La Flâneuse: Simone de Beauvoir and Class

In *Class Struggle and Women's Liberation* (1984), Tony Cliff chooses a passage from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* as representing a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of women in the French Revolution. In Beauvoir's words:

'It might well have been expected that the Revolution would change the lot of woman. It did nothing of the sort. That middle-class Revolution was respectful of middle-class institutions and values and it was accomplished almost exclusively by men. (*The Second Sex* 139)'

Cliff comments that this 'is the opposite of the truth,' and that women 'played a crucially important role in the revolution'—most importantly, the progressive 'bourgeois feminists' and 'women of the propertyless classes' (19)—who were initially stung into action by particular class grievances, then subsequently united by a mutual cross-class interest in how the position of women-in-general might be revolutionized. Middle- and working-class women joined in street-marches, bread riots, political discussion-club meetings, and stormed prisons and government offices, providing a grass-roots expression of people-power which significantly aided the Jacobins. Any momentary hope that such a coalition would last was soon dashed; as Cliff argues, the ascendancy of the bourgeois feminists, and the creeping dismissal of underclass female protest as obsessed by nothing more than the price of groceries, created deep lesions. There was a growing sense that women-as-one would not be served by educational, property or marriage-law reform; an agenda pursued by upper-order feminists like Olympe de Gouges, who also believed that common prostitutes should be flushed from Parisian streets—not as a welfare consideration, but because the sight of them offended good taste. For her agitational efforts, and for framing the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* (1790), Gouges was cheered on her way to the guillotine by many working-class women who saw in her the personification of self-interested betrayal.

Beauvoir’s historical analysis of this situation, where class is suddenly elided into and subsumed by the categories of gender, thus shies away from a worrying self-mutilation which injured the early French women’s movement. Despite swipes at 'bourgeois values,' Beauvoir sees the blighted promises of 1789 principally as a result of the making of the revolution 'by men.' As Cliff claims later, critiquing another of Beauvoir's remarks ('a woman must not fall into the trap of...
children and marriage’); ‘Only a woman highly successful in the professions’ could say such a thing (267); a writer for whom the all-encompassing concept of gender is more readily at hand than the idea of class. In effect, Cliff suggests, Beauvoir’s view disregards the internecine class-clashes amongst women, to rally them instead behind the transcendent, unifying principle of gender.

This, of course, is an inadequate response to a complex and enduringly-important writer, whose work sits at a point where several discursive shappings converge. In Beauvoir’s case, they are more alphabetically multiple than most: anthropology, autobiography, biography, cultural history, ‘decadence,’ economy, existentialism, feminism... Moving to ‘M,’ one might even posit Marxism in this discursive chain—as some critics did, in the United States and Britain, when The Second Sex was published there, and more so after Beauvoir’s visit to Mao’s China. In France, where an explicit Marxist activism pertained in day-to-day political life, the reception of The Second Sex was less certain in regard to political content or affiliation: it ‘appears to have had more of a personal effect on individual readers than a more general intellectual or political impact’ (Fallaize 9).

And in Beauvoir’s remarks on the French Revolution, the lingering problematic of class and her political position comes to the fore. Her passage on the ‘man-made’ insurrection, cited above, continues thus:

It is important to emphasize the fact that throughout the Old Régime it was the women of the working classes who as a sex enjoyed most independence ... She shared in production as seamstress, laundress, burnisher, shopkeeper ... her material independence permitted her a great freedom of behaviour: a woman of the people could go out, frequent taverns, and dispose of her body as she saw fit almost like a man ... It was on the economic, not on the sexual plane that she suffered oppression. In the country the peasant woman ... was treated as a servant ... But as in ancient agricultural societies, being necessary to man she was respected by him; their goods, their interests, their cares were all in common ... These are the women who, out of the midst of their hard life, might have been able to assert themselves and demand their rights; but a tradition of timidity and submissiveness weighed on them (The Second Sex 139-40).

Subsequently, The Second Sex moves briskly on to the contrasting position of middle-class women at the time: women who were ‘too well integrated in the family to feel any definite solidarity as a sex’; who ‘did not constitute a separate caste’; who ‘economically ... led a parasitic existence’—and who, most revealingly, were nevertheless members of ‘the active class ... condemned to stand aside as being women’ (The Second Sex 141).
Among the many striking assertions of this passage, the counterpoise of loaded intangibles such as 'a tradition of timidity and submissiveness' among the working class and the idea of bourgeois women as a potentially dynamic, 'active' force is suggestive. What does it mean to say that a system of economic servility is transformed into a 'tradition' of emotional 'timidity'; or that the economic exploitativeness of middle-class women aside, they are still 'actively' in possession of a driving will which is stopped solely by the roadblock of gender inequity? For me, that 'tradition of timidity' does not quite articulate what it might: a hegemonic embedding, the reach of a value-system into the sphere of intimate psychology. It suggests, almost, a class pathology; a biological disposition to everyday passivity, the disruptive reverse side of which is the carnivalesque abandon of the tavern and the freely-disposed body.

