

Rereading Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* from a Distance of Some Forty Years

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I first came across Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* when it was released in English in 1972. My mother (who is now eighty-nine and suffering from vascular dementia) gave a copy to my ex-wife on the occasion of her twenty-first birthday, assuming that the title referred to the English phrase for emergence into adulthood—a far cry from “Old Age,” the literal translation of *La Vieillesse* (the French title released in 1970). This English translation was a clever marketing ploy which must have fooled a great many people, as it did my mother. My wife quickly turned the book over to me, saying it had nothing to do with her.

I was twenty-three years old, just out of my undergraduate philosophy days at Yale and working as a carpenter. I was one of those children of the 1960's who took to the streets to protest the war in Vietnam, to combat racism and imperialism. I once sat in New Haven's Black Panther headquarters (a rundown old two-story house in the ghetto), gawking in horror at the rifles stashed along the walls and filling sandbags to protect against police bullets. Armed more peacefully with intellectual Marxism, I joined thousands annually for demonstrations in Washington, smoking dope on long bus rides, playing guitars and banjos and singing protest songs.

In 1973 I enrolled as a Master's student in American intellectual history at Wesleyan University. I was interested in how old people became a marginalized and stigmatized group, and Beauvoir's book helped me frame my Master's thesis, which focused on the evolution of state policies that led up to the Social Security Act of 1935. Before reading her book, I knew Beauvoir vaguely as Sartre's lifelong lover; as a serious novelist, memoirist, and philosopher in her own right; and as author of *The Second*

Sex (1949), a foundational text of modern feminism, which, much to her delight, was placed on the Vatican's list of prohibited books. *The Coming of Age* appealed to me with its sweeping generalizations, its radical and provocative intent, and its Marxist theorization of old age as a problem primarily of poverty in a society structured by the relationships between a small ruling class and the mass of oppressed workers.

Rereading *The Coming of Age* at a distance of more than forty years, I am struck by several things: The sheer learning and energy that jumps from her pages. It was intimidating then, and it is intimidating now. It was inspiring then, and it is inspiring now. The book is almost 600 pages; it was hard to finish then and it is hard to finish now. As with *The Second Sex*, the book's conceptual boldness is not easy to see because it is never theorized directly. Without articulating it, Beauvoir takes her deep engagement with the work of German and French philosophers—Merleau-Ponty, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Marx, Bergson, and of course Sartre—and converts their discourses to purposes they never imagined. She takes their concern with everyday life and brings to the surface inequities that lie hidden in the very discourses of these male philosophers who intended to promote freedom, dignity and liberation under the generic category of “man.” Beauvoir, however, was interested in the lived, embodied experiences of race, sex (we would say gender), and age, which intersect with multiple sources of inequity. She formulated her ideas about old age not from formal philosophical theories, but from whatever materials—mostly literary/historical—she can lay her hands on.¹

In my twenties I agreed with Beauvoir's claim that capitalism was the source of what she saw as the scandalous condition of old age. The *liberation* of old people, she claimed, required the destruction of the entire economic system. As she put it:

¹ For more on Beauvoir's methodological approach, see Deutscher.

insisting that men remain men during the last years of their life would imply a total upheaval of our society. The result cannot possibly be obtained by a few limited reforms that leave the system intact: for it is the exploitation of the workers, the pulverization of society, and the utter poverty of a culture confined to the privileged, educated few that leads to this kind of dehumanized old age. (7)

In Marxist terms, Beauvoir believes that a “superstructure” that fails to support human flourishing in old age cannot be repaired without replacing capitalism, its economic “base.”

From the vantage point of my sixties, I think that Beauvoir lays too much at the feet of capitalism and that her critique of capitalism, while important, is not the most valuable part of that book. It is a broad rhetorical move that overreaches and actually obscures many of her other important insights. In terms of political economy, the book underestimated the ways that the welfare state in France, Western Europe, Scandinavia, and the United States had begun to address the worst problems of poverty and health care among old people. If her fellow countryman Thomas Piketty is right his *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013), income inequality in France, continental Europe, and English-speaking countries also began to narrow in the post-World War II era with the introduction of a progressive income tax—a trend, however, that has been rapidly reversed by neoliberal governments in the last thirty years.

In addition, many of the most interesting complexities of aging that Beauvoir articulates cannot be reduced to political economy. At her best, Beauvoir highlights the dialectical relationship among political economy, social construction, personal experience, and the biology of old age. For example, she criticizes what we would now call the social construction of old age or, following Margaret Gullette, the decline narrative of aging. But she also insists on the stubborn and intractable reality of physical decline and decrepitude, the biology of senescence, and the unique combination of temperament, self-care, social location, genes, accidents, and diseases that determine one’s experience of old age.

