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Chapter 11
Surpassing Liberal Feminism: Beauvoir's Legacy in Global Perspective

Karen Vintges

La vraie liberté c'est celle qui se réalise par un projet positif
(Simone De Beauvoir, L'Amérique au jour le jour)

Abstract Paradigmatic as Beauvoir's thinking is for contemporary Western feminism, in the light of global developments, it is important to note that her feminist ideals surpass the dominant forms of Western liberalism in substantial ways. Her positive concept of 'ethical' freedom does not correspond to Western liberalism's negative concept of freedom as the absence of constraints. Nor does her gender egalitarian concept of society resemble Western liberalism's model of society with its dichotomous organization of labor and care. It is argued that Western feminism, as it was conceived by Beauvoir, can be elaborated substantially, as well as strategically, into an inclusive feminism for a globalizing, yet culturally plural world.

Paradigmatic as Beauvoir's thinking is for contemporary Western feminism it is important to investigate her feminist ideals and strategies from a global perspective.[1] During the last three decades non-Western men and women all over the world have objected to the global spread of liberalism's concepts of man and society under the banner of women's emancipation. They consider Western feminism as an offspring of Western liberalism and reject it as informal imperialism.[2] In this article, I

[1] See Karen Vintges, 'Beauvoir's Philosophy As the Hidden Paradigm of Contemporary Feminism,' in *Perspectives on Feminist Political Thought in European History from the Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. Tjitske Akkerman and Siep Stuurman (London/New York: Routledge, 1998).

[2] I borrow this term from political philosopher James Tully. See especially Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,' in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). Leila Ahmed, in her *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), argues that feminism was imported in Egypt by British colonialists like the by now famous Lord Croner, who in their own country outspokenly resisted the vote for women.

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will investigate whether Beauvoir's feminist ideals converge with the dominant norms of Western liberalism. Does Beauvoir's feminism amount to the view that women, in order to become emancipated, should (be forced to) assimilate to dominant Western liberal models of man and society? Or are her feminist ideals more critical towards these Western liberal models and more inclusive than recently has been suggested by French feminists, such as Elisabeth Badinter, who claim Beauvoir's legacy to underline their assmiliationist perspectives regarding Muslim women?[3] Can Western feminism, as conceived by Beauvoir, be elaborated into an inclusive perspective and, as such, into a topical feminism for a globalizing, yet plural world?

To answer these questions I will first investigate the substance of Beauvoir's feminism, especially her ideals of 'ethical freedom' and of a new gender egalitarian society. In a second section I will discuss her ideas on strategy.

11.1 Substance: Beauvoir's Feminist Ideals

In *The Second Sex* (1984 [1949]) Beauvoir describes and analyzes the situation of women throughout history as dominated by men. Woman has been subjected by man who objectified her as 'the Other,' i.e., the negative of himself: 'passivity confronting activity, diversity that destroys unity, matter as opposed to form, disorder against order.'[4] Following Hegel's philosophy, she argues, we discover in human consciousness a fundamental enmity toward every other consciousness. The subject constitutes itself as the essential, opposite the inessential Other, the object. This Self-Other structure is to be found at all levels and places in human life, and it is therefore not surprising that we find it on the level of gender relations as well. Man has appropriated the role of Self and made woman the absolute Other, i.e., a being that only exists in relation to man and that is subjugated to his sovereignty. Woman was made into the one who, through her kinship with the corporal dimension, allowed man to experience himself as the superior subject, and the one who had just enough consciousness to observe man's essential nature and to mirror this sovereignty back to him.

In the first book of *The Second Sex*, entitled 'Facts and Myths,' Beauvoir analyzes how women's biology together with the Self-Other mechanism in human relations is at the roots of women's subjugated position. Since women were more bound in history to biology, out of their procreative functions, the male sex was the one that transcended life, consciously defying death in acts, projects and struggles,

[3] Badinter, in her book *Fausse route* (2003), defended the banning by law in France of the headscarf for Muslim schoolgirls, referring in interviews to Beauvoir's stances to underline her overall argument.

[4] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 112.

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and since men and women value action more than the mere repetition of life, men were able to appropriate the role of sovereign subject and place woman in the position of Other. The myths that men have created about woman affirm her position as the Other of man— the sovereign Self.

In the second book of *The Second Sex*, entitled 'Woman's Life Today,' Beauvoir describes how Woman has internalized her position as Other and lived it on a subjective level. In the final chapters, she discusses how, for the first time in history, through the availability of contraceptives and the access to paid labour, women have the chance to develop into a self as well. *The Second Sex* is a passionate appeal to women to do so.

Karen Green argues that Sartre's analysis of anti-semitism and the oppression of Jews in his work *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1995 [1946]) was a great influence on Beauvoir's approach to women in terms of the object-Other.[5] Although Sartre 'does not explicitly speak of the Other when discussing anti-Semitism, his analysis clearly derives from the characterization of concrete relations with others developed in *Being and Nothingness.*'[6] In this work, Sartre argues that our relations with other people can never be intersubjective and are always conflictual. According to Sartre, human consciousness is not a substance. It is no thing in the world but a 'lack of being' or 'nothingness,' since it is intentional in character and therefore always a consciousness *of* something. In order to exist, consciousness is doomed to transcend itself and reach out for a thing in the world. As such, it is pure negation or emptiness; and, therefore, free, according to Sartre. Since our consciousness can only observe things in the world, it can only observe other humans as objects and not as a consciousness. Concrete relations between people can only take the form of a subject-object relationship.

