

Lori Jo Marso

Politics with Beauvoir: Freedom in the Encounter

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Steeped in Beauvoirian thinking, Lori Jo Marso spends little time defending her reading of Simone de Beauvoir. In setting Beauvoir into conversations with other theorists-- Hannah Arendt, Frantz Fanon, Richard Wright, and contemporary filmmakers--she avoids the theoretical sparring that often accompanies works on Beauvoir. Instead she uses the problematic of "freedom as an encounter" to stage very compelling and engaging conversations among enemies, allies, and friends. Marso's coined phrase "freedom as an encounter" is an apt one, since it manages to accommodate the spontaneity of the event as well as acknowledge the structures (socioeconomic relations, political institutions, cultural constructs, and historical context) within which Beauvoirian freedom arises. Marso concentrates on micro-political affective relations and spends little time exploring the macro structures of historical existence. As a result, she produces a different Beauvoir from the one most of us are familiar with, but a Beauvoir who is highly readable and relevant to contemporary theoretical debates.

Few of Marso's interventions are based upon actual conversations; rather, they are staged dialogues that enable the reader to appreciate the complexity and potential of Beauvoir's political thinking. In the process, Marso explores how Beauvoir's thinking goes beyond gender concerns to inform postcolonial, antiracist, and antifascist politics as well as to illustrate its potential to enhance the affective register of politics.

First, I will provide an outline of Marso's book, and then offer more extensive treatments of specific aspects. In part I, she stages exchanges between Beauvoir and her "Enemies": specifically, the reputed misogynist filmmaker Lars von Trier and the Nazi collaborator Robert Brasillach. Even though Beauvoir never met Arendt, given that they both witnessed the trials of evil fascist collaborators, Marso's comparison of their respective handling of these trials is apposite.

In part II Marso sets up discussions between Beauvoir and her "Allies": specifically, Fanon (whom she only met once) and Wright (with whom she had a longstanding friendship in America and France). Marso convincingly shows how Beauvoir's understanding of racial and colonial violence was sharpened in their encounters. In addition, she praises them for showing how solidarity works across borders and identities.

In part III, "Friends," Marso shifts to film and an exploration of intimate and freedom-enhancing relations between women. Although Beauvoir sketched in some detail cultural, material, and social impediments women faced in becoming free, Marso believes more work must be done to address "how wounded subjects might choose freedom and enact change rather than repeat the same patterns" (15). Setting Beauvoir in conversation with diverse aesthetic forms (films, images, and novels) furthers this end.

For the last few decades, antihumanism seems to have dominated the field of continental democratic thinking (whether it be in the form of structural Marxism, semiology, discursive thinking, or more recently affect and new materialist theories), but Marso's use of Beauvoir provides an alternative. Beauvoir's attention to embodied and situated subjects accommodates the individual's affective, emotional, reflective, and creative life, while also recognizing that one's individuality emerges from historical-material, political determinations, collective myths and ideologies as well as impersonal sensations. Returning to the subject, albeit an embodied, affective, and situated one, Marso via Beauvoir avoids the shortcomings of liberal voluntarism, as well as those of antihumanism.

Although Marso tries to minimize debates that might divert her from her project of staging conversations and illustrating the significance of affect and emotion, she does, in passing, note her differences from affect theorists. Concerned with embodied affect rather than autonomous affect--how things are entwined with emotion and ideology and how they may sustain or transgress ideological formations and material circumstances--she distinguishes herself from those who stay clear of emotions and are more interested in the power of things. Marso sees Beauvoir as a precursor to contemporary feminist affect theorists (specifically Lauren Berlant, Sara Ahmed, and Sianne Ngai). Nevertheless, in linking affects to material and political realities, she rightly claims that Beauvoir is more political than they are. Marso spends little time analyzing affect itself and more time speculating upon situated affects in specific historical political contexts. In doing so, Marso (with the help of Beauvoir) makes a significant contribution in linking affect to textuality, aesthetics, and politics, the noncognitive to the cognitive, producing much needed stronger and clearer links to politics.

