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Beyond Sovereignty and Particularism: for a Truly Universalist Feminism

Abstract: Intersectional understandings of identities as traversed by diverse forms of oppression have brought to light also the ways commitments to contesting these forms of oppression might come into conflict. A salient form of conflicting intersectionality is the apparent conflict between feminist and anti-racist or anti-colonial commitments today. By offering a materialist rereading of Simone de Beauvoir’s understanding of oppression and emancipation against her postcolonial critics, I argue that instead of a particularistic one, a universalist and egalitarian account of conflicting intersectionality is required today – an account which is however fully aware of the historical nature of the universal itself. Such an account may allow us to keep condemning all forms of oppression, with Beauvoir’s words, as an “absolute evil”.

Keywords: feminism, universalism, particularism, egalitarianism, intersectionality, sovereignty, autonomy

“Their ceasing to be regarded by men as Other won’t necessarily mean that these women will cease regarding other men and women as Other”, writes Elisabeth V. Spelman in her now notorious critique of Western modern feminism: *Inessential Woman – Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*: “The very attitude they must take up about themselves (the one that men have had about themselves), inevitably involves taking up quite a different attitude about some Others.”¹

This passage is part of Spelman’s critique of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*; it tackles the way Beauvoir deploys and moulds some conceptual dualities of scholastic and modern European philosophy – transcendence and immanence, the self and the other, the absolute and the relative, the essential and the inessential – to offer an existential and ontological analysis of women’s oppression. Spelman credits Beauvoir for her attention to other forms of oppression and the diversity of experiences of women suffering from them,² but she ultimately reproaches her for masking

¹ Elisabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (London: The Women’s Press, 1988), 74.

² *Ibid.*, 62.

these by focusing upon the specificity of one form of oppression – the oppression of women.³ Therefore, Spelman argues, it is her own experience of oppression as a white middle-class French woman which Beauvoir illegitimately universalises, pretending to be analysing women's oppression in general.⁴

Spelman's critique of Beauvoir is part of her wider project aimed at contesting the race and class blindness or outright prejudice of much second-wave (predominantly white) feminism. Though a white academic herself, Spelman's book can be viewed as part of a wider contestation of white feminism, particularly widespread in the late seventies and eighties, by Black and non-white feminist collectives, as well as individual authors, such as The Combahee River Collective,⁵ Patricia Hill Collins,⁶ Barbara Smith,⁷ Angela Davis⁸ and others. Spelman's critique can be understood as part of the tendency in feminist movements and theory to denounce the historical exclusions of white feminism (particularly its blindness to race and class diversity), and amend it with more intersectional approaches – a term famously coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw.⁹

I want to acknowledge here the historical importance of these and other critiques of feminist thought: by exposing the biases and the blindness of mainstream white feminism, I would argue, these critiques contributed significantly towards the articulation of a more universal and more egalitarian feminism. However, in what follows, I will contest a particular understanding (and sometimes self-understanding) of such critiques, which, I will argue, at times plagues Spelman's account as well. The problem arises, I will argue, when these critiques are not understood as internal self-amendments of feminism, but are rather presented as the antagonistic articulations of other, more or multiply oppressed, interest groups. In other words, when feminism and anti-racism, or even black-feminism are understood in particularistic, instead of egalitarian and universalist terms, the historical struggles of one these movements are often delegitimated and discarded in favour of another, instead of understanding both (and in fact all anti-oppressive, anti-exploitative struggles) as part of a common universalist egalitarian political movement. Universalist understanding of feminism, such as the one I am advocating here, has been, in fact, articulated by one of the major proponents of Black feminism as well. In a speech in 1979, Barbara Smith put it eloquently:

³ Ibid, 66.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The Combahee River Collective, April 1977. Quoted in Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 235. The statement is available online at www.circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html.

⁶ See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

⁷ See Barbara Smith ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

⁸ Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1983).

⁹ See Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, (1989): 139–67.