Green concludes that Beauvoir's explanatory model for women's oppressed situation is Sartrean in character: first, in that women's situation as Other is explained through the prism of human consciousness as an always objectifying gaze, and, second, in its analysis of the position of Other as interiorized and lived on a subjective level. All of the attitudes of women which are described in the second book of *The Second Sex* are conceptualized in terms of the subjective condition of the oppressed Other, in a way similar to Sartre's description in *Anti-Semite and Jew* of several attitudes of Jews in their position as Others.

However, the differences between these works are significant – differences that Green overlooks when she argues that *The Second Sex* is merely an application of Sartre's model of oppression. As several studies have shown (for example, those of Meryl Altman, Nancy Bauer, Debra Bergoffen, Sara Heinämaa, Sonia Kruks, Michèle Le Doeuff, Eva Lundgren Gothlin and Margaret Simons, all of which I rely on heavily in what follows), Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* departs in significant ways from Sartre's original philosophical framework, mainly through her affinity with

[5] Karen Green, 'Sartre and de Beauvoir on Freedom and Oppression.' *Feminist Interpretations of Sartre,* ed. Julien Murphy (University Park, Penn: Pennsylvania University Press, 1999).

[6] Ibid., 196, fn. 7.

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phenomenological anthropology and her original appropriation of Hegel's ideas on reciprocal recognition, as will be argued below.[7] As Lundgren-Gothlin states: 'Beauvoir's picture of human relations is closer to the view propounded by Hegel … than that of Sartre.'[8]

Beauvoir's ethical theory, as elaborated in her work *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948 [1947]), published 2 years before *The Second Sex*, is especially important in this respect. Influenced as this work is by the thought of Sartre, Hegel, and Merleau-Ponty, it succeeds in synthesizing these ingredients into an original philosophical framework. It is this framework, of her own creation, that we encounter, in descriptive and prescriptive ways, in *The Second Sex*.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* Beauvoir argues that the human condition is an ambiguous one: we are consciousness as well as nature, a rational animal or a 'thinking reed,' as Pascal called it. This means 'that we are both separate and connected to each other, a unique subject and an object for others, consciousness and body, free and unfree.' Beauvoir's own definition of the human condition as ambiguous 'differs from Sartre's view in *Being and Nothingness*, of human beings as autonomous, separate subjects with instrumental and conflictual relationships to each other.'[9] Our empty consciousness—our ontological freedom in Sartre's terms—separates us from other humans. What we should do, however, according to Beauvoir in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, is transform this emptiness or 'lack of being,' into a positive existence as an individual of flesh and blood, through a 'moral conversion'. Through constant moral effort and exercise, we have to transform our status as ontologically free consciousness into an incarnated existence in the world, engaged in positive projects, thus rising, so to speak, to the level of our fellow men, temporarily overcoming the separation and antagonism between ourselves and others.

Discussing the character of this 'moral conversion', Beauvoir refers to Hegel's dialectics. 'In Hegelian terms it might be said that we have here a negation of the negation by which the positive is re-established. Man makes himself a lack, but he

[7] Meryl Altman, 'Beauvoir, Hegel, War,' *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 22, 3 (July, 2007): 66–91. Nancy Bauer, *Simone De Beauvoir, Philosophy and Feminism* (New York: Columbia University, 2001). Debra Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997); Sara Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); Sonia Kruks, *Situation and Human Existence: Freedom, Subjectivity and Society* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990; New York: Routledge, 1991). Michèle Le Doeuff, *L'Etude et le rouet* (Paris: Editions Seuil, 1989; published in English as *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, Etc*., trans. Trista Selous (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991); Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex,'* tr. Linda Schenck (London:Athlone Press, 1996; Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996); Margaret Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race and the Origins of Existentialism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

[8] Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex & Existence,* 212.

[9] Gothlin, 'Beauvoir and Sartre on appeal, desire and ambiguity,' in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, ed. Margaret Simons (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 133; 137.

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can deny the lack as lack and affirm himself as a positive existence. He then assumes the failure.'[10]

Yet, contrary to Hegel's dialectic model, she argues, instead of an act of surpassing, an act of 'conversion' is at issue here. 'For in Hegel the surpassed terms are preserved only as abstracts moments, whereas we consider that existence still remains a negativity in the positive affirmation of itself. …The failure is not surpassed but assumed.'[11] Further on, she explains: 'There are thus two ways of surpassing the given: it is something quite different from taking a trip or escaping from prison. In these two cases the given is present in its surpassing; but in one case it is present insofar as it is accepted, in the other insofar as rejected and that makes a radical difference. Hegel has confused these two movements with the ambiguous term "*aufheben*"; and the whole structure of an optimism which denies failure and death rests on this ambiguity.'[12] Earlier in her work Beauvoir argued that traditionally philosophers have denied the ambiguity of the human condition by 'making oneself pure inwardness or pure externality, by escaping from the sensible world or by being engulfed in it, by yielding to externity or enclosing oneself in the pure moment. Hegel with more ingenuity, tried to reject none of the aspects of man's condition and to reconcile them all.'[13] According to Hegel's famous master-slave dialectics, in a higher phase of human history two consciousnesses can overcome their enmity and recognize each other as subjects in a reciprocal manner. For Beauvoir, however, this is never possible. Our ontological freedom is always there at the background of our existence. A Hegelian view that denies this, also denies the pertinence of conflict and struggle between people and the need of constant ethical effort to overcome these.