The first section, "Enemies," is foregrounded by her reading of *The Second Sex*, as well as *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Here Marso compares Beauvoir's engagement with the trial of Brasillach, the collaborator, with Arendt's treatment of the trial of Eichmann, the Nazi bureaucrat. She manages to elucidate how Beauvoir's embodied affective approach has some affinity with, although also striking differences from, Arendt's notion of enlarged thinking. She acknowledges how these trials had political agendas larger than determining the guilt or innocence of Brasillach and Eichmann. All collaborators were on trial in the former case, and the trial of a Nazi served the greater needs of the Israeli state: to keep the evils of anti-Semitism in the international eye in the latter. Although Marso points to Arendt's sharp distinction between the private and the public, and Beauvoir's acknowledgment that in fact the personal is political, Marso avoids one of their most glaring differences: Arendt's failure to attend to the affective dimension of judgment. Beauvoir's article "Eye for an Eye" focuses upon revenge, how people, herself included,

felt justice would be served only if there were equivalence between the punishment meted out and the suffering caused. Beauvoir points out that Mussolini could not be killed thousands of times, yet this desire for equivalence remained and problematized a just solution. Here Arendt's reflective judgment with its omission of concern for victims and their emotions comes up short. The differences between Arendt and Beauvoir could have been pursued more fruitfully.

Drawing upon Beauvoir's distinctive way of eliciting political support through feelings and aesthetic objects, Marso turns to the film *Antichrist* (part of von Trier's trilogy). Renowned for its misogyny, the film receives a capacious feminist reading by Marso, one that illustrates affective ideology.

Marso dismisses von Trier's portrayal of SHE as a bad mother, bewitched and sexually crazed. Personally, I never managed to get beyond the opening scene of *Antichrist* (husband and wife so absorbed in sex that they fail to notice their toddler pass their bed, push a chair to the window, open it and plunge to his death); nevertheless, Marso's work encourages me to try again. How does one survive this tragedy? This pair fails to. Marso offers a compelling reading of the film, aligning it with Beauvoir's treatment of male responses to women and their bodies in *The Second Sex*: disgust, fear, and the desire to control and demean women play central roles. Nonetheless, I'm not sure that the sensations associated with the grisly desecration of bodies is necessary to foster solidarity with SHE. Drilling holes in HE's leg, crushing his penis, she then masturbates with his limp hand, and begs him to hold her as she cuts off her clitoris, finally she is burnt at the stake like a witch. These excessively violent acts and cruelly harmed body parts, Marso claims, "stand for the cruel promises that bid us to regimes of unfeeling and the death of real sensation" (92). HE's patronizing attitude to SHE's mourning is sufficient for me to be convinced of their patriarchal culture; nevertheless, among affectless individuals in our affect-rich world, such grisly excesses are perhaps necessary.

Learning from Beauvoir, Marso claims, "we now see how *Antichrist* moves us to feel our way, in solidarity with SHE beyond patriarchy" (92). Although I might approach von Trier's films differently from the way Marso does, her argument is thought-provoking and illustrates how aesthetic experiences (watching films, viewing photographs, reading novels) contribute to nondirective political pedagogy. These aesthetic experiences are effective in viscerally communicating difficult experiences of violence and suffering and possibly establishing solidarity. While aesthetic experiences (specifically the novel) are sites for the mobilization of political commitment, Beauvoir's approach to narrative structure was the object of scorn among literary experimenters of the Tel Quel group and the Nouvelle Vague cinema (such as Jean Luc Godard), so Marso's efforts to link Beauvoir to contemporary film and cultural theory is a clever turn.

All too often, Beauvoir has been treated as a gender theorist, and her broader emancipatory thinking has been ignored. Marso's book, like the work of Sonia Kruks before her, is making inroads in challenging this perception. Although Marso thinks and addresses issues as a feminist, she manages to open Beauvoir up to nonfeminists and rightly addresses Beauvoir's interest in antiracist politics, which for the most part has

been overlooked. Theorists like Elizabeth Spelman who feel Beauvoir focused on the situation of white women, or French theorists of difference who treated Beauvoir as an abstract universalist humanist, have prevailed for some time. Staging Beauvoir in conversation with Fanon and Wright, in part II Marso challenges these interpretations. In returning to Beauvoir's defense of Boupacha, an Algerian activist who had been raped by French soldiers, Marso illustrates the importance of visceral affects in catalyzing support for the Algerian War of Independence.

Her chapter on Fanon addresses the conjuncture of patriarchy, colonialism, and racism. In his article "Algeria Unveiled," Fanon presciently draws attention to how the French naively interpreted veiled women as culturally dominated, ignoring their role in the resistance movement. Supplementing this article with Gillo Pontecorvo's film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), Marso shows how the veil facilitated their activism (allowing them to deliver guns under their burkas and move more freely than males could). Beauvoir's position on Boupacha also offers a case study in strategic political choices, though Marso does not pick up on this. Although Beauvoir was not optimistic that the postcolonial Algerians were sufficiently attentive to issues of gender oppression, she refused to support Boupacha, who wanted to return to France, when she was released from prison and forcibly returned to Algeria. Beauvoir felt her support might delegitimize the new postcolonial regime in Algeria. Here we see Beauvoir's commitment to collective freedom at odds with the particular freedom of Boupacha--broader emancipatory goals trump narrow feminist ones.

