittent forays into essentialist mode, Beauvoir's theoretical hesitancy suggests that gender, at least at that historical moment, was an ambiguous affair, difficult to resolve. Although Beauvoir recognized the differences between women and men usually considered biological, she did not theoretically conceive of them as natural phenomena. Instead, she viewed these differences as the result of institutions such as marriage and motherhood that reify patriarchy and ultimately function as the embodiment of difference.

Often unfairly accused of blindly adapting the tenets of Sartrean existentialism, Beauvoir initiated much earlier than Sartre a critical reflection on the nature of intersubjective relations, particularly the functioning of the individual and collective groups in a social context. Situation, she would claim, can limit the efficacity of our freedom. In *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* (1944), Beauvoir explored ethical responsibility between human subjects and suggested how it might apply to oppressed groups. At issue was the question of what constitutes justice in the world. The freedom of an individual does not function in isolation. To realize freedom, a subject must

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recognize other subjects' quests for freedom in the world. Ironically, our own freedom depends on the freedom of the other and should motivate the other's freedom.

What is striking is Beauvoir's refusal to describe herself as a feminist until many years after the publication of *The Second Sex*. However, in spite of rejecting the feminist label, Beauvoir ultimately became the symbol for feminist engagement in the West, perhaps even more so in the United States than in France. Like Marx, who had suggested nearly a century earlier that one needed to study before making the revolution, Beauvoir began her radicalization with research in the stacks of the library where she undertook archival work, an intellectual engagement that would eventually effect change.

Only in the 1970s, however, did Beauvoir actively begin to campaign for the women's movement, participate in demonstrations, and sign petitions in the name of human rights. She used her physical presence and celebrity to conjoin pragmatic needs with a more subdued form of radicalism. For example, in lending her name to the "Manifesto of 343," a list of famous female writers and celebrities who had received illegal abortions (which in truth she had not), Beauvoir began a sustained engagement for abortion rights. Subsequently she worked for the decriminalization of abortion and the need for working women to obtain easier access to contraception.

A new generation of feminists emerged in France in the 1970s, some of whom, like Psy et Po (an abbreviation for a group calling itself Psychoanalysis and Politics) and its leader, the psychoanalyst Antoinette Fouque, were highly critical of Beauvoir. The group around Psy et Po considered her a phallic woman (Moi 77). Depicted as a universalist wedded to assimilationist politics, Beauvoir was criticized for having reduced woman to the order of the dominant male model. She was unfairly accused of being a female misogynist, and groups like Psy et Po saw in Beauvoir's philosophical speculations about the body an attempt to represent female sexuality as abject.

The epistemology of the new feminisms that emerged in the shadow of poststructuralist thought in the 1970s broke with the phenomenological underpinnings of the old humanism as Beauvoir practiced it. More recent theorists such as Hélène Cixous focused on the specificity of woman's difference; Cixous even went so far as to describe herself as a nonfeminist. She used the term "phallic feminism" for what she regarded as the attempt, as practiced by Beauvoir, to appropriate for women the same networks of power that men had traditionally controlled.

The birth of Beauvoir as an engaged intellectual came rather late. Describing her life in the period before the Second World War, she declared in one of her autobiographical volumes, *The Prime of Life*, that her political activism was limited. "I was riddled with bourgeois idealism and aestheticism, blinded to political realities. But this blindness was not peculiar to me; it was a characteristic of the universal failings of the period" (363). Her involvement in the French Resistance was minimal, and, as Deirdre Bair suggests, Beauvoir's engagement during the occupation was typical of the French bourgeoisie, who "did what they needed to do in order to survive" (296). Like Sartre, Beauvoir submitted her works for review to the German censors. Neither collaborating nor partaking in heroic acts, Beauvoir took the path of least resistance and focused primarily on her intellectual work.