This constant ethical effort, necessary to restore our positivity, comes down to an *ethical attitude* of 'willing ourself free,' since it effects 'the transition from nature to morality by establishing a *genuine* freedom on the original upsurge of our existence.'[14] By willing ourself free we want freedom as such and therefore the freedom of our fellow men. But this 'ethical freedom'[15] or 'moral freedom'[16] 'requires a constant tension' and a 'permanent choice.'[17] Where Hegel was too optimistic, and where Sartre had emphasized the permanence of subject-object relationships and enmity between people, Beauvoir, through the attitude of ethical freedom, manages to synthesize Sartrean conflict with Hegelian reciprocal recognition. Reconciliation and mutual recognition between people are possible but never final. Since our ontological freedom is inherent to our ambiguous human condition,

[10] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), 13.

[11] Ibid., 13.

[12] Ibid., 84.

[13] Ibid., 8.

[14] Ibid., 25. My italics.

[15] Ibid., 24.

[16] Ibid., 26; 32.

[17] Ibid., 26.

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power struggles are inherent to all levels and places in human life. Love and friendship demand constant moral effort and exercise: they are always under threat but they are possible.[18]

In the background of this synthesizing view is Beauvoir's positive evaluation of emotion, which derives from her affinity with Merleau Ponty's concept of man as a unity of body and consciousness.[19] Whereas Sartre's works of the 1930's and 1940's in the end conceived of emotion as self-deceit, Beauvoir in the same years developed her own existentialist philosophy in which our bodily existence, emotions, and connectedness to others are critical. Emotion for Beauvoir is a positive experience of becoming a 'psycho-physiological unity,' able to connect to others.[20] It is especially through emotion that we become a situated and incarnated self that contacts others immediately. Beauvoir's own model of human relationships involves this concept of a sensitive self, which is capable of meeting others through the 'flesh.' Her transformation—inspired by Merleau Ponty's concept of man—of Sartre's concept of emotion as self-deceit, forms a necessary ingredient of her own synthetic view of human relationships, which involves that we can meet each other, if we practice the attitude of ethical freedom.[21]

We can conclude that, although Sartre's concept of ontological freedom remains pertinent in Beauvoir's thinking, what really interested her was ethical freedom. We can evade our ontological freedom or refuse it in 'laziness, heedlessness, capriciousness, cowardice, impatience.'[22] We should, however, assume it and realize it in positive ethical projects, willing 'our existence in its finiteness.'[23] The attitude of ethical freedom or willing oneself free in sum involves the incarnation of pure consciousness into a sensitive self, which is engaged in projects in the world. As Beauvoir expresses it: 'La vraie liberté c'est celle qui se réalise par un projet positif.'[24] 'True freedom' for Beauvoir comes about only through a positive project, and as such is always situated.

Following Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction between negative and positive freedom, as absence of constraints and self-realization/self-determination respectively, we can conceive of Beauvoir's concept of ethical freedom as the more 'positive' one in comparison with Sartre's concept of ontological freedom. The latter implies that freedom is an attribute of the human condition *per se*, which can be constrained or oppressed. Freedom in this view in essence is a matter of being left alone. As we

[18] Ibid., 158.

[19] Compare: 'Phénoménologie de la perception de Maurice Merleau-Ponty,' *Les Temps modernes* 1 (1945): 363–67 and 'Merleau-Ponty et pseudo-sartrisme,' *Les Temps modernes* 10 (1955): 2072–122.

[20] Simone de Beauvoir, *Must we Burn De Sade?* (London: Nevill), 33.

[21] See Karen Vintges, *Philosophy As Passion: The Thinking of Simone de Beauvoir* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,1996), ch. 4.

[22] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 25.

[23] Ibid., 159.

[24] Simone de Beauvoir, *L'Amerique au jour le jour* (Paris: Editions Paul Marihein, 1948), 319.

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have seen, Beauvoir shifts the emphasis from ontological freedom to ethical freedom. She defines freedom as realizing oneself in positive, ethical projects in the world, in interdependence and connectedness with others.

In *The Second Sex* we encounter the theoretical framework that Beauvoir developed in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in descriptive and prescriptive ways. Approaching the relations between the sexes in terms of power relations (inspired by Hegel's master-slave analysis and by Sartre's work *Being and Nothingness*), she analyzes women's position throughout history in terms of the oppressed Other, representing the corporal dimension of human life, but nonetheless gifted with just enough consciousness to affirm man as the superior consciousness (inspired by Hegel's argument that the oppressed slave is a subjugated consciousness). At the roots of women's oppression, as we have seen, lies women's biology in combination with the human mechanism of 'Othering,' for which she explicitly refers to Hegel's master-slave dialectics: man becomes the master or sovereign subject because he challenges death in hunting and struggles for life and death. Woman thus became the subjugated consciousness and resigned herself to her secondary status, since she recognizes man as the superior subject.