Marso addresses Fanon's and Beauvoir's difference on violence. Where Fanon believes that violence can be redemptive if the colonized redirect outward the violence they have suffered at the hands of their colonizers rather than internalizing it or attacking their fellow Algerians, Beauvoir does not see violence fulfilling this role. Nonetheless, she too recognizes the debilitating effects of socio-psychic power on the agency of the oppressed.

Marso believes Beauvoir is pessimistic in *The Second Sex*, bemoaning the fact that women are unable to formulate a "we" subject. Here I disagree; although this statement aptly captures the past, Beauvoir is optimistic that with international organizations like the United Nations, liberal democratic and socialist countries were beginning to address women's exclusion from paid labor, political life, and their structural inequality. In addition, women were beginning to organize and struggle. Drawing attention to both the material and cultural aspects of women's oppression, in the final chapter of *The Second Sex*, she anticipates a positive future of democratic socialism. Though much work had to be done on women since they were often complicit with patriarchal practices, Beauvoir's life-long engagement in grass-roots struggles (local and international) and her commitment to forces of democratic socialism were signs of her optimism that women were organizing for change.

I found the encounters between Wright and Beauvoir the most edifying section of the book. Since they were good friends and intellectual allies (sharing an existential orientation), they both eschewed identity politics and current forms of structural determinism. In drawing out their political affinities, Marso's research is thought-

provoking. Both gave voice to a plurality of racial and gendered voices as well as having acknowledged the shortcomings of biological theories of race and gender. Wright identified himself as a man of the West and Black, refusing to cultivate shared black identity with Africans, based upon precolonial values. Hence he refused to endorse a politics of negritude that was popular at the time. Beauvoir too rejected identity politics and essentialism, acknowledging the complexity of gendered experiences involving the intersection of race, class, age, and ethnicity. Both shared a belief in radical collective politics that encouraged collaboration based upon the "freedom of all" (Beauvoir 1948, 97) rather than identity or class. Both engaged in popular activist causes and relied upon aesthetics to offer new ways of seeing and perceiving. Wright's participation in a photographic project funded by the US government seeking to capture the urban and rural poverty of Twelve Million Black Voices illustrated how his project became a site of social critique. He, alongside Dorothea Lange, produced compelling evidence of the lives of the suffering and nameless poor. Although existentialists are often remembered as negative and filled with angst or as voluntarists, Marso's work shows how shallow this interpretation is. Both activists stressed how the oppressed were not simply immiserated but had resolve and passion. In taking their bearings in history and collaborating with others, they were capable of working toward change.

In the final section, Marso shows how Beauvoir's sensibility exceeds the literary/philosophical format and contributes to the contemporary aesthetic turn in political theory. Looking at the films of Chantal Akerman, David Fincher, Margarethe von Trotta, and the purportedly misogynist filmmaker Lars von Trier, Marso reveals the importance of intimate relations in political struggles. Marso relies upon the Bechdel test to evaluate these films: a feminist film must feature more than one (named) woman, who talk to each other about something other than men. Although Akerman, Fincher, and von Trier fail the Bechdel test if strictly applied, they nonetheless "depict the lives of women struggling with patriarchal demands and not through the male gaze," hence Marso claims they pass Bechdel's "interpretive task" (177). In the final chapter of part III, Marso considers Beauvoir's mentorship of Violette Leduc (providing not only financial but emotional support) as more than passing the test. Arendt's fictionalized relationship with Rachel Varnhagen (whom she never knew but who offered a story of how the anti-Semitism and sexism of nineteenth-century German society inhibited her freedom) is deemed to have passed the test. Finally she considers Arendt's friendship with Mary McCarthy and Lotte Kohler as represented in the film by von Trotta as also having passed the Bechdel test.

All in all, I found this book innovative, engaging, and a clever tribute to Beauvoir. In illustrating how intense sensory experiences engross people, in opening up new ways of being, perceiving, and engaging with things, Marso introduces new sites of solidarity. She is to be commended for making Beauvoir germane to students of politics, cultural, and film studies in addition to her usual gender, philosophy, and literary readers.

Reference

Beauvoir, Simone de. 1948. *The ethics of ambiguity*. New York: Citadel Press.