

“Becoming a Different Me”: Simone de Beauvoir on Freedom and Transatlantic Sexual Stereotypes

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Abstract

Europe’s relationship to America in general, and France’s in particular, centers around questions of freedom and dependency. This paper compares Europe’s search for independence with America’s ideology of freedom as articulated through today’s sexualised transatlantic rhetoric. I examine Simone de Beauvoir’s observations that differences in sexual relations and gender constructions are crucially linked to constitutional and cultural notions of liberty. Her portrayal of male disempowerment in the novel *The Mandarins* contrasts an intimidating American masculinity with its counterpart in Europe. European masculinity has been constructed as soft and peace loving, while its American counterpart is perceived as emboldened and tough. The ‘War on Terror’, as noted by Timothy Garton Ash and others, has reintroduced the sexual imagery into the verbal abuse hurled over the Atlantic. Europe’s tendency to define itself against America lends itself to revealing conclusions regarding de Beauvoir’s inability to dismantle cultural stereotypes about the ‘New World’ of possibility and abundance.

Europe’s relationship to America in general calls into question notions of freedom and dependency. In particular France’s search for cultural autonomy in an increasingly Americanised world converges with debates regarding the limits of liberty in a nation that constitutionally and culturally celebrates its freedom. Often overlooked in this discussion are the opinions expressed by the Left Bank existentialists, whose views on the constraints of freedom were shaped by their attitudes to America. From the time when Alexis de Tocqueville published *De la Démocratie en Amérique* in 1835, French suspicion and outright hostility towards America’s military and economic supremacy has often translated into cultural elitism. Through closely reading passages from Simone de Beauvoir’s fiction and non-fiction, this essay identifies two key players in Europe’s post-war ‘independence project’ from America: the European male intellectual and the independent American woman. Both draw attention to the ways in which ideas and values are constructed and deconstructed and stereotypes of self and others created and circumvented on the transatlantic border. Signifying something beyond the geo-political boundary di-

viding two or more nations, Ilan Stavans (2000) reflects on the border as "first and foremost a mental state, an abyss, a cultural hallucination, a fabrication" (13).

The sense of risk taking and deliriousness implied by Stavans' ruminations are found in de Beauvoir's writing. Particularly the gap between freedom and constraint animates her prose. Her work, especially the autobiographical, reveals a commonality with the narratives of liberty that underscore American history, culture and ideology. Attentive to America's many pleasures, Simone de Beauvoir was also repelled by its failure to live up to its ideals. As an intellectual, however, she recognised this chasm as a productive zone of critical engagement and creativity. When opportunities to bridge the rift between dream and reality presented themselves in her own life, de Beauvoir declined, perhaps sensing that her work as an intellectual and a writer would suffer. Many of the idiosyncrasies that challenge and motivate the life she lived are strongly present and far from resolved in *Les Mandarins* (1954). To begin tracing the effect of this transatlantic maelstrom, real and imagined, on Simone de Beauvoir, this essay will focus primarily on this fictional account of the period from 1944 to the early 1950s (compressed into the years 1944–47). By exploring masculinity as a social construct, *Les Mandarins* depicts both the initial post-war joy and an increasing disillusionment with Europe's disempowerment.

Published five years after *Le Deuxième sexe*, de Beauvoir's iconic text on the historical and socio-cultural status of women, the specific post-war dilemma to which France was subjected provides *Les Mandarins* with a new textual framework against which de Beauvoir's ideas about gender relations gain a deeper significance. Specifically, she connects the childlike status of France, dependent on its American 'saviour', to the male impotence experienced by Dubreuilh and Henri in their relationship to women. Despite her distaste for American politics, Simone de Beauvoir recognises the independence of many American women by comparison to the French: "femme américaine, femme libre; ces mots me semblaient synonymes" (1954: 318) ["'American woman', 'free woman'—the words seemed synonymous" (1999: 330)], she writes in her travelogue *L'Amérique au jour le jour* (1948).

American women have been simultaneously depicted as a threat and the object of sexual desire in twentieth-century French literature. They were believed to be conspiring against the influence of the male intellect and the general powerlessness of post-war France. Often, their very femininity has been called into question, an act of sexual stereotyping that has left the French male intellectual vulnerable to similar assaults on their gender. Most dramatically, the emotional and intellectual independence Europe seeks away from America is reflected in the way Simone de Beauvoir oscillates between embracing as well as resisting the American dream of freedom as personified in the French cult of the American woman.