Seemingly Hegelian in her explanation in these passages, Beauvoir in the end applies her own model of human relationships arguing that the male and the female sex have each opted for one side of their ambiguous human condition, i.e. their conscious and bodily dimension, their being a subject and an object in the world for others respectively, and that instead both sexes should 'assume their ambiguity.' 'Instead of living out the ambiguities of their situation,' each sex projects 'into the partner that part of the self which is repudiated.' She concludes: 'If, however, both should assume the ambiguity with a clear-sighted modesty, correlative of an authentic pride, they would see each other as equals and would live out their erotic drama in amity.'[25]

In the first book, 'Facts and Myths,' she already argued in a similar way: 'It is possible to rise above the conflict if each individual freely recognizes the other, each regarding himself and the other simultaneously as object and subject in a reciprocal manner'.[26] But friendship and generosity, which alone permit in actuality this recognition of free beings, are not facile virtues. It requires 'an authentically moral attitude,' a 'conversion'[27] through which we attain 'true wisdom', however, this conversion 'is never done, it is necessary to make it without ceasing, it demands a constant tension.'[28]

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[25] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 737.

[26] The phrase that both sexes, man and woman, should recognise the other as both subject and object, is articulated by Bauer as Beauvoir's original appropriation of Hegel's formula that we should recognise each other as subjects, original because she indicates instead that men and women should accept their subjective ánd objective, i.e. bodily dimension in a reciprocal manner. See Bauer, *Simone De Beauvoir, Philosophy and Feminism*.

[27] My translation. The English translator, Parshley, translated the French 'conversion' as 'transformation.'

[28] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 172.

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We can conclude that Beauvoir's final explanation and solution of women's secondary status in history are distilled from the theoretical framework that she developed in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. She does not simply apply Sartre's model of Othering for her analysis of women's position on an objective and subjective level, as Green argues, but instead applies her own synthetic model of human relationships in descriptive and prescriptive ways. Descriptively, where she argues that both man and woman have their share in the origin and continuity of the asymmetrical relationship between the sexes, inasfar as they in history each refused to accept *both sides* of their ambiguous human condition.[29] Prescriptively, since she argues that love, friendship and brotherhood between the sexes are possible, on a temporary basis, when both sexes assume their ambiguity through a moral conversion which demands constant effort and exercise. Assuming one's ambiguity means that we accept that we have to practice our freedom, by incarnation and engaging the world and our fellow humans. And it means, as we have seen, that we accept the continuing presence of our ontological freedom at the background of our existence together with our always being a body, i.e. we accept that we are consciousness and body, subject and object.

Beauvoir's model of human relationships in *The Second Sex* thus finally goes back to her own synthetical framework that she developed in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, including its positive concept of freedom, which we characterized as 'ethical freedom.' The free person, for her, is not the one who seeks to be left alone, but the one who, through constant effort, tries to realise oneself in projects in the world, not opposing others in an external way but connecting to them in love, friendship and brotherhood.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir's appeal to women to become free persons thus does not favor the self which is at a distance from its fellow humans, as implied in Sartre's original concept of freedom as negation, and, therefore, separation of the world and others. Instead of arguing for women's assimilation to this isolated type of self, she argues for an ethical, sensitive type of self for women and men – on the basis of constant ethical exercise.

This does not mean, however, that men and women will finally be the same. The social identities of gender as we know them are historical constructions which we should distrust and leave behind. However, there will always be 'certain differences' between men and women, since their sexual worlds have special forms: 'This means that her relations to her own body, to that of the male, to the child, will never be identical with those the male bears to his own body, to that of the female, and to the child. Those who make much of "equality in difference" could not with good grace refuse to grant me the possible existence of differences in equality.'[30]

The way these differences will be experienced cannot be predicted. She concludes: 'new relations of flesh and sentiment of which we have no conception will arise between the sexes'; 'already, indeed, there have appeared between men and

[29] Compare the treatment in Bauer, *Simone De Beauvoir, Philosophy and Feminism.*

[30] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 740.

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women friendships, rivalries, complicities, comradeships— chaste or sensual—which past centuries could not have conceived.'[31] For Beauvoir, sexual difference is not a matter of pre-given identities but rather involves a continuous work of *invention*. Convinced as she is that humans are free and should invent themselves, she merely gives some guidelines but no blueprints for the future.