This is history sliding into mythology: and most specifically, into the mythology of bohemia—that shady underground which had had an important overlap with French academic and literary circles since the 1830s. The bohemian brush with the outcast and oppressed has left an indelible mark on French letters, supplying a mental geography, a gallery of character-types, and a cultural mythos which hinges on the 'disposal' of the lumpen body and the Rabelaisian joy of intoxication. Bohemia exists below the horizon of bourgeois morality; a zone where an urban 'peasantry' (as Aragon called it) could play at its animal rituals—or, in Beauvoir's terms, where an 'ancient agricultural' society of women could serve as a model of sexual liberty, a fabulized projection of middle-class desires.

There are repeated observations—and vilifications—of the cramped, destructive character of middle-class mores and mind-sets in The Second Sex and in Beauvoir's novels. Her fictive, vivisectional thrusts expose this as a social world she knows minutely, and can carve-up as an insider. On the other hand, the portrait of the downtrodden female classes in The Second Sex often has the observational flavour of flânerie. In passages such as the one on working women under the Ancien Régime, there is a disquieting sense not so much of inaccurate historical reconstruction but of almost-unconscious absorption of a myth of promiscuous vitalism.

Bohemia features prominently in the after-imagery of the 'existentialist generation'; in snapshots of a life at full-tilt, where intellectual labour was transacted in the milieu of the boulevard and bar. In the 'delirious intensity' of postwar Paris, in the St Germain-des-Prés, writes Stephen Barber, the proliferating bars and nightspots signalled the reopening of a bohemia foreclosed by the Occupation: a hedonistic-academic convergence which functioned as much for the elaboration of a philosophically overhauled identity as for the delirium
of dance and adrenalin’ (28). This leaves compelling impressions, as Elizabeth Fallaize neatly summarizes: ‘It would be difficult ... not to be seduced by the subject position of an elegant Beauvoir, sitting in the Café de Flore in Montparnasse, with Sartre or Olga, a cocktail in one hand and a pen in the other’ (11). Or, it might be added, by the oppositional value-system this environment implies: stratagems of sexual intrigue and prowlings on the precipice of respectability, in a textual-sexual coalition. It is the sub-society which Jean Paul Sartre fondly recalled to Beauvoir in the conversations later published as Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre, so rife with the possibility of bringing together the co-related arts of drinking, thinking, doping, hoping and living into a constellated limit-experience.

In Adieux, Beauvoir quizzes Sartre about the postwar scene of parties, gatherings, drinking and amphetamine abuse, reminding him that he ‘used to say that there was a pleasure in alcohol because there was a kind of risk.’ Sartre responds: ‘I liked the destruction in itself. I liked having confused, vaguely questioning ideas that then fell apart.’ And, he confides, ‘I abused [amphetamines] massively for twenty years’—but always with the thought of some philosophical breakthrough in mind.’ To which Beauvoir adds, admiringly, ‘there [was] a kind of depraved pleasure’ in pushing to limits in this way. Sartre agrees that ‘the possibility of things turning lethal’ excited him. ‘Yes,’ says Beauvoir, ‘every minute had to be useful and ... your body should go to the limit of its strength, including that part of the body which is the brain’ (Adieux 318-9). The sensory riot of bohemia is, essentially, the bourgeois subject testing the borders of its identity.