Everything would change in the postwar era. As part of the team (Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Raymond Aron) that founded the journal *Les temps modernes* ("Modern Times"), she shared in the group's declaration that henceforth the writer and intellectual would be interchangeable entities. Sartre's manifesto-like presentation of the first issue of that journal, in October 1945, reorientated the notion of what it meant to be an intellectual in postwar France. Commitment,

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responsibility, and freedom were the order of the day. Thereafter, writers would be obligated to think critically and without restriction in matters of social and political justice. No longer isolated in belle-lettristic pursuits or permitted to act as mere politicians on the public stage, these intellectuals put themselves in situations that allowed them to reflect universality in analyzing those who had experienced it daily. During that period Beauvoir penned several important essays, such as "Moral Idealism and Political Realism" (1945). She declared that philosophy was more than abstract speculation; for her it entailed the engagement of the human subject in empirical reality. Like Sartre and Camus, Beauvoir in her literary production, such as her prizewinning novel *The Mandarins* (1954), dramatized the ethics of commitment and explored philosophical and political issues like the responsibility of the intellectual in society.

Although Beauvoir saw herself unequivocally as a woman of the left, her political activity was relatively subdued until the beginning of the Algerian War, when she became a vehement critic of French colonialism. Opting for the independence of Algeria, she declared in her autobiography *Force of Circumstance*, "I am an intellectual. I take words and truth to be of value" (672). Accordingly, Beauvoir came to the defense of a member of the Algerian resistance, Djamila Boupacha, a twenty-one-year-old woman who was accused of having planted a bomb at a café at the University of Algiers. Arrested and accused of collaboration with the FLN (National Liberation Front), Boupacha was unjustly imprisoned, tortured, and finally raped with a bottle by barbaric French officials. Recognizing the inauthenticity of the parties of the left (the communists and socialists) for their failure to protect oppressed victims of colonialism such as Boupacha, Beauvoir went beyond the limitations of institutionalized politics.

Beauvoir considered herself a witness to history endowed with an ethical mission for which she assumed collective responsibility. Defining herself as such required Beauvoir to view the tragedy of the Algerian conflict as a personal challenge and a moral dilemma to which she had to respond. In *Force of Circumstance* she suggested that the political was indeed personal: "Living through the Algerian war was like experiencing a personal tragedy" (652). Like Émile Zola's newspaper article "J'accuse" (1896), which questioned the authority of the French army and military justice during the Dreyfus affair, Beauvoir's "In Defense of Djamila Boupacha" (published in *Le monde* on 2 June 1960) brought about moral outrage in public opinion. Condemned as a scandalous, anti-French piece of writing, Beauvoir's article nevertheless raised awareness in support of Boupacha and challenged the French silent majority to awaken to these crimes against humanity and finally take an ethical stand. Beauvoir's essay raised issues such as the need to postpone Boupacha's trial so that further evidence could be gathered and those responsible brought to justice for their barbarous behavior at the prison. In Algeria Beauvoir's essay was considered so inflammatory that the sale of *Le monde* was forbidden on the day of its publication.

In defending Boupacha, Beauvoir brought attention to the atrocities that the French army committed in Algeria: torture, rape, imprisonment without cause. The indifference that Beauvoir perceived among the French motivated her to speak at political rallies and in the mass media, for she believed that the future of democracy was at stake. In the middle of the Boupacha affair, the civil rights and feminist lawyer Gisèle Halimi approached Beauvoir and asked that she preface a book Halimi had written defending Boupacha. Beauvoir did so and received death threats as the result of her support for Boupacha.

On the Algerian question, Beauvoir's support was unequivocal, and she viewed her political engagement in this context as a moral necessity. As in her other political

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commitments, she rejected whatever would fetter freedom and the execution of justice, which was always viewed as a rather relative phenomenon. In this context Beauvoir perceived evil as an absolute, for it "intervenes" and creates a dehumanized world that eradicates any trace of ambiguity. By mobilizing her influence as a public intellectual, she was able to realize the political thrust articulated in her *Ethics*. "Only the freedom of others keeps each one of us from hardening into the absurdity of facticity" (71). Beauvoir's role as universal intellectual defending human rights was as relevant then as it is today, as demonstrated by the grotesque atrocities carried out in the Abu Ghraib prison.