In an article published immediately after *The Second Sex* in 1950, entitled 'It's About Time Woman Put a New Face on Love,' she reiterates that men and women will have to accept each other as ambiguous beings, and that this is what love is all about. As in *The Second Sex,* she then points to certain differences between men and women that will always remain. 'I believe that what fascinates each in the other is the discovery of a human world like its own but *different*: the *other* sex has the fascination of an exotic country, it is a treasure, an Eden, simply because it is different.' She clarifies that the body and sexuality of men and women are not the same: both sexes differ 'in their sensuality, their sensibility, their relation to the world.' Even when men and women will accept each other as ambiguous beings, the conditions for mutual magic will always be there. We cannot predict which forms these new relationships between men and women will take. It may be that certain forms of sensibility are bound to disappear while others will be born. However, 'rather than grimly hanging on what is dying, or repudiating it, would it not be better to try to help *invent* the future?'[32]

In her preface to the book *La grand peur d'aimer* (1960) by Lagroua Weil-Hallé, Beauvoir emphatically argues for the availability of adequate Birth Control for all women who want it, so that love in the family may survive, 'a love which for millions of women is their unique recourse against the world's harshness.'[33] In a short essay in the American lady's home journal, *McCalls*, she again goes into how love is a joy and a gift.[34] The Vatican banned *The Second Sex* in the fifties and only recently accused feminism of wanting to destroy the family. But from all Beauvoir's early feminist texts, which we discussed above, we can conclude that her original aim was the opposite, i.e. to rescue love between the couple, not least inside the family. She consequently argued for an ethical freedom (i.e. the assuming of our own and others' ambiguous human condition), which allows for real love and friendship between people—partners, parents and children.

We can conclude that her feminist ideal of the free person surpasses Sartre's original concept of ontological freedom as well as the dominant model of the free person of Western liberalism, which both emphasize freedom as an attribute of the person, implying that an individual is free to the degree to which he is left alone and

[31] Ibid.

[32] Simone de Beauvoir, 'It's About Time Woman Put a New Face on Love,' *Flair* 1 3 (1950): 76–7; the italics are mine.

[33] Simone de Beauvoir, 'Preface' in Lagroua Weil-Hallé *La grand peur d'aimer* [1960], in C. Francis & F. Gontier, *Les écrits de Simone de Beauvoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 397–400, 399 (my translation).

[34] Simone de Beauvoir, 'What Love Is and Isn't,' *McCall's* (August, 1965), 53–55.

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is not hindered by others. Beauvoir instead emphasizes that freedom is only exercised in an incarnated dimension of connectedness and interdependence.

Not only through her concept of ethical freedom, but as well through limiting the absolute character of ontological freedom, Beauvoir emphasizes the social dimension of freedom. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* she repeatedly argues that a person can be cut off from the future. 'Then he may not justify his existence positively.'[35] 'There are limited situations where this return to the positive is impossible, where the future is radically blocked off.'[36] But even more so: 'There are beings whose life slips by in an infantile world because, having been kept in a state of servitude and ignorance, they have no means of breaking the ceiling which is stretched over their heads. …This is the case, for example, of slaves who have not raised themselves to the consciousness of their slavery. …This is also the situation of women in many civilizations; they can only submit to the laws, the gods, the customs, and the truths, created by the males.'[37] Beauvoir limits the absolute character of ontological freedom by arguing that although our ontological freedom is always potentially present, its realization is dependent on a certain level of social freedom.[38] 'Ignorance and error are facts as inescapable as prison walls. The black slave of the eighteenth century, the Mohammedan woman enclosed in a harem have no instrument, be it in thought or by astonishment or anger, which permits them to attack the civilization which oppresses them. Their behavior is defined and can be judged only within this given situation.'[39] People can be cut off from access to their ontological freedom, not being in a situation to realise it in positive projects in the world.

In this emphasis on the social dimension of freedom we again see the Hegelian background of Beauvoir's own thinking. For Hegel, freedom is not an attribute of the person but of social arrangements. In *The Second Sex,* Beauvoir argues that for women to be able fully to realise their ontological freedom in positive projects in the world, social institutions, laws, and morals have to change.[40] Until then not a single woman can realise her freedom. A Marxist elaboration of this social approach to freedom is present in her emphasis in *The Second Sex* on the necessity of economic change in a socialist direction and the need for women to have access to paid labor.[41]

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[35] See Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 30.

[36] Ibid., 32.

[37] Ibid., 37.

[38] cf. Vintges, 'Simone de Beauvoir: A Feminist Thinker for the Twenty-first Century,' 70; 184. For an interesting discussion of the absoluteness of ontological freedom in Beauvoir's work see Gail Linsenbard, 'Beauvoir, Ontology, and Women's Human Rights' *Hypatia* 14 4 (1999): 145–162.

[39] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 38. My translation. The French reads 'noir' other than the English translation 'negro.'

[40] Beauvoir implies that we should 'change laws, institutions, customs, public opinion and the whole social context, for men and women to become truly equal' (*The Second Sex*, 734).

[41] For the left Hegelian thinker Marx as well freedom is not an attribute of persons but of social arrangements.

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However, Beauvoir adds to this that economic change is not the only factor:

> We must not believe, certainly, that a change in women's economic condition alone is enough to transform her, though this factor has been and remains the basic factor in her evolution; but until it has brought about the moral, social, cultural and other consequences that it promises and requires, the new woman cannot appear. At this moment they have been realized nowhere, in Russia no more than in France or the United States.[42]

Her concept of a gender egalitarian society clearly is not the one which she witnessed in 1949 in the Soviet Union, nor is it however the Western liberal one with its dichotomy of the public and the private sphere, of the 'free' labor market and the family. She instead demands in *The Second Sex* that thorough societal changes should take place.