The reason racism is a feminist issue is easily explained by the inherent definition of feminism. Feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women: women of colour, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women, as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. *Anything less than this is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.*¹⁰

Contrary to such a universalist (self-)understanding of feminism, to be found also within Black feminism, Spelman's critique of modern feminism in general and her critique of Beauvoir and second wave feminism in particular tends to be driven by a particularistic critique of modern universalism,¹¹ as I will argue in what follows. Spelman contests both the specificity Beauvoir accords to women's oppression and its relative generality across other social positions. This, however, commits her to a logical mistake exemplary of particularistic critiques of modern feminism:¹² contesting the legitimacy of one kind of anti-oppressive struggle (i.e. feminism) by contesting the legitimacy of generalisations in social and political analysis altogether. While simultaneously critiquing the false generalisations of modern Western feminism's notion of woman, these critiques appear to have no problems with generalising 'non-Western' women or 'women of colour' into another umbrella term.¹³ While they often contest the legitimacy of analysing the oppression of women *as* women, as Spelman did explicitly, they appear to have no problem in conceding to the specificity of the oppression of, i.e., women of colour *as* women of colour. One level of specification is added to the category of 'woman', without questioning whether more (and how many) should be added to it or whether, in any case, a certain level of generalisation in analysing any kind of oppression will be necessary, if we want to recognize and analyze the larger-than-individual, i.e. the social and political nature of oppression.

As mentioned, I would argue that this paradoxical attitude might be at least partly due to the fact that such critiques tend to present anti-oppressive struggles and theories in particularistic terms – as conflicting perspectives articulating conflicting social groups' interests. By mandating a choice of allegiance to one struggle against another, this picture leaves no room for thinking possible ways of contesting all systemic forms of oppression as an "absolute evil", to use Beauvoir's words (without denying that in particular instances allegiances to their contestation might indeed come

¹⁰ Quoted in Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, ed., *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983), 61.

¹¹ To be found also in: Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *boundary 2: A Journal of Post-Modern Literature and Culture* 12, 3 (1984): 333–59; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

¹² On this topic, see Alison Assiter, *Revisiting Universalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) and *Enlightened Women. Modernist Feminism in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge, 1996).

¹³ A similar point was made by Bronwyn Winter in "Essentialisation de l'Altérité et invisibilisation de l'oppression: l'histoire bizzare mais vraie de la déformation d'un concept," in *Cinquanteenaire du Deuxième sexe*, ed. Christine Delphy and Sylvie Chaperon (Paris: Éditions Syllepse, 2002): 204–11.

into conflict¹⁴). In order to overcome these shortcomings, a particularistic account of conflicting intersectionality, which arguably underpins also Spelman's critique, needs to be abandoned in favor of a truly universalist, truly egalitarian, as well as materialist and historical understanding of different kinds of oppression, their commonalities and the ways they might come into conflict.

The Historical and Political Necessity of a Universalist Feminism

It needs to be clarified here that the alliance of feminism with universalism and egalitarianism, which I am advocating here, is strategically motivated also by a historical understanding of the ideological discursive dynamic of modern forms of oppression. An important facet of the latter is the systematic particularisation of oppressed social groups through their reduction to a specific difference, taken to indicate their subordinated status (i.e. sex, skin colour, ability etc.). Beauvoir writes:

I used to get annoyed in abstract discussions to hear men tell me: "You think such and such a thing because you're a woman." [...] There is an absolute human type that is masculine. Woman has ovaries and a uterus; such are the particular conditions that lock her in her subjectivity; some even say she thinks with her hormones. Man vainly forgets that his anatomy also includes hormones and testicles. He grasps his body as a direct and normal link with the world that he believes he apprehends in all objectivity, whereas he considers woman's body an obstacle, a prison, burdened by everything that particularizes it.¹⁵

In what follows I will argue that particularistic arguments in the name of the specific difference of a subjugated group end up unwittingly participating in the systematic particularization of subjugated social groups. A universalist and egalitarian understanding of feminism and anti-oppressive struggles more broadly may not only allow us to overcome the impasses of particularistic social ontologies, but also to contest the false universalisations of historical instantiations of universalist and egalitarian commitments in the past and present – i.e. masculinist, Eurocentric, imperialist, heterosexist ones. In what follows, I will argue such an understanding of oppression