Dedicated to her lover in real life, the American author Nelson Algren, *Les Mandarins* invites the reader to draw comparisons between text and life and the characters Anne and Lewis who share similarities with de Beauvoir and Algren. For all her devotion to Algren, de Beauvoir was never prepared to sacrifice her

public and private life with Sartre, the same way her alter ego Anne eventually abandons Lewis. "Même si Sartre n'avait pas existé," de Beauvoir writes in her autobiography *La Force des choses* (1963), "je ne me serais pas fixée à Chicago" (177) ["Even if Sartre hadn't existed, I would never have been able to live permanently in Chicago" (De Beauvoir 1968: 177)]. Perhaps more than most writers, Simone de Beauvoir felt herself strongly situated (not least by her readers) as belonging to a very specific milieu. Perhaps because the specific locality of her authorship prevented her from living elsewhere, her writing evokes a sense of remoteness as it attempts to tap into an unattainable elsewhere. The many volumes of autobiography testify to the desire to link the present moment to the past and the future, to connect herself with the plight of others.

At times, de Beauvoir's work shares great affinity and concerns with political activism. The fact that her writing often focuses on the author's difficulty to successfully cross-over from fiction into politics does not detract from the powerful impact of her writing on issues relating to peace, justice, and equality. However, this is not to say that a fundamental disbelief in the American dream of freedom as an ideology and cultural practice leads Simone de Beauvoir to offer something more substantial in place of cultural and sexual stereotypes. While offering insight into Europe's 'independence project' from America, Simone de Beauvoir's personal trajectory reveals this struggle to be related to and entangled with fantasies of unity with others and freedom of self—a dream that reinforces cultural and sexual stereotypes. During the Algerian war of independence 1954–62, a sense of personal failure towards Algerian women led her to conclude that personal happiness is inescapably bound up with national self-esteem. With regards to sexual stereotypes, de Beauvoir's pessimistic *La Femme rompue* is written during the May 1968 insurgency. Far from celebrating the new-found freedom of women and the oppressed, this novella exposes the hollowness of a woman's life after the breakup of a marriage. Finally, de Beauvoir's writing indulges in transatlantic cultural stereotypes, specifically, by depicting America as the 'New World' of opportunity to a European who wishes to leave her old self behind.

Keeping these historical events in mind, my goal in the pages that follow will be to develop a discussion of the transatlantic relations during the period of reconstruction and its contemporary manifestations in the 'war on terror'. Today, Europeans and Americans once again occupy opposite ends of the male/female spectrum. The 'war on terror' has reintroduced sexual imagery into the verbal abuse hurled over the Atlantic, falling back on post-war rhetoric between what was perceived to be a feminised, neutralised Europe and a tough, masculinised America. Simone de Beauvoir addresses this complex question of transatlantic gender construction against the backdrop of post-war politics and cultural rivalry in a way that highlights dominant socio-cultural narratives of transatlantic difference then and now.

Into the Jars of Literary History

France has often objected to an American superpower because of the implications for French culture and the French language. The fear of being stampeded by a hoard of English speakers fuels French antagonism against America. However real the agony, it is also important to remember that, as Pierre Guerlain, Professor of American Studies at the University of Marne la Vallée, observes:

cultural resentment is the more acceptable face of economic resentment: it is much easier to reject a foreign country's culture than to admit that, in the economic rat race between nations, one has fallen behind. (Guerlain 1996: 136)

America's entry into the Second World War in 1941 and subsequent aid after the war underscored French dependency on its transatlantic neighbour in a way that irked the sensibilities of the intellectual, in particular. America was no longer a distant dystopia to be feared, ridiculed, or admired. Paradoxically, America was resented both for its splendid isolation and its intervention. Its post-war aid to Europe was reluctantly accepted and scholars have subsequently questioned the significance of the American aid programme to Europe altogether (Judt 1967: 38).

Though its financial impact might be in doubt, the Marshall Plan had an undisputable effect on the psyche of the French people at the time. Unable to challenge America on a political and economic level, French artists and intellectuals propagated the belief that America was intellectually inferior to the Old World. This was not an exclusively foreign view. The most extreme expression of cultural inadequacy could be found in 1940s and 1950s America where the intellectual was stigmatised as a figure of mirth, at the best of times, or a communist to be feared. Either way, he was scorned on account of what was perceived to be an ambivalent masculinity. In his definition of an *egghead*, conservative anticommunist writer Louis Bromfield captures the sexualised anti-intellectual hostility in 1950s America by describing the intellectual as:

A person of spurious intellectual pretensions, often a professor or the protege [sic] of a professor. Fundamentally superficial. Over-emotional and feminine in reactions to any problem. Supercilious and surfeited with conceit and contempt for the experience of more sound and able men... A self-conscious prig, so given to examining all sides of a question that he becomes thoroughly addled while remaining always in the same spot. An anaemic bleeding heart. (Cited in Cotkin 1999: 332)

It is no wonder, perhaps, that Stalinism was thought by some Left Bank intellectuals to be an:

Intellectually and culturally superior system that was destined to remain victorious against exploitative American capitalism and its supposedly trivial, manipulative, soulless, and impoverished 'non-culture'. (Berghahn 2001: 92)

In his essay 'Situation de l'écrivain en 1947' Sartre's pessimistic view of the role of the intellectual in France is translated into a bitter rebuke of both America and the Soviet Union:

Nous savons que le destin posthume de nos œuvres ne dépendra ni de notre talent ni de nos efforts, mais des résultats du conflit futur ; dans l'hypothèse d'une victoire soviétique nous serons passés sous silence jusqu'à ce que nous soyons morts une seconde fois ; dans celle d'une victoire américaine, on mettra les meilleurs d'entre nous dans les bocaux de l'histoire littéraire et on ne les en sortira plus. (Sartre 1948 : 320)

[The fate of our works, he writes "will depend neither upon our talents nor our efforts, but upon the results of [a] future conflict[s]. In the event of a Soviet victory, we will be passed over in silence until we die a second time; in the event of an American victory, the best of us will be put into the jars of literary history and won't be taken out again." (Sartre 1988: 215)]

Until then, Europe is fated to be the repository for American ideas: "Une idée peut *descendre* d'un pays élevé vers un pays à potentiel bas —par exemple d'Amérique en France— elle ne peut pas *remonter*" (Sartre 1948: 292) ["An idea can *descend* from a country with a high potential towards a country with a low potential—for example, from America to France—it cannot *rise*" (Sartre 1988: 197)].

Both the idea of potential as well as the arguably phallic imagery used to describe the gap between the transatlantic neighbours find their way into Simone de Beauvoir's novel *Les Mandarins* (1954). Taking as its focal point the choices that the intellectuals of the Left Bank faced between a capitalist American future and socialist Russia, *Les Mandarins* accounts for the dilemma of an intellectual circle only thinly disguised from the real one formed by de Beauvoir and Sartre. The dream of a socialist Europe independent from America is articulated through the author and politician Robert Dubreuilh in conversation with the less nostalgic Scriassine, a relatively minor character in the novel:

"La reconstruction, c'est très joli : mais pas par n'importe quel moyen. Ils acceptent l'aide américaine ; un de ces jours, ils s'en mordront les doigts : de fil en aiguille la France va tomber sous la coupe de l'Amérique."

Scriassine vida sa coupe de champagne et la reposa bruyamment sur la table : "Voilà une prédiction bien optimiste !" Il enchaina d'une voix sérieuse : "Je n'aime pas l'Amérique ; je ne crois pas à la civilisation atlantique ; mais je souhaite l'hégémonie américaine parce que la question qui se pose aujourd'hui c'est celle de l'abondance : et seule l'Amérique peut nous la donner.

"L'abondance ? pour qui ? à quel prix ?" dit Dubreuilh. Il ajouta d'une voix indignée : "Ça sera joli le jour où nous serons colonisés par l'Amérique !"

"Vous préférez que l'U.R.S.S. nous annexe ?" dit Scriassine. Il arrêta Dubreuilh d'un geste : "Je sais : vous rêvez d'une Europe unie, autonome, socialiste. Mais si elle refuse la protection des U.S.A., elle tombera fatalement dans les mains de Staline." (De Beauvoir 1955: I, 191–192)

["Reconstruction is all very well and good, but not when it's done without considering the means. They go on accepting American aid, but one of these days they're going to be sorry. One thing will lead to another, and eventually France will find herself completely under America's thumb."]

Scriassine emptied his glass and banged it down on the table. "Now that's what I call an optimistic prediction!" In a serious voice, he continued rapidly, "I don't like America and I don't believe in the Atlantic community. But I sincerely hope America predominates, because the important question in this day and age is one of abundance. And only America can give it to us."

"Abundance?" Dubreuilh said. "For whom? And at what price? That would be a pretty picture, to be colonized by America!" he added indignantly.