In a later article, entitled 'La condition féminine' (1961), she argues more explicitly that a socialist revision of production processes is necessary to create laws and institutions that allow for the combination of labor and the upbringing of children. Major changes in the conditions of the upbringing of children and housework should take place, i.e. changes in societal institutions and practices that would diminish women's burdens in the family and that would allow the couple to equally share these tasks. Men will get used to women's work and adapt their sensibility and sexuality to the new situation, and as for the children, little conformists as they are, they easily would accept the situation when it was a given. But the equally sharing of tasks takes a reversal in the system of production. Socialism is a necessary condition for the many changes that have to take place on the level of ideologies, the myths, relationships between spouses, and between parents and children.[43]

In summary, we can conclude that Beauvoir's feminist ideals of ethical freedom and a gender egalitarian society do not correspond to Western liberalism's dominant models of self and society. We will now have a look at her thoughts on strategy.

11.2 Strategy

Which strategy does Beauvoir consider best to reach the feminist ideals of ethical freedom and a gender egalitarian society, which she developed in her work? In this respect it is again useful to compare her work with Sartre's, who more than she did, articulated strategic questions concerning Western liberalism. For this, I especially refer again to Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1995).[44] Sartre explicitly argued in his study that Jews have to struggle against two enemies: the anti-semite on the one

[42] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 734.

[43] Simone de Beauvoir, *La condition feminine* [1961], in C. Francis & F.Gontier, *Les écrits de Simone de Beauvoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 401–409.

[44] For an extensive comparison of both their works see Bart van Leeuwen and Karen Vintges, 'L'existentialisme français d'un point de vue multiculturel: une politique de la différence dans les philosophies de Simone de Beauvoir et de Jean-Paul Sartre', in *Simone de Beauvoir cent ans après sa naissance: contributions interdisciplinaires de cinq continents*, ed. Thomas Stauder (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2008).

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hand, the 'liberal democrat' on the other. The first one wants to destroy the Jew as a human being; the second one annihilates him as a Jew, leaving nothing in him but 'the abstract and universal subject of the rights of man and the rights of the citizen.'[45] The democrat conceives of human society merely as a collection of individuals and does not take socio-cultural attachments seriously.

Sartre characterizes this position as an abstract and condescending liberalism. He concludes that a policy of assimilation that oppresses the Jew in favour of humanity is, in fact, inhuman. '*The man* does not exist; there are Jews, Protestants, Catholics; there are Frenchmen, Englishmen, Germans; there are whites, blacks, yellows. In short (these) drastic measures of coercion would mean the annihilation of a spiritual community, founded on custom and affection, to the advantage of the national community.' Instead, Sartre proposes a 'concrete liberalism' dealing with people as concrete persons. 'This means, then, that the Jews—and likewise the Arabs and the Negroes—from the moment they are participants in the national enterprise have a right in that enterprise; they are citizens. But they have these rights *as* Jews, Blacks or Arabs – that is, as concrete persons.'[46]

Members of these oppressed groups should not deny their identity but, defying their oppressors, they should explicitly assume it. In a similar way, Beauvoir concludes in *The Second Sex* that for

> …the philosophy of Enlightenment, of rationalism, of nominalism…women…are merely the human beings arbitrarily designated by the word *woman*…but such a declaration is abstract. The fact is that every concrete human being is always singularly situated. To decline to accept such notions as the eternal feminine, the black soul, the Jewish character, is not to deny that Jews, Blacks, women exist today—this denial does not represent a liberation for those concerned, but rather a flight from reality. It is clear that no woman can claim without bad faith to situate herself beyond her sex.[47]

From these similar passages in their works we can conclude that both Sartre and Beauvoir reject the strategy of abstract liberalism, or a philosophy of Enlightenment, which denies or refuses individuals' concrete situations. Both philosophers turn out to be critical of a policy of assimilation that does not take into account people's socio-cultural attachments, and both consider those members of oppressed groups to be authentic who do not disavow these attachments.

This is clear as well from their anti-colonialist interventions and writings. Sartre was involved in anti-racist struggles in the movement of negritude (a movement that strives for a re-evaluation and self-conscious affirmation of African and Caribbean identity), and in anti-colonialist struggles all over the world. Both Sartre and Beauvoir outspokenly sided with the National Liberation Front's fight against French colonianism in the Algerian war of independence (1954–1962), a struggle

[45] *Anti Semite and Jew* (New York: Schocken Books, 1955), 57

[46] Ibid., 146. My translation. The French reads 'les Noirs' other than the English translation 'Negroes.'

[47] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 14. The last sentence has been omitted from the original English translation.