¹⁴ Black women appear more reluctant to report domestic violence, possibly because weary of feeding racist stereotypes which portray Black men as violent and misogynist. Instead of a particularistic interpretation in terms of conflicting interests and commitments among which to choose, a universalist one renders this case as a confrontation with two 'absolutely evil' forms of oppression, in Beauvoir's words. No matter what the concrete choice will be, no course of action prevents this woman, or an observer, to keep condemning both forms of oppression in the future, recognizing their interplay and conflict in this case and contesting them in other cases and realms. On this issue, see i.e. Carolyn West, "Black Women and Intimate Partner Violence. New Directions for Research," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 19, 12 (December 2004): 1487–93.

¹⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 2011), 5.

may be developed through a materialist rereading of Beauvoir today. I will attempt to illustrate this claim by confronting what I take to be a particularistic critique of what arguably underpins Beauvoir's normative understanding of subjectivity: sovereignty, autonomy, transcendence, freedom.

Beauvoir's Normative Understanding of Sovereignty: The Universal Value of Transcendence

What singularly defines the situation of woman is that being, like all humans, an autonomous freedom, she discovers herself as Other: an attempt is made to freeze her as an object and doom her to immanence, since her transcendence will be forever transcended by another essential and sovereign consciousness. Woman's drama lies in this conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject, which always posits itself as essential, and the demands of a situation that constitutes her as inessential.¹⁶

The definition of woman as both systematically socially objectified *and* driven by the existential drive of every subject to affirm its freedom, allowed Beauvoir to normatively ground what I am arguing is a universalist and egalitarian claim for the irreducibility of women to sexual difference (to a life of reproductive labor) and to contest male dominance as an "absolute evil"¹⁷: a social arrangement which bars half of humanity access to what is socially considered an ethical life.

Critics have contested Beauvoir's reliance upon the tradition of Western Enlightenment in her normative equation of subjectivity with freedom, transcendence, autonomy; many have argued that the latter led her to hold a falsely universal, covertly masculinist, Eurocentric and racist model of subjectivity as normative.¹⁸ Indeed, her training as an academic philosopher in mid-20th century France, her allegiance to existentialism and phenomenology, her heavy reliance upon a reading of Hegel's theory of consciousness in the master-slave dialectic, as well as her espousal of the values of equality, brotherhood and liberty handed down from the French Revolution, undoubtedly situate her firmly within a European tradition of Enlightened democratic egalitarianism. However, as I will argue in what follows, her understanding of subjectivity, oppression and liberation departs significantly from Sartre's subjective voluntarism and brings *The Second Sex* much closer to the structuralist problematisation of the self-transparency and autonomy of the subject (demonstrated perhaps also

¹⁶ Ibid, 17.

¹⁷ Ibid, 16.

¹⁸ I.e. Sally Markowitz, "Occidental Dreams: Orientalism and History in *The Second Sex*," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34, 2 (2009): 271-94.

by her drawing upon Freud,¹⁹ Lacan,²⁰ and Levi-Strauss²¹). While this departure in no way marks Beauvoir's precocious affinity with a postmodern intersectional feminism, as some have held,²² I would argue that a materialist re-reading of Beauvoir allows us to recognise her significant departure from Eurocentric and sexist models of subjectivity. In what follows, I will therefore contest particularistic critiques of Beauvoir's alleged Eurocentrism and masculinism and contrast them to a materialist critique of the subject of Western modern philosophy.²³ This will allow me to situate *The Second Sex* as a work genuinely en route towards a truly materialist, historical, universalist and egalitarian analysis of women's oppression, which I am advocating here.