"Would you rather Russia annexed us?" Scriassine asked. He stopped Dubreuilh with a sharp gesture. "I know. You're dreaming of a united, autonomous, socialist Europe. But if Europe refuses the protection of the United States, she'll inevitably fall into the hands of Stalin." (De Beauvoir 1993: 144)]

There are a couple of things to note regarding this intricate exchange between Dubreuilh and Scriassine. The most obvious of these is the utter disempowerment felt by the two French intellectuals. Like puppets, these men have no say in their own future. All they can do is talk—a sad indictment of the dwindling importance of the role of the intellectual both then and now—a situation for which America and its propensity for the mass-produced and the artificial is often blamed. Their views demonstrate the utter passivity of Europe, faced with the choice between America and Stalin. After its soldiers had liberated Europe from Fascism, America had become the guardian of Europe's fate. Ill-equipped for modern life, Scriassine implies above, France must stay close to its protector in order to survive. It is at this point in transatlantic history that representations of the American dream converge with discourses of the emancipated American woman and the notion of abundance.

Hannah Arendt (1965) provides an insightful commentary on how the European poor contributed to the materialism of the American dream through "ideals born out of poverty, as distinguished from those principles which had inspired the foundation of freedom" (139). Thus, she notes, the

American dream, as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries under the impact of mass immigration came to understand it, was neither the dream of the American Revolution—the foundation of freedom—nor the dream of the French Revolution—the liberation of man; it was, unhappily, the dream of a 'promised land' where milk and honey flow. (Arendt 1965: 139)

The dream of abundance as represented by America is starkly contrasted with the emptiness and hopelessness felt by the male intellectual in *Les Mandarins*. Arendt alludes to the femininity of this dream by describing America as a promised land where milk and honey flow, iconically represented by the Statue of Liberty who famously welcomes immigrants and visitors to her shores.

The causal link between the impoverished, powerless European male and the American, feminised dream of abundance underpins the narrative of Simone de Beauvoir's novel. Decades before the eroticised advertising imagery that, crudely speaking, connects sex with shopping, de Beauvoir constructs similar links between sexual prowess and the belief in an American dream of plenty. Interesting in this respect, however, is that her focus is on male desires and wish-fulfilment, rather than on female consumption. This is not to say, however, that Simone de Beauvoir herself was immune to this Jekyll and Hyde relationship, transposing her views on independence and freedom onto America as a way of coming to terms with her own limitations as an intellectual in France at the time.

Les Mandarins shifts between America and France, between the choice of a dream and a frugal reality, to signal the power struggle between men and women. Through the relationship between Dubreuilh and his wife Anne, France's political situation is mirrored most evocatively. Anne, a psychiatrist, falls in love with an American author, rendering Dubreuilh sexless and inadequate. The more virile and youthful American lover threatens the manhood of the much older Dubreuilh in a way that parallels how the youthfulness of America ousts old Europe. Furthermore, the lover Lewis is modelled on Simone de Beauvoir's real-life lover, the American author Nelson Algren. Possessing an over-supply of everything Dubreuilh lacks, Lewis symbolises American wealth. Stephen Spender (1974) accords wealth with masculinity and with America, and thus profoundly different from Europe: "European possessiveness is feminine. American wealth is rape, something torn out of the earth or from other men" (48).

Even the way Dubreuilh is protective about France, wishing to enter politics as a way of saving his country from the clutches of America, signals a fearful possessiveness. Stubbornly, he continues to reject any affiliation with America, even if he is as repulsed by the news of Soviet labour camps as his increasingly estranged friend Henri Perron. Through his wish to escape politics altogether and take up writing, Henri is depicted as a victim. An ex-Resistance fighter and head of the newspaper *L'Espoir*, Henri's neutrality vis-à-vis America and Russia demonstrates a general unmanliness. To further underscore this state, Henri is victimised by the women in his life. His wife Paula, with whom he has fallen out of love, threatens suicide, a young woman and her mother blackmail him, and Nadine coerces him into marriage through the birth of their child. Though an intellectual of some standing, Henri's refusal to take a political stand as the editor of a major paper reinforces the stereotypically feminine aspect of culture as something "indistinct and soft", as Michel de Certeau (1997) has observed, "a nonplace in which everything goes, in which 'anything' can circulate" (107).

Towards the end of the novel, Henri and Dubreuilh reconcile, united in their shared sense of inferiority as French intellectuals faced by the dominance of either Russia or America. Utterly defeated, Dubreuilh says:

"Dès le début la partie s'est déroulée entre l'U.R.S.S. et les U.S.A.; nous étions hors du coup."

"Ce que vous disiez ne me semble pourtant pas si faux," dit Henri. "L'Europe avait un rôle à jouer et la France en Europe."