Following the liberation, many French intellectuals, such as Camus and François Mauriac, signed a petition asking for the commutation of the death sentence for Robert Brasillach, a leading collaborationist and editor of the rabidly anti-Semitic newspaper *Je suis partout* ("I Am Everywhere"). Beauvoir viewed Brasillach's activities during the war as motivated by a desire to commit absolute evil, a phenomenon about which nothing was ambiguous. Her refusal to sign that petition was based on the belief that absolute evil required absolute punishment; to do otherwise would have made her complicitous in Brasillach's activities. As in the case of Bouchapa, Beauvoir once again addressed the question of how to respond ethically to atrocities that surpass human understanding. For Beauvoir, Brasillach's death sentence in the name of justice suddenly became ironically justifiable.

Perhaps the radical political engagement that Beauvoir pursued starting in late middle age allowed her to transcend the depression that Toril Moi has so aptly described. Beauvoir's range of activities was indeed epic: she condemned the Soviet Union's invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia and its attack on human rights; participated in the Helsinki peace conference; opposed the war in Vietnam and joined the Russell tribunal; signed the "Manifesto of 121," which supported the right of those called up during the Algerian War to evade military service; and became president of Choisir (To Choose), a prochoice organization.

In the period immediately following the events of May 1968, the government of President Georges Pompidou confronted the new-left movement. The government attempted to censor revolutionary publications such as the Maoist newspaper *La cause du peuple* ("The People's Cause"). In spite of Beauvoir's concern that Sartre was being manipulated by a new generation of revolutionaries, she decided with Sartre that they had no other choice than to become editors of *La cause du peuple* and defend free speech. The minister of the interior, Raymond Marcellin, enlisted the support of the National Assembly to curtail the actions of the Gauche Prolétérienne ("the proletarian left"). Demonstrations were banned and the sale of the newspaper on the streets of Paris was forbidden. To show the bad faith of the government (which did not want to jail internationally recognized public intellectuals) and to protect free speech, Beauvoir and Sartre took to the streets and sold the newspapers themselves. As she writes in *All Said and Done*, "What we wanted was not . . . to get ourselves arrested but to put the government in a state of self-contradiction by reason of its failure to arrest us" (467). Had the principle become greater than the cause?

The years of Beauvoir's increased political engagement ironically brought with it an increased preoccupation with old age and death. Anguished by the infelicitous experience of growing old, which had occupied her since the age of fifty, Beauvoir was prepared to take on another taboo subject, the fate of the elderly.

In *Old Age* (1970) Beauvoir asked what it means to age and reflected on how society treats the elderly. *The Second Sex* anticipated some of the issues that emerge during aging with the decline of "[woman's] erotic attractiveness and . . . fertility which, in the view

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of society and her own, provide the justification of her existence" (587). The onset of old age is represented as a form of abjection. Increasingly sensitive to issues concerning the female body since Boupacha's rape and her own consciousness of growing old, Beauvoir became more attentive to corporeal disfigurement in all its manifestations. When Anne, the middle-aged character in *The Mandarins*, views women with whom she identifies dancing at a party, she mournfully describes her disgust at the aging female body: "The faces of the women of my own age, that flabby skin . . . those dropping mouths. . . . They're old worn-out hags" (666–67). Was Beauvoir's attention here to concerns of the female body a question of personal narcissism and the fear of death, or did it manifest a new level of consciousness about the body, which contemporary feminists accused her of not having? Be that as it may, for Beauvoir "death is a woman," an ontological reality that allows men to live on (*Second Sex* 166).