The Postcolonial Critique of Sovereignty as False Universality and its Materialist Critique

According to particularistic critiques of the false universalisation behind normative pictures of ethical human life, such ideals would set up members of subjugated groups for failure in advance, dooming them to immanence on a theoretical plane, repeating what social conditions already accomplish. Beauvoir's apparent commitment to a falsely universal model of subjectivity would also be culpable of the latter.²⁴

Andrea Veltman argued that such critiques miss out precisely on the normative function of Beauvoir's deployment of transcendence in critiquing relations of oppression.²⁵ By contesting it as inadequate to capture the materially affordable modes of living of oppressed social groups, such critiques unwittingly naturalise these groups: they present them as static entities and condemn standards of ethical life which do not adequately capture their experiences. Beauvoir's framework, however, allows us to contest precisely the material conditions which prevent subjugated groups from leading what, from a dominant perspective, is considered ethical human existence.²⁶

The historically dominant model of ethical life is indeed no metaphysical given, but the product of historically contingent social relations. As Catherine Wilson argues, Beauvoir's implicit take on Kant's understanding of human dignity with the

¹⁹ E.g. in Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*, 49–62.

²⁰ Ibid, 284.

²¹ Ibid. 80–81.

²² See i.e. Karen Vintges, "Simone de Beauvoir – a Thinker for the Twenty-First Century," in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir. Critical Essays*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006) 214–27.

²³ I.e. Christine Delphy, "The One behind the 'Other'," in *Separate and Dominate. Feminism and Racism after the War on Terror* (London: Verso, 2015), epub.

²⁴ See Judith Okely, *Simone de Beauvoir: a Re-reading* (London: Virago, 1986).

²⁵ Andrea Veltman, "Transcendence and Immanence in the Ethics of Simone de Beauvoir," in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir. Critical Essays*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 127.

²⁶ Ibid.

notion of transcendence underscores the social nature of the latter.²⁷ Furthermore, I would argue, it underscores the historical process through which transcendence comes to be valued as a humanly dignified form of existence. In Part Two – History, Beauvoir writes how men, by transcending life – which is facilitated by the material conditions of the sexual division of labour – posited transcendence itself as a value.²⁸ We might contest Beauvoir’s dubious periodization of the emergence of social values in some primordial times, since characterising humans as subjects capable of transcending material conditions of life and creating values presupposes the modern self-understanding of individuals as (relatively) autonomous agents extricable from the objectified realm of passive nature. Nevertheless, Beauvoir sets the conceptual conditions of possibility for understanding subjectivity, as well as social values, as historical, social and relational, and not metaphysical or natural, entities. She sets the conditions of possibility for considering the historically contingent genesis of what comes to count as universally valuable (including the universal as such as a value) – for historicising the universal itself, without, for this, rejecting it as arbitrary. What counts as universally dignified or valuable, as Beauvoir reveals according to Wilson, is not a matter of individual decree or whim, but the historical product of human relations: of hierarchical socialisation and its contestation.²⁹ This, I would argue, places Beauvoir at an argumentative advantage from her particularistic critics, who unwittingly take both dominant social values and social groups as unchangeable entities, whose mutual incommensurability would inherently undermine the normative purchase of universality altogether, instead of understanding this incommensurability as the motor of the historical transformation of the universal itself.

A Materialist Re-reading of Beauvoir

Beauvoir was committed to an anti-naturalist account of oppression denying that any facet of oppression would be the result of a natural, historical, psychological or metaphysical destiny.³⁰ However, as she herself regretted later on,³¹ she did not account for oppression in fully materialist terms; she did tend to concede some role to biology in the emergence of the gendered division of labour³² and in the end did not envision the potential overcoming of sexual difference as such,³³ as materialist feminists would. Yet her understanding of the specificity of women’s condition as a

²⁷ Catherine Wilson. “Simone de Beauvoir and Human Dignity,” in *The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Emily Grosholz (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 103.

²⁸ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 74.

²⁹ Catherine Wilson, “Simone de Beauvoir and Human Dignity,” 114.

³⁰ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 17.

³¹ See Simone de Beauvoir, *Tout compte fait* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 614.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 766.

duality between their social objectification or particularisation on one hand and their irreducibility to it on the other, paved the way for a materialist and historical understanding of oppression, which would be developed later on by French materialist feminists (i.e. Christine Delphy, Monique Wittig, Colette Guillamin, Nicole Claude Mathieu, Paola Tabet and others), whom she closely collaborated with (i.e. on the journals *Questions Féministes* and *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*) when becoming engaged in the feminist movement in the 1970s.