"C'était faux ; nous étions coincés. Enfin, rendez-vous compte," ajouta Dubreuilh d'une voix impatiente, "qu'est-ce que nous pesions ? Rien du tout." (De Beauvoir 1955: IV, 94–95)

["The game was between Russia and the United States from the start. We were completely out of it."

"Nevertheless, what you used to say still doesn't seem so false to me", Henri said. "That is, that Europe—and France in Europe—had a definitive part to play."

"It was false; we were trapped. After all", Dubreuilh added in an impatient voice, "let's face it. What weight did we carry? None at all." (De Beauvoir 1993: 620)]

A disempowered man, whether then or now, is often discursively linked to an emancipated woman, whose independence constitutes a threat to the man, or worse, makes a mockery of him. If the French male intellectual felt himself weightless and empty when confronted with his post-war destiny as depicted by de Beauvoir, the American female by comparison was perceived to be gaining in strength and influence. The sexual stereotypes that mark de Beauvoir's fiction provide the reader with a key to understanding Franco-American cultural relations of the early post-war decades. What makes the transatlantic relationship at the time so complex, however, is also the genuine appeal of the American dream of freedom in Europe, especially when symbolically exported in its most feminine and seductive form.

The Lolita Syndrome

Women and their bodies were at the core of European sentiments regarding America at the beginning of the twentieth century, anticipating some of the disturbing polemics relating to eugenics during the Second World War. As part of an exchange program between the Sorbonne and Columbia and Harvard University in 1910, Professor Gustave Lanson was convinced that the 'girl américaine' embodied the American race as unimpaired by the melting pot:

A slim, athletic young girl with regular features, a pure profile, blond or brown hair, clear blue eyes, a laughing, frank, and firm gaze, lithe and confident gestures, nothing of the English stiffness, a mixture of strength and grace, a free, rich and joyful expansion of life: that is what I think of as the American 'girl' type. (Cited in Roger 2005: 191)

In an engrossing chapter on the special role that the American woman played in the collective imagination of the French at the time, Philippe Roger argues that the 'girl' was considered by some the perfect type of the American race precisely because she was not yet a grown woman. Adult females, however, were also singled out.

The politician and author Charles Victor Crosnier de Varigny was the first to single out the American female as "the superior type of the race and environment". According to de Varigny and other propagandists like him, she was developmentally ahead of the male, "the (already present) future of the American man" (Roger 2005: 184). To Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, the French fascist author, the American woman embodies the beauty and skills of a "superior race", as David Carroll notes (1995: 165). However, no amount of admiration could diminish European fears of the influence of American women and their role in the Americanisation of Europe. The American woman's power, it was believed, came from her supreme emancipation from her husband. The possibility that something similar to the suffragette movement might arise in France put fear into the French intelligentsia. In *La Femme aux États-Unis*, de Varigny conveys some of this fear by proposing that the American female might consider wielding her power beyond her country's borders. He suggests, "the 'dame', not satisfied with having also conquered the New World, is well on the way to Americanizing the old one" (cited in Roger 2005: 186).

Deeply fascinated with the freedom of the American woman, Simone de Beauvoir fills her travelogue *L'Amérique au jour le jour* (1948) with astute observations regarding female-male relations. The travelogue is unfortunately a somewhat underrated work whose value one hopes might be recognised anew because it expertly and vividly captures an America of the past, but also because it addresses America's role today, as the only remaining superpower. The sentiments towards America in Europe today are similar to those expressed in the late 1940s. *L'Amérique au jour le jour* was published two years before *Le Deuxième sexe* and it is not unlikely that the observations she made during her travels in America influenced her views as both a feminist with the MLF (*Mouvement de libération des femmes*) and an existentialist. Indeed, as Deirdre Bair (1990) argues in her biography of Simone de Beauvoir, the author was always accommodating towards American feminists who visited Paris in the 1970s, "enjoying what she sometimes called 'transoceanic feminist reciprocity'" (545). However, reminiscent of Sartre's observation that "man is condemned to be free," de Beauvoir deplores what she perceived as the squandering of freedom in America.