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that to them was to be compared with the struggle of the resistance movement against Nazism during the second world war.[48]

During the Algerian war, Beauvoir defended the Algerian Muslim girl, Djamila Boupacha. In Beauvoir's eyes, Boupacha was a freedom fighter, rightly assuming her identity as an Algerian woman. Boupacha was an active member of the National Liberation Front that directed the war for independence against France. She was accused of planting a bomb at the centre of Algiers, and when imprisoned was tortured and raped by French officials, after which she confessed her act of terror. Invited by lawyer Gisèle Halimi, Beauvoir wrote a highly controversial article in *Le Monde* in June 1960, formed a political action committee, and together with Halimi published a book, all on behalf of Boupacha's case.[49] Murphy comments:

> Beauvoir understood her situation in light of anti-Muslim racism. By the time her thoughts were drawn to the Algerian war, she had visited America, felt her whiteness in Harlem, and seen American apartheid, which she spoke out against in *America Day by Day*. She was appalled by the widespread chauvinism and the depth of racism in France.[50]

In *The Force of Circumstances,* Beauvoir repeatedly describes the daily hostility towards the two hundred thousand Muslim Algerians living in France. In discussions with her Jewish friend Claude Lanzmann, she had come to reevaluate her opinions of intellectuals who 'rallied to Western values.'[51] For instance, she was appalled by French writer Camus' ambivalent attitude towards the Algerian war when he received the Nobel Prize, thus making it possible for many to reconcile this war and its methods with bourgeois humanism.[52]

Beauvoir writes with admiration about how their friend Frantz Fanon (who tried to unite African peoples in a new positive African self-awareness) reacted to the Algerian war. Fanon, who was from Martinique originally, sided as an African intellectual with the FLN. 'At the height of the battle of Algiers, this French civil servant…broke completely with France and openly declared himself an Algerian. …His principal objective was to bring African peoples to awareness of solidarity.'[53] As Margaret Simons shows, Beauvoir sympathises as well with the attitude of

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[48] Both were threatened by bomb attacks, among other things, as were many others who spoke out against French colonialism.

[49] Simone de Beauvoir, 'Pour Djamila Boupacha' *Le Monde* 2 (1960): 6. Simone de Beauvoir,'Preface,' In *Djamila Boupacha*, Simone de Beauvoir and Gisele Halimi (Paris: Gallimard, 1962).

[50] Julien Murphy, 'Beauvoir and the Algerian War: Toward a Postcolonial Ethics,' in *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, 289. For a discussion on Beauvoir's stances on the Algerian war see as well Sonia Kruks, 'Simone de Beauvoir and the politics of privilege,' *Hypatia* 20 1 (2005): 178–205.

[51] Beauvoir, *The Force of Circumstances*, trans. Richard Howard (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 386.

[52] Beauvoir, *La Force des choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 406: 'fournissant ainsi une caution à ceux qui souhaitant concilier cette guerre et ses méthodes avec l'humanisme bourgeois.' In the English text 'caution' is translated in its opposite namely 'warning' instead of licence, or permit. See, Beauvoir, *The Force of Circumstances*, 396.

[53] Beauvoir, *The Force of Circumstances*, 607–8.

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Richard Wright, who committed himself, as a Black writer, to the case of the Blacks. Beauvoir clearly admires the attitudes of people such as Boupacha, Wright and Fanon, who *critically assume* their ascribed identities.[54]

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* she had already discussed Wright's attitude, pointing out that oppression can be multilayered:

> The Arabian fellah is oppressed by both the sheiks and the French and English administration; which of the two enemies is to be combatted? …What order should be followed? What tactics should be adopted? It is a matter of opportunity and efficiency. For each one it also depends upon his individual situation. It is possible that he may be led to sacrifice temporarily a cause whose success is subordinate to that of a cause whose defense is more urgent; on the other hand, it is possible that one may judge it necessary to maintain the tension of revolt against a situation to which one does not wish to consent at any price: thus during the war, when black leaders in America were asked to drop their own claims for the sake of the general interest, Richard Wright refused; he thought that even in time of war his cause had to be defended.[55]

Which cause comes first is for actual people to decide. The only thing that matters is that one 'through his own struggle must seek to serve the universal cause of freedom.'[56]

Beauvoir's defense of the Chinese revolution in her book, *The Long March,* should be seen in a similar vein. She was convinced at that time that China was fighting an anticolonialist struggle by breaking with its past and installing a Chinese version of socialist production. In her book's conclusion, she questions the importance of Western concepts of freedom for the Chinese situation: 'what a good many French mean by freedom…is to say no. That is freedom.' However: '[T]he *no* said for the sake of saying *no* is destructive.'[57] Many Westerners argue for the Chinese people that the Chinese 'regime has stolen their freedom and doomed them to conformity…but who is to convince me that the Chinese masses have ever been free? …[T]his total powerlessness (of the peasants) need not be mistaken for freedom… to be free to eat meat is to have the money to buy some.'[58]

As far as we know, both Sartre and Beauvoir were never members of the communist party, since both were strongly in favour of a socialism, which involves democracy. Visiting China and the Soviet Union in the 1950s they were, however, convinced that the road to freedom was to be one that first needed 'for everyone a margin of real freedom beyond the production of life.'[59] As Beauvoir formulated it

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[54] See Margaret Simons, 'Beauvoir and the Problem of Racism,' in *Philosophers on Race*, eds. Julie Ward and Tommy Lott (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

[55] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 89–90. My translation. The French reads 'leaders noir' other than the English translation 'Negro leaders.'

[56] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 89–90.

[57] Beauvoir, *The Long March*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1958), 497.

[58] Ibid., 496.

[59] William McBride, 'Sartre at the twilight of liberal democracy as we have known it,' *Sartre Studies International*, 11 1&2 (2005): 311–18, fn. 13.