Beauvoir's understanding of women's systematic othering through their reduction to sex – “*woman is exclusively defined in her relation to man. [...] Woman is sometimes designated as 'sex'; it is she who is the flesh*”³⁴ – would be radicalised by materialist feminists. Not only are women systematically reduced to sex with a metonymic slippage equating them with embodiment, eroticism, reproduction, mothering, domestic labour, which both repeats and ideologically sustains the material conditions of their exploitation, as exposed in *The Second Sex*. For materialist feminists, women are ontologically constituted as a subjugated social group through the symbolic investment in the anatomic marker of sex, in and by itself devoid of social and political implications. This marker first delineates the subjugated group (the one socially ‘destined’ to reproductive labour) from the dominant one, and subsequently ideologically legitimates this hierarchical division with a naturalist recurrence to a biological destiny, as Guillamin lucidly reveals.³⁵ As Wittig put it:

The category of sex is the category that sticks to women, for only they cannot be conceived of outside of it. Only they are sex, the sex [...] The category of sex is the category that ordains slavery for women.³⁶

Without fully accounting for the historical construction of sexual difference and without envisaging its end, Beauvoir's analysis nevertheless prefigured the materialist feminist understanding of emancipation as the undoing of the very symbolic investment into sex which ideologically legitimates women's exploitation. She wrote: “the more women assert themselves as human beings, the more the marvelous quality of Other dies in them.”³⁷

If subjugated social groups are ontologically constituted through the systematic particularisation of their members, this particularisation ought to be contested and undone, according to an egalitarian understanding of emancipation. We can see from this perspective how postcolonial critics, implicitly driven by particularistic commitments, unwittingly affirm the specific difference of subjugated social groups, which results from the material conditions of their exploitation. When they contest the offered models of

³⁴ Ibid, 162.

³⁵ See Colette Guillamin, “The Practice of Power and Belief in Nature,” in: *Sex in Question: French Materialist Feminism*, ed. Diana Leonard and Lisa Adkins (London: Taylor and Francis Ltd., 1996), 73–110.

³⁶ Wittig Monique, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1992), 9.

³⁷ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 162.

emancipation as inadequate to these groups with arguments pointing to the very oppressive material conditions which would prevent them from leading such lives, they unwittingly imply that these conditions are an unchangeable given and that no normative critique can be deployed against them. On the other hand, a materialist re-reading of Beauvoir allows us to articulate a truly egalitarian understanding of emancipation as undoing both the specific particularisation of subjugated social groups and the false universalization of the modes of subjectivation of dominant social groups. Upon such an understanding of emancipation, undoing relations of oppression would necessarily transform, in fact undo, both dominant and dominated social groups as such – it would not logically entail one group becoming like another or everyone becoming alike. Rather, it would imply the emergence of a myriad, unimaginable number of socially non-hierarchized differences, as also Beauvoir's vision of women's emancipation in the conclusion to *The Second Sex* hints at.³⁸ Delphy wrote in "Rethinking Sex and Gender":

If women were the equals of men, men would no longer equal themselves. Why then should women resemble what men would have ceased to be? If we define men within a gender framework, they are first and foremost dominants with characteristics which enable them to remain dominants. To be like them would be also to be dominants, but this is a contradiction in terms. [...] To be dominant one must have someone to dominate. One can no more conceive of a society where everyone is 'dominant' than of one where everyone is 'richer'.³⁹

Re-reading Spelman and Postcolonial Critiques of Feminism

A radically egalitarian and universalist understanding of emancipation allows us to contest and overcome Spelman's critique of Beauvoir and the particularistic impasses resulting from it. If dominant and subjugated social groups are historically formed, mutually implicated entities – implicated through relations of domination – this logically entails that emancipation has meaning only within the specific social relation in question. In other words, if women are the social group subjugated by men, they can only emancipate themselves against men – by contesting this particular relation of domination. They cannot, logically, emancipate themselves against, or at the expense of, another social group.