This is a ‘classic’ bohemian credo, familiar to the middle-class students and artists who migrated to the slums after the ‘Battle of Hernani’ in 1830, laying the foundations of Parisian counter culture; or to the massive readership of Henri Murger’s best-selling Scènes de la Bohème (1851), which parcelled the underclasses in romantic tales which were soon adapted for the stage. As Joanna Richardson argues in her study The Bohemians, bohemia is a bourgeois invention; the creation of a living theatre in which the sexualized underclass female is a major actor. There are two faces of this symbolic low female Other in the mythology of bohemia, both of which condition Beauvoir’s comments on the working women of the Revolution. First, there is the vibrant, intoxicative sexuality; the tavern-crawling, the free disposal of the body. Second, she is forever separated from the middle-class bohemian, objectified by the flâneur’s optic régime, because she has the biologically intransigent backwardness of the peasant, who can only be rescued from the downward spiral of historical decline—Beauvoir’s ‘tradition of timidity’—in theory, as it were: by incorporating her in a poetics, as a symbol, whose anti-intellectual
eroticism inspires an investigation of the bohemian self. This is evident in Charles Baudelaire, whose nocturnal mappings of the streets and dives of the city famously epitomize, for Walter Benjamin, the contradictory attraction-repulsion the bourgeois aesthete feels for the underclass woman. Baudelaire's verse is the record of vicarious excursions into the underclass Other, whose sexual magnetism provokes a recognition—even celebration—of desire lost to bourgeois propriety, yet who is also traditionally tamed by the disinterested gaze of the bohemian streetwalker. In the repertoire of bohemian lore, underclass reality is hollowed-out as a sign; representing a particular limit to which the bourgeois subject can go in its historic, ideological mission—to renovate the being of the free individual.

In this context, Beauvoir's reconstructive view of the class-politics of the revolutionary period itself belongs to a 'tradition of submissiveness.' Its swift subsumption of the problem of class by the over-arch of gender submits to the same appropriations which haunt Baudelaire's verse, the Decadents, the Surrealists, and the axial Montmartre-Montparnasse modernist avant gardes. To all of these, it can be said with sweeping accuracy, bohemia's bricolage of human detritus has supplied important provocations and inspirations for the revolutionary drama of bourgeois subject-formation; a process which converts concrete misery into the mythos of 'liberty.'

Confronting the real underworld— in Nelson Algren's Chicago, in 1947—Beauvoir suffered the 'shocks' that Benjamin finds in Baudelaire. On a tour guided by Algren, Beauvoir saw the plight of the city's 'pimps, baggage thieves, whores and heroin addicts.' In Algren's judgement, 'Their drive was downward, always downward—as if they were fading out of history. His intention in walking Beauvoir on the wild side, Algren said, was political: 'I wanted to show her that the U. S. A. was not a nation of prosperous bourgeois' (Bair 335-6). Algren's affinities with the American left are well-known; but even so, his choice to inhabit the lower depths was as much an artistic expedient as it was a matter of political conscience. Consequently, Beauvoir could admire Algren's conversion of low-life into his fiction; the repackaging of underclass experience as an aesthetic spectacle. As I have argued, this particular form of interest in under- or working-class life owes less to Marxism than it does to the essentially appropriative ethos of bohemia; a discursive use of the low Other, entrenched in bohemianism's 'lore of limits.'

Beauvoir's portrait of women in the French Revolution is structured by a view of the lumpen body rescued from historical disappearance by the observational consciousness of the middle-class intellectual—an incorporation of underclass sexuality into the very
different project of investigating the boundary of bourgeois gender identity. One should not forget that during the writing of *The Second Sex*, the most important relationship in Beauvoir's life was with Algren, the novelist of underclasses. Nor should the cultural context of postwar Paris be ignored, where intellectual life 'took place on the [café] terraces adjacent to the open street [and] the detail and swarm of the metropolis' (Barber 28). The atmosphere and bohemian mythology of the street—the meadow of the urban peasant—pervades sections of *The Second Sex*; especially, I have suggested, in the raising of working-class women into a symbolic order, conceptually harnessing their sexuality for the liberation of the 'active class.' This, I think, challenges Toril Moi's conclusion that Beauvoir's 'utopia'—of which the French Revolution's aspirations is a major referent—is articulated in terms cognate to Marxism (Moi, 1994, 209).

In many ways, Beauvoir's reading of the French Revolution—as the stirrings of a utopianism strangled in infancy—is neither a bad nor a marginal point at which to re-engage with the strengths and problems in her oeuvre. As distinct from post-1968, or poststructuralist feminists—and as many critical readers of Beauvoir in the late 1990s observe—she at least regards class as an issue to be faced, and placed, within a grander pattern of idealisms. For me, the abiding value of *The Second Sex*—with all its awkward, orthodox appropriations of working-class experience—is its anxious dealing with class as one of the elements of an 'anthropology of oppression'; its attempt, however flawed, to keep class struggle in the frame of a panoramic yearning for liberation. And as Beauvoir recognized, 'When economic power falls into the hands of the workers, then it will become possible for the working-woman to win rights and privileges that the parasitic woman, noble or middle-class, has never obtained' (141). If this has the quality of fantasy, it also voices a quintessential generosity of spirit; lost today on many 'highly successful in the professions'—female and male—for whom the spectacle of underclasses contains no germ of revolutionary hope.

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