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in her book on China, freedom certainly was not a matter of imposing bourgeois democracy on colonized countries.[60]

During the Khomeini revolution in Iran, Beauvoir, in March 1979, delivered a speech at a press conference in Paris on the eve of a trip to Iran by an international women's delegation in response to calls for help from a large number of Iranian women. Beauvoir in her speech summarizes that the women's delegation's first task is 'acquiring information concerning the struggle of the Iranian women, communicating that information, and supporting their struggle.' She once more concludes: 'I reiterate, however, that this is essentially an effort to gather information, in order to put ourselves in contact with Iranian women, in order to know *their demands* and the ways in which *they plan* to struggle.'[61] She thus emphasized the need to support Iranian women from their point of view, instead of imposing the point of view of Western feminists.

All in all we can conclude that in strategic respects Beauvoir's view does not converge with the dominant Western liberal one of abstract egalitarianism. Instead it comes closer to a contextual approach that is open for identity political movements on national and transnational levels. This approach takes into account people's concrete socio-cultural attachments, instead of reducing people to abstract individuals, as liberalism does, which often comes down to a politics of forced assimilation.

11.3 Conclusion

We can conclude that Beauvoir's feminism is critical towards Western liberals' concepts of man and society in both substantial and strategic ways. With respect to strategy, she distrusted abstract liberalism and abstract egalitarianism as we saw in the previous section. In the first section, we saw that her feminist ideals differ in substantial ways from liberalism's concept of human beings as separated individuals *per se*, and from the prevalent market economies, which are based on a dichotomy of labor and care. Evaluating her feminist ideals from a current global perspective, I would contend that we should prefer Beauvoir's emphasis on social freedom, as well as her positive concept of ethical true freedom, to the negative

[60] Beauvoir concluded her book on China by stating that China must become richer and more liberal (Beauvoir, *The Long March*, 501). McBride convincingly argues that Sartre questioned the abstract nature of rights in bourgeois democracies, attacking them as 'false democracies,' not because he wanted to get rid of democracy but on behalf of the democratic ideal as such: 'if there are "false democracies," there must also be true ones, at least in principle.' (William McBride, 'Sartre at the twilight,' 312–313) McBride concludes that Sartre's own vision was a democratic, socialist and libertartian one, an open vision which he therefore never attempted to describe in detail.

[61] Simone de Beauvoir, 'Speech,' in *Foucault and the Iranian revolution,* edited by J. Afary & K. Anderson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 246–247, 247; the italics are mine.

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concept of the freedom of Western liberalism. Her thinking on freedom, in fact, could be conceived as the demand for access for everyone to ethical self-formation – an ethical type of freedom which requires constant exercise and which involves the disarmament of the self into a sensitive self connected to others. The concept of freedom as (access to) ethical self-formation in my view does not suffer from a Western bias. Across a diversity of cultures and religions we find that people use all kinds of exercises to create themselves as free ethical subjects; this is a model of human life which goes back to antiquity, but also to Eastern philosophy and religion.[62]

A feminism that wants to be truly global is best served by taking on board Beauvoir's emphasis on social and ethical freedom. Beauvoir's ethical concept of freedom and her emphasis on love and friendship, are similar to the themes that are articulated in the emerging discourse of Muslim and Islamic feminists, which opposes Western liberal feminism and which argues for a more inclusive and more plural feminist movement. [63] Islamic feminists especially emphasize the relevance of love in the family and the limits of autonomy in this respect. Scholars, Leila Ahmed, Aima Wadud, and Asma Barlas, among others, refer to the dynamic and diverse history of Islam in their reinterpretations of the *Quran* and Islamic historical traditions. They highlight the egalitarian Spirit of Islam's ethical spiritual message and the active role of women in the history of Islam. Others, like Saba Mahmood, show the active role and agency of women in Islamic societies today, demonstrating that Muslim women are by far not the passive, oppressed creatures that many Western feminists hold them to be.[64] In many countries, there are Muslim women's organizations that have a feminist agenda. These movements argue for the full social participation of women, the sharing of household duties, and the raising of children between husband and wife. Muslim and Islamic feminists explicitly want to struggle together with men for these ideals and not against men; cooperation between the sexes is not only their final goal but their strategy as well, and love in the family is upheld as a strong value.

In my view, Beauvoir's concept of the free person, through emphasizing its incarnation, embeddedness, and connectedness, is much broader than Western liberal concepts of the person, in a way that it can be inspiring to those who, like Beauvoir, are critical of Western liberalism's models of self and society. Eva Lundgren- Gothlin ends her book, *Sex and Existence,* stating that Beauvoir, 'by surpassing traditional Marxist and liberal feminism, provides a point of departure for all contemporary feminist theory and thus is a significant foremother.'[65] I'd like to think that Beauvoir can be a foremother to Islamic and Muslim feminists as well.

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[62] See Vintges, 'Endorsing Practices of Freedom. Feminism in a Global Perspective,' in *Feminism and The Final Foucault,* edited by D. Taylor and K. Vintges (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 275–299.

[63] See Vintges, Karen and Ireen Dubel, *Women, Feminism and Fundamentalism* (Amsterdam: SWP Publishers, 2007).

[64] Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[65] Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence*, 253.

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