What, then, are we to make of the fact that Western women's emancipation from the compulsory and naturalised performance of reproductive and domestic labour is materially facilitated by the reserve force of migrant domestic labour of non-white, non-western women?⁴⁰ Or of the fact that women's emancipation is used as a weapon

³⁸ Ibid, 764–66.

³⁹ Christine Delphy, "Rethinking Sex and Gender," *Women's Studies International Forum* 16, 1 (1993): 8.

⁴⁰ See Terri Nilliasca, "Some Women's Work: Domestic Work, Class, Race, Heteropatriarchy, and the Limits of Legal Reform," *Michigan Journal of Race and Law* 16 (2011): 377.

to install imperialist and racist cultural narratives about the alleged 'backwardness' of 'illiberal' non-western cultures (as analysed also by Sarah Farris⁴¹)? Following the argument above, if women are by definition a subjugated social group which can emancipate themselves only against men, when they subjugate other social groups, they do so only in lieu of their position in dominant social groups according to other kinds of divisions, and not in lieu of being women: if they exploit migrant labour, they do so as whites or Westerners, not *as women*. Rather than taking these examples as pointing towards the necessary conflict between feminist and anti-racist commitments today, they require us to radically rethink the meaning of the terms 'emancipation' and 'feminism'. Given the understanding of emancipation derived from a materialist rereading of Beauvoir above, these examples turn out not to be examples of emancipation at all; the 'feminism' these phenomena are taken to co-opt, cannot be the egalitarian, universalist feminism I am attempting to extricate from a materialist re-reading of Beauvoir. If we accept the understanding of feminism developed above, the forms of exploitation and subjugation which clothe themselves in feminist garments can be exposed as non-egalitarian, non-universalisable ones – and therefore condemnable misuses, not co-optations of feminism.

What follows in terms of political orientation is not that women's emancipation should be abandoned as an aim, because it would structurally imply the subjection of other social groups, as Spelman implies; as argued above, it structurally, and logically, does not. What follows is rather the much more radical claim that women today are not really emancipated anywhere in the world: if one woman is oppressed in lieu of being a woman, all women are oppressed in lieu of being women (even if differently in relation to their other social positions and indeed to varying degrees). As Le Doeuff put it eloquently:

We are beginning today to recognise that – once again, only as an example – the fact that a high percentage of women stay 'in the home' is not without its effects on those who do not. The class/sex of women is not as dispersed as it seems, and there is a globality or a globalisation which needs to be thought: the common lot falls to each woman via a causality which passes through global society.⁴²

If women's exploitation has a systematic character which mandates a systematic analysis and contestation, as suggested above, a woman who allegedly emancipates herself by exploiting other women *as women* is engaging in a constitutively exclusionary, non-universalisable practice which reinforces the subjugation of the social group she is part of. Such an exclusionary practice cannot therefore be taken to consistently follow from egalitarian and universalist feminist commitments as sketched above – commitments which drive also Beauvoir's analysis.

⁴¹ See Sara R. Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

⁴² Le Doeuff, Michèle, "Operative Philosophy: Simone de Beauvoir and Existentialism," *Critical Essays on Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Marks Elaine (Boston Massachusetts: G.K. Hall&Co., 1987), 153.

Emancipation Beyond Sovereignty

If women's emancipation cannot logically entail women becoming like men at the expense of othering another social group, what might it entail? And what understanding of ethical human relations and egalitarian modes of subjectivation is implied in Beauvoir's vision of women's emancipation?

To characterise oppression as an "absolute evil", to morally condemn it, a regulative idea of freedom still needs to be operative in Beauvoir's framework. However, the latter need not be an inherently compromised, exclusionary one, as was implied by her particularistic critics. While rehearsing an analogously particularistic critique of the model of subjectivity espoused by Beauvoir as allegedly masculinist, Catriona Mackenzy nevertheless recognizes the constitutive role played by Beauvoir's upholding of an ideal of ethical, egalitarian relationality as both realizable and ethically required;⁴³ this egalitarian ideal is precisely what allows Beauvoir to analyse and contest oppression as an absolute evil. Mackenzy links this ideal to Beauvoir's understanding of ethical existence in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*: the latter would lie in human beings recognizing the inescapable ambiguity of their condition, between freedom and facticity, subjectivity and objectivity, embodiment and will, in mutual, reciprocal recognition of each other's worth as subjects.⁴⁴