Simone de Beauvoir observes the restlessness of the people she encounters there, the quest for excitement, the vast selection of consumerist choices as a means to mask the emptiness and boredom of life. Unlike other Western countries, an "official denial that individualism may have the[se] soul-destroying consequences" has taken hold of the American psyche, she argues (Brooks 2002: 127). To doubt American freedom is to be un-American. In stark contrast to her own childhood filled with learning, she observes in *L'Amérique au jour le jour* how the American "consomme sa jeunesse sur place faute de savoir que c'est l'homme qui est la mesure des choses et non celles-ci qui lui imposent a priori ses limites" (De Beauvoir 1954: 305) ["[he] spends his youth staying put, never knowing that it is man who is the measure of things, and not things that a priori impose limits on him" (De Beauvoir 1999: 313)]. In particular, she objects to the inertia amongst young

Americans: "en Amérique il remplit tout juste l'espace qui lui a été réparti dans un monde extérieurs à lui" (De Beauvoir 1954: 305) ["[Young Americans] simply fill the space assigned to [them] in a world that's external to [them]" (De Beauvoir 1999: 313)]. Thus, while Simone de Beauvoir recognises the emancipation of American women, she also argues that this will not earn them respect by the opposite sex, largely because freedom as such is not valued in America the same way it is in France and Europe more generally.

The question of freedom and its significance on either side of the Atlantic often surfaces in discussions related to history and the past. An American propensity to annex other people's history blends seamlessly with misogyny in de Beauvoir's *Les Mandarins*. When visiting her American lover Lewis, Anne is struck by the condescending way France is discussed there: "leurs scrupules à notre égard ressemblaient à ceux qu'un homme peut éprouver devant une faible femme ou une bête passive" (De Beauvoir 1955: IV, 161) ["Their scruples concerning us were like those a man could feel towards a weak woman or a passive animal" (De Beauvoir 1993: 666)]. Though their sympathy clearly was for France, "déjà avec notre histoire ils fabriquaient des légendes de cire" (IV, 161) ["already they were making wax legends out of our history" (1993: 666)]. Echoing Sartre's concern that "the best of us will be put into the jars of literary history", Simone de Beauvoir's narrator voices a real concern of becoming patronised by America—as a woman and a citizen of France. Unless the American male earns his freedom and discovers his true potential, women will continue to be objectified and portrayed as idols, divinities and the objects of cults, she predicts. As for women in France, she observes that the strong woman no longer has a place in the collective imagination of the French.

In an essay titled *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome*, she notes how the *femme fragile* has replaced the *femme fatale* in popular culture in France. "The adult woman now inhabits the same world as the man," she notes, "but the child-woman moves in a universe which he cannot enter [thus] the age difference reestablishes between them the distance necessary to desire" (De Beauvoir 1972: 10). Having established themselves in the work force, women must be removed from the male sphere in other ways than professional in order to continue to be desired by men. As a Marxist, she attributes the sexism of the French male to capitalism and the economical competition between men and women, which of course comes from the other side of the Atlantic—thus America is indirectly to blame for the demise of chivalry in France. However, never failing to reflect on her own vantage point as a cultural critic and observer, Simone de Beauvoir's travelogue and other pieces of non-fiction invite the reader to consider her own predicament when passing judgement over sexual stereotypes and America's abundance of freedom on the one hand and Europe's dependency and entrapment on the other. In what remains of this essay, I shall read de Beauvoir's intellectual and creative development in the context of her own position as a woman and intellectual in France at war with Algeria. Finally, I will conclude with a few remarks regarding the continuing relevance of these debates in the 'war on terror' today.

Becoming a Different Me

Though Simone de Beauvoir's commitment against French atrocities in Algeria during the war of independence 1954–62 was strong, she also suffered from profound estrangement and alienation. Her memoirs operate as a place in which she can regain some of the authority and self-control lost as a result of feeling unable to make a difference as an intellectual. This is not to say that de Beauvoir did not act. On the contrary. At one point both Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir were labelled anti-French due to the strong stance they took against the French government in *Les Temps modernes* and other publications. However, part of the freedom that she had gained since a restrictive bourgeois Catholic childhood was lost and never to be had again. Never was she to experience the euphoria during the years of 1929–44 accounted for in the second instalment of her autobiography, *La Force de l'âge*, when Sartre and herself imagined themselves invincible:

Le jeu, en déréalisant notre vie, achevait de nous convaincre qu'elle ne nous contenait pas. Nous n'appartenions à aucun lieu, aucun pays, aucune classe, aucune profession. (De Beauvoir 1960 : 26)

[By releasing the pressure of reality upon our lives, fantasy convinced us that life itself had no hold upon us. We belonged to no place or country, no class, profession, or generation.]

Unable to relinquish her citizenship, Simone de Beauvoir experiences painful identification with the victims whose suffering she is unable to alleviate: "I needed my self-esteem to go on living; but I was seeing myself through the eyes of women who had been raped twenty times, of men with broken bones, of crazed children: a Frenchwoman" (cited in Lawson 2002: 125).