Following Beauvoir, I'd like to make two points about age, ethnicity, and social class: First, there is injustice. Second, there is no justice. Disasters like Hurricane Katrina, for example, where old and black residents of New Orleans suffered the most and received the least assistance, reveal the injustice wrought by poverty and ageism. The social injustices that occur in such disasters can be politically addressed through government policies. Yet, there is nothing that can ultimately prevent the injustices of aging as such. One can live many years with good fortune, good health, and good habits—and still be brought low in old age. As her examples illustrate, the most virtuous, accomplished, faithful writer or physician can fall victim to chronic disease or cancer, and can outlive themselves, as many elders suffering from dementia or painful, debilitating illness have reason to know. There is no justice in these matters. Put another way, there is social injustice but there is no existential justice.

Beauvoir championed a secular existentialism that in some ways anticipates the contemporary ideal of “successful ageing.” Being fully human, she insisted, requires social engagement in active projects, not passive endurance. “There is only one solution” she writes, “if old age is not to be an absurd parody of our former life. And that is to go on pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning—devotion to individuals, to groups or to causes, social, political, intellectual, or creative work” (540). In other words, Beauvoir sees social engagement and meaningful activity as the ways to flourish in later life. But then she makes what is a wrong-headed claim: “growing, ripening, ageing, dying,” as she puts it, are not real projects. They are passive and merely follow the predestined and inevitable passing of time. Here she misses the psychological dialectic, for example, of physical decline and personal or spiritual growth, or the paradox of learning to hold on while preparing to let go. In other words, Beauvoir does not give due attention to the tasks of learning how to die and how to care for the dying. Hence she does not do justice to much of the literary and autobiographical material she brings to light. The problem, I think, is that Beauvoir banishes spiritual discipline as a genuine activity of aging and sees it instead as a form of passivity, merely

giving in to the inevitable. This, I think, is also a limitation inherent in the paradigmatic ideal of “successful” aging.

Several other things strike me from this distance. First: Beauvoir remains a modernist, who anticipates but is not yet influenced by the generation of Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault, who broke open old assumptions of decontextualized foundational knowledge, universal truths, and grand narratives. She believes that she can tell the “Truth” about old age.

My own education in philosophy and in history was also modernist. From the postmodern vantage, the most egregious sin of the modernist is the unspoken idea that a thinker in humanities and the human sciences could speak a monological truth without specifying his or her social location, gender, point of view, and other relevant contextual features that influence one’s thinking. I spent a good deal of time in the 1980s trying to get my head around books about postmodern theory, postmodern culture, and postmodernism in the social sciences. I learned about deconstruction and the impossibility of fixed interpretations of texts or works of art. I came to accept the idea that there is no view from nowhere, that there is only partial knowledge, that all knowledge is constructed—infected with and inflected by power—and that looking for the essence of being human or being old or being anything is a fool’s errand, and so on.

Given the genealogy of my own thought, I could take this paper as an occasion to critique Beauvoir as a modernist student of old age. I might then title my paper (forgive the exaggeration) “A Postmodern Feminist, Antiessentialist, Foucauldian Critique of the Construction of Old Age in Simone de Beauvoir’s *La Vieillesse*.” Here I might argue that Beauvoir unselfconsciously writes in the voice of a male modernist. But that would be to let myself off the hook. It would ignore my own aging and my own identity as a white (Jewish) man who follows in a long white male tradition of writing about old age that goes as far back as Plato’s *Republic* and comes up at least to Robert Butler’s last book *The Longevity Revolution* or to Jan Baars’s *The Art of Aging*. In fact, I do not disown this tradition, I

embrace it. I certainly recognize its failure to address issues of race, class, and gender and its failure to become self-conscious of its own social, cultural, and historical location. I recognize its habit of obscuring social embeddedness, relationships, love, and spirituality while privileging an individual male's rational thought. And I am strongly influenced by the feminist gerontology first formulated by Ruth Ray and most recently articulated in its fullest form in Martha Holstein's *Women in Late Life*. Still, I cannot disavow the tradition itself, as this would be to disavow my own "coming of age," and I still think we have much to learn from it.² Perhaps this is why, on rereading *The Coming of Age*, I personally recognize and identify with its depiction of aging—of resisting, recognizing, or refusing to acknowledge one's own age. Even more recognizable are the self-portraits of men (and women) who are confused about their age and identity. These are things that my twenty-three-year-old self imagined but had yet to experience.

I am currently working on a book project based on interviews with accomplished (mostly white) American men over eighty. In this project, I probe their beliefs, hopes, and fears about being old men living in or on the verge of the Fourth Age. In particular, I am interested in their ideas about and experiences of love, masculinity, meaning, and relevance. I get at these issues through exploring daily life rather than through intellectual questions about theology, philosophy, or social science. I think that how one lives day-to-day is often a better indicator of what a person believes than what he says he believes. So I begin by asking how their day begins and how it proceeds. I ask what they love, whom they love, what they are afraid of, what they hope for, what role sex plays in their lives, et cetera. And only then do I ask what it means to be an old man. For most of them, being an old man is not a topic of much interest. Their perspective is broader, their needs are greater, and their horizons are shorter. For

² For a recent popular exemplar of this tradition, see Daniel Klein's lovely little wisdom entitled *Travels with Epicurus: A Journey to a Greek Island in Search of a Fulfilled Life*.

example, I asked Keith Jackson, ABC television sports announcer for sixty years, what he hoped for. “Tomorrow,” he said.