This ideal of ethical human life underpins what I would call Beauvoir's normative egalitarianism, which posits equality as an ethically required universally human aim, achievable only by contesting existing inequalities (to distinguish it from the descriptive egalitarianism of liberalism, which holds that inequalities are politically irrelevant and therefore should not be contested). Characterized by Beauvoir in terms of reciprocity and mutual recognition, this ideal is far removed from the phantasy of sovereignty entertained by members of dominant social groups, falsely universalised into the dominant norm of ethical life (i.e. self-sufficiency, independence, assertion of one's freedom at the expense of others), which Spelman considers being Beauvoir's ideal of women's emancipation (being like men and othering other others). Rather, Beauvoir's normative ideal of ethical life comes much closer to what Mackenzy and others elsewhere attempted to conceptualise in terms of "relational autonomy".⁴⁵

⁴³ Catriona Mackenzy, "A certain lack of symmetry: Beauvoir on autonomous agency and women's embodiment," in *Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Ruth Evans (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), 133.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁴⁵ See Catriona Mackenzy and Natalie Stoljar ed., *Relational Autonomy. Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency and the Social Self* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Conclusion: The Historical Nature of the Universal

The process of critique of what counts as a universal model of ethical life, implicit in the materialist and feminist critiques of sovereignty and the subsequent revision of this model can be understood in terms of what Etienne Balibar characterises as the constitutive role of “anthropological difference” in driving universalism’s historical self-amendment. Balibar characterises the latter in terms of “a dialectic of universality in its civic-bourgeois form” as “an infinite process or task to start over again”, and argues that “what empowers the power of challenging the institution of universality in its own terms is not simply the contradiction, it is the difference: more precisely, it is the anthropological difference in its singular forms.”⁴⁶ This is, then, “the conatus of the subject-citizen in terms of anthropological differences permanently overdetermining and empowering the political conflict of inclusion and exclusion – which historically institutes universality.”⁴⁷

However, anthropological difference, i.e. sexual difference or race, upon the materialist re-reading of Beauvoir offered above, needs to be understood as fully historically contingent, just as what counts as universally human turns out to be in the historical process of its endless revision. A similar universalist ‘conatus’, as I have argued, drives Beauvoir’s analysis and condemnation of women’s oppression as an “absolute evil” and also Delphy’s argument for the critique of universality ‘on its own terms’ can be understood, I would argue, as an instantiation of this ‘conatus of the citizen-subject’:

Equal rights, true universalism, cannot be achieved unless we draw attention to the hidden specificity of the subject of universal rights. We must reveal his sexed, ethnicized and class nature, and replace this subject with an individual who could be any individual and who takes all individuals into account.⁴⁸

Falsely universal historical instantiations of universalism can be consistently critiqued only ‘on their own terms’: in terms of their failed universalizability, and not from a particularistic position, which is, as I have argued above, logically self-defeating. A normative egalitarianism, coupled with the incipiently historical understanding of the universal, remains one of the main resources for feminist and other oppositional struggles to counter the historical instantiations of false universalism, without reference to a particular specific difference. Such a normative egalitarianism, as I have argued, can be extricated from a materialist re-reading of Beauvoir today, beyond the particularistic critiques of her work. As Beauvoir reminds us, what counts as

⁴⁶ Etienne Balibar, “Civic Universalism and its Internal Exclusions: The Issues of Anthropological Difference,” *boundary 2* 39, 1 (January 2012): 229.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Christine Delphy, *Separate and Dominate. Feminism and Racism after the War on Terror* (London: Verso, 2015), epub.

universally valuable 'depends on us' – together with securing the material conditions through which all may participate in what comes to count as universally valuable, ethical life:

The fact of being a human being is infinitely more important than all the singularities that distinguish human beings; it is never the given that confers superiority: 'virtue,' as the ancients called it, is defined at the level of 'what depends on us.'⁴⁹

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⁴⁹ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 763.

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