This is a bleak period in de Beauvoir's life in that she discovers that personal happiness is inescapably and unhappily bound up with national self-esteem. With this realisation comes disbelief in the abstract notion of freedom, not to mention autonomy of one's self altogether and the existence of one's past as de Beauvoir has her narrator exclaim in the novella *La femme rompue* written a few years after the end of the Algerian war: "Je croyais savoir qui j'étais, qui il était: et soudain je ne nous reconnais plus, ni lui ni moi" (De Beauvoir 1967: 191) ["I know the whole of my past by heart and all at once I no longer know anything about it" (De Beauvoir 1969: 169)]. With the loss of the past comes ontological and epistemological despair: "Je n'ai rien d'autre que mon passé. Mais il n'est plus bonheur ni fierté: une énigme, une angoisse. Je voudrais lui arracher sa vérité. Mais peut-on se fier à sa mémoire?" (1967: 212) ["I possess nothing other than my past. But it is no longer pride nor happiness—a riddle, a source of bitter distress. I should like to force it to tell the truth. But can one trust one's memory?" (1969: 185)].¹

¹It has been speculated that the reason the third volume of *Le Deuxième sexe* was never written was because it was advertised to be about Simone de Beauvoir's own life as something of a case study for the issues discussed in the first two volumes. However, to those who feel let down by

Considering the emphasis de Beauvoir places on contemplation and reflection, it is not surprising that her central objection to America is that it does not encourage introspection, understanding and personal growth because it knows and valorises only the present time:

—l'avenir collectif est dans les mains d'une classe privilégiée, la Pullman class à qui est réservée la joie d'entreprendre et de créer sur de grandes échelles ; les autres ne savent pas s'inventer, dans le monde d'acier dont ils sont les rouages, un avenir singulier : ils n'ont ni projet, ni passion, ni nostalgie, ni espoir qui les engage au delà du présent ; ils ne connaissent que la répétition indéfinie du cycle des saisons et des heures. Mais coupé du passé et de l'avenir, le présent n'a plus de substance ; il n'est rien ; c'est un pur maintenant vide. Et parce qu'il est vide il ne peut s'affirmer que par des moyens extérieurs : il faut qu'il soit 'excitant'. (De Beauvoir 1954 : 259)

[The collective future is in the hands of a privileged class, the Pullman class, which has a monopoly on the joy of starting ventures and creating on a grand scale. The others don't know how to invent a unique future for themselves in the steel world in which they are merely cogs in the machine. They have no project, passion, nostalgia, or hope that engages them beyond the present; they know only the indefinite repetition of the cycle of hours and seasons. But cut off from the past and future, the present no longer has any substance; it's nothing, just a pure, empty now. And because it is empty, it can be affirmed only through external means: it must be 'exciting'. (De Beauvoir 1999: 266)]

Simone de Beauvoir's fiction and non-fiction have something in common with the narratives of liberty that underscore American history, culture and ideology. Fractured self-esteem is sutured through language and narrative. The bulk of her autobiographical work alone testifies to a moving belief in representation shared by both France and America. Naturally, all governments govern and celebrate their leadership through representation, but perhaps none more fervently (at least in the West) than America, as Anne Norton (1993) implies:

Brought forward by a declaration, constituted in writing, Americans place themselves under the authority of language. The declaration spoke the nation into being. The constitution stands not as an artefact, or as mere law, but as the written representation of America. (9)

Simone de Beauvoir also speaks herself into being and as such her œuvre is a celebration of language against silence. In all her work, she calls attention to the gap between the ideal and reality, not to chastise the American people, although there is an element of that, but also to motivate the reader to carry out his or her personal aspirations for freedom and independence in the process of reading and living.

this decision, her autobiographical and fictional work already speaks volumes of how the author combined her private life with her work.

To an existentialist, especially, to whom there is no fixed self, only a constantly becoming self, the power of narrative to shape and reshape us must not be underestimated. The struggle for cultural integrity in France is reflected in Simone de Beauvoir's struggle for autonomy as a woman to whom the political becomes the personal as testified by her extreme identification with rape victims in Algeria and a philosopher to whom power to change political reality is limited. Her self-exploration and attempts to liberate herself echo the intellectual and emotional independence Europe sought away from America. Interestingly, this wish for autonomous self-creation finds resonance in the American concept of the 'self-made' man or woman. Consider the following dialogue between Dubreuilh and Henri towards the end of *Les Mandarins*:

"La réalité n'est pas figée", dit Dubreuilh. "Elle a un avenir, des possibilités. Seulement pour agir sur elle et même pour la penser, il faut s'installer en elle et non s'amuser à des petits rêves."