In conversations with these old men, the most fascinating thing is to observe and share the ways they live in-between their ideals and their realities. When they respond to my questions, they are sometimes restating an old idea or story, sometimes thinking and adjusting as they go along, perhaps learning as they speak; sometimes denying reality; sometimes articulating a desire or a wish or a hope. They work in the wreckage and reclamation business, where they must lie down, as Yeats put it, “in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart” to find a new identity or accept an unwelcome reality. This is also what Beauvoir finds in the autobiographical works she uses in her chapter “The Discovery and Assumption of Old Age.”

This chapter brims with exhaustive and eccentrically researched testimonies of writers and artists, some women as well as men. They are piled up one after the next: Casanova, Da Vinci, Freud, Gide, Goethe, Goya, Lenin, Michelangelo, Monet, Proust, Lou Andreas Salome, Madame de Sevigne, Turgenev, Trotsky, and Voltaire. The writing is trenchant and fearless. Here is what she says about Yeats:

The ageing Yeats wavered between two contrary attitudes in his relationship to himself. At the height of his fame—at fifty-seven [he lived to seventy-four] he had just received the Nobel Prize—he was filled with bitterness about his old age; he could only see with one eye and he was afraid of becoming deaf, but above all it was the very fact of growing old that exasperated him. . . . Yet he took pleasure in playing the part of the absurd old man. He astonished the Irish Academy by making a speech in which he announced that he was going to change into a butterfly “and fly, and fly, and fly.” He described himself as a “sixty-year-old smiling public man”: later he assumed the character of a “wild old wicked man.” (298)

Beauvoir’s comments about Yeats are incisive. Yet, as with the rest of her argument, she misses the spiritual thread that is sometimes woven into Yeats’ late poetry, as in *Sailing to Byzantium*: “An aged man is but a paltry

thing,/ A tattered coat upon a stick, unless/Soul clap and sing and louder
sing/ For every tatter in its mortal dress”

Let me come back to the arc of Beauvoir’s argument, the Marxist critique which opens and closes the book. In the conclusion, she poses a decidedly masculine question: “What should a society be, so that in his last years a man might still be a man?”³ She answers:

[T]he answer is simple: he would always have to have been treated as a man. By the fate it allots to its members who can no longer work, society gives itself away—it has always looked upon them as so much material. Society confesses that as far as it is concerned, profit is the only thing that counts, and that its “humanism” is mere window-dressing . . . That is why the whole question is buried in a conspiracy of silence. Old age exposes the failure of our entire civilization. It is the whole man that must be re-made, it is the whole relationship between man and man that must be recast if we wish the old person’s state to be acceptable. A man should not start his last years alone and empty-handed. (542-43)

In my twenties I believed this. In my sixties I do not. Old men and women in Western countries do not in general start their last years alone and empty-handed. The welfare state, which is now politically vulnerable and under strenuous attack, provides crucial income support and health care for the great majority of its citizens. Old people have powerful lobbying groups. They vote in large numbers to protect Social Security, Medicare, and to a lesser extent Medicaid. On the other hand, unrestrained global capitalism is eviscerating the middle class and exposing individuals—especially low wage workers and minority populations—at all ages across the life course to risks. More people approach retirement without adequate savings. Ageism, despite countervailing trends, remains a powerful cultural force.

3 Although Beauvoir often uses the term “man” (*l’homme*) generically, I think she actually means men, rather than men and women. Here she is largely concerned with work and employment, which in her own context was the exclusive province of males.

Let me offer some broader reflections on our dialogue with Simon de Beauvoir. When she published *La Vieillesse*, Beauvoir wanted to make a difference in how we understand old age. She wanted to make a difference in public perception of old people; a difference in personal perceptions of our aging selves; a difference in economic structure, political power and social policy; a difference in how society treats and cares for old people; a difference in the level of complexity we can tolerate in approaching cultural and existential challenges of growing old and dying. Forty-five years later, I think Beauvoir would be amazed and pleased with how far humanistic and critical inquiry have come in helping us think about old age. Today we have the organization of the North American Network in Aging Studies (NANAS), which follows on the heels of the European Network in Aging Studies (ENAS), and over thirty years of conferences on Cultural Gerontology and thirty-five years of research and writing loosely connected to the Gerontological Society of America. But she would also ask pointedly: what difference does it make in public perception, personal experience, public policy, and care of old people who are sick and/or dying? The best way to work in the tradition of inquiry Beauvoir helped invent is to keep these questions alive, which then keeps her work alive and asks us to stay in dialogue with her foundational text.

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