As in the representation of women in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir draws our attention to the social isolation and alienation that the elderly experience as a consequence of marginalization. However, the relation depicted in *Old Age* is not a condition that is sustained by the agonistic struggle of human consciousnesses. No longer perceived as productive and materially useful, the elderly become victims of a materialistic society that forecloses their ontological freedom. Suggesting that society characterizes the elderly as "corpse[s] under a suspended sentence" (244), Beauvoir sees them as having been abandoned and denied a space to occupy. To be sure, the elderly are reified by the machinations of savage capitalism; bourgeois society reduces the elderly to a "being for others," a phenomenon imposed from without rather than from within and ultimately devoid of moral purpose.

Writing about old age and death constituted for Beauvoir a political and moral imperative that, despite the scholarly erudition in her book, she viewed once again as practical. Claiming that the phrase "old and poor" was tautological, Beauvoir declared that "those who condemn the maiming, crippling system in which we live should expose the scandal" (17). Beauvoir believed that the elderly are passed over in silence and that the infelicitous consequences of old age needed to be addressed. If Beauvoir did not offer a solution to the problem of old age, at least she discovered in it the symptoms of an inadequate society. "It is the whole system that is at issue and our claim cannot be otherwise than radical—change life itself" (604).

Beauvoir remained ambivalent about political activism to the end of her life. She believed, however, that to be a true intellectual required independence from the overdetermined rhetoric of established political parties and of reified political ideologies. As early as 1954, for instance, Beauvoir published an essay, "The Thought of the Contemporary Right," that criticized the socialist prime minister Pierre Mendès France. Yet in spite of her sustained, albeit pragmatic, political engagement in her later years, she declared near the end of her life that her greatest achievement was neither her political commitment nor her success as a writer. Instead, it was the more than fifty-year relationship she had with Sartre as intellectual interlocutor and lover (*Force* 365).

In retrospect, one might challenge some of the political positions that Beauvoir took, such as the belief that sexism and ageism would ultimately disappear with the triumph of Marxism. In spite of her desire to examine the complexity of human freedom and its limits, her choices sometimes appeared too absolute and even at times uncritical. Beauvoir's blind support of Sartre's declaration of understanding concerning the 1972 killing of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics is a startling case in point (see O'Doherty). Yet the same public intellectual denounced anti-Semitism in all its forms and appealed to the Soviet Union to be more flexible in allowing

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Jewish emigration to Israel. One must admire this woman of paradoxes, whom Danièlle Sallenave refers to as "Castor de Guerre" ("Beaver [Beauvoir's nickname] at War") for her engagement with life and what might be called the experience of "being in the world." This woman of the left, who yet was adamantly independent and critical of all overdetermined discourse, had indeed no problem questioning the left's failures. By giving voice to groups who had yet to speak and mobilize, such as women and the elderly, she was a woman before her time. Going beyond the earlier philosophy of Sartre, which was predicated on the idea of unlimited freedom, Beauvoir continually suggested that society was not gender- or age-neutral and that the limits to our freedom, what she characterized as the facticity of existence, are often beyond our doing. Nevertheless, at times the self-portraiture in her autobiographical texts projects the image of an engaged intellectual in possession of a certain exemplarity. Despite various references to vulnerability in her personal life, Beauvoir succeeded in transforming herself into Sainte Simone through the power of transcendence. "I attached small importance to the actual conditions of my life: nothing I believed could impede my will" (*Prime* 291).

In France, as in other parts of the world, women intellectuals have not always been taken seriously and have all too often been subject to derogatory and unfounded critiques. Those who have criticized Beauvoir for having profited as an exceptional woman in a world of men failed to realize the remarkable courage she showed in examining subjects that were previously taboo. No one before her had linked questions of female sexuality to political issues. Beauvoir should be praised for her audacity, for fighting the good fight, and for struggling to give meaning to her life and to the world in which we live. In this year, when we celebrate the centenary of her birth, let us remember the exemplary contributions she made in the quest for human rights and the radical politics that made it possible, and let us reject the marketing of exploitative indiscretions concerning her private life.

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