"Vous savez, je ne rêve guère", dit Henri.

"Quand on dit : 'Les choses sont moches' ou comme moi l'an dernier : 'Tout est mal', c'est qu'on rêve en douce à un bien absolu." Il regarda Henri dans les yeux : "On ne s'en rend pas compte, mais il faut une drôle d'arrogance pour placer ses rêves au-dessus de tout. Si on était modeste, on comprendrait qu'il y a d'un côté la réalité, et de l'autre rien. Je ne connais pas de pire erreur que de préférer le vide au plein", ajouta-t-il. (De Beauvoir 1955: IV, 216–217)

["Reality isn't frozen", Dubreuilh said. "It has possibilities, a future. But to act on it—and even to think about it—you've got to get inside it and stop playing around with little dreams."

"You know, I have very few dreams", Henri said.

"When someone says, 'Things are rotten', or, as I was saying last year, 'Everything is evil', it can mean only that he's dreaming secretly of some absolute good." He looked Henri in the eyes. "We don't always realize it, but it takes a hell of a lot of arrogance to place your dreams above everything else. When you're modest, you begin to understand that, on the one hand, there's reality, and on the other, nothing. And I know of no worse error than preferring emptiness to fullness", he added. (De Beauvoir 1993: 704–705)]

The contemporary context of European and American relations reiterates the debates of Simone de Beauvoir's time. In particular, the sense of entrapment and inferiority voiced by Dubreuilh and Henri in *Les Mandarins* has resurfaced more recently. Andrew Ross (1989) suggests that the construction of masculinity goes hand in hand with the international balance of patriarchal power. Comparing cultural icons such as the American Rambo and the English Boy George, Ross asserts that the latter "bespeaks the softer European contours of masculinity in the twilight of its power". While American masculinity is "emboldened and threatening", its European counterpart is "sentimental and peace loving" (Ross 1989: 165). In the

light of recent events, Ross' comments must be considered prescient of the transatlantic rhetoric today. The 'war on terror', Timothy Garton Ash (2005) notes, has reintroduced sexual stereotypes into the transatlantic debate:

If anti-American Europeans see 'the Americans' as bullying cowboys, anti-European Americans see 'the Europeans' as limp-wristed pansies. The American is a virile, heterosexual male; the European is female, impotent, or castrated. Militarily, Europeans can't get it up. (After all, they have fewer than twenty 'heavy lift' transport planes, compared with the United States' more than two hundred.) Following a lecture I gave in Boston, an aged American tottered to the microphone to inquire why Europe 'lacks animal vigor.' The word 'eunuchs' is, I discovered, used in the form of 'EU-nuchs.' The sexual imagery even creeps into a more sophisticated account of America-European differences, that of Robert Kagan of the Carnegie Endowment for Peace titled 'Power and Weakness'. 'Americans are from Mars', wrote Kagan approvingly, 'and Europeans are from Venus'—echoing that famous book about relationships between men and women, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. (Garton Ash 2005: 123)

In the US, feminist critics such as Susan Faludi (2007) have argued persuasively that the terrorist attacks of September 11 have been used to denigrate women, in particular, as helpless victims who need rescuing by manly male heroes (14). There is not sufficient space here to dwell deeper on the contemporary expression of these stereotypes, except to say that they have by no means diminished and, finally, to ask whether de Beauvoir's writing interrupts or supports this transatlantic view. Once again, it is the notion of freedom that underpins this question. Simone de Beauvoir recalls in the first pages of *L'Amérique au jour le jour* her sentiments regarding the prospect of encountering the country of her imagination and the desire for nothing less than the freedom to begin something new by virtue of being born again:

Il me semble que je vais sortir de ma vie ; je ne sais si ce sera à travers la colère ou l'espoir, mais quelque chose va se dévoiler, un monde si plein, si riche et si imprévu que je connaîtrai l'extraordinaire aventure de devenir moi-même une autre. (De Beauvoir 1954: 11–12)

[I feel I'm leaving my life behind. I don't know if it will be through anger or hope, but something is going to be revealed—a world so full, so rich, and so unexpected that I'll have the extraordinary adventure of becoming a different me. (De Beauvoir 1999: 3)]

Rather than dismantling cultural stereotypes, de Beauvoir reinforced them by portraying America as the 'New World' of possibility and abundance to which she could abandon her old self. America simultaneously promised freedom *of* self and the freedom *from* self. Simone de Beauvoir would rather have been born again in America than have witnessed the pillars of her life crumble under the weight of too much history.

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