

# Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Privilege

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*How should socially privileged white feminists (and others) address their privilege? Often, individuals are urged to overcome their own personal racism through a politics of self-transformation. The paper argues that this strategy may be problematic, since it rests on an over-autonomous conception of the self. The paper turns to Simone de Beauvoir for an alternative account of the self, as "situated," and explores what this means for a politics of privilege.*

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In 1955, Simone de Beauvoir published a collection of essays entitled *Privilèges*. She wrote in the Preface that one question linked all her essays together: how may the privileged think about their situation? They cannot think about it honestly and without self-delusion, she says. For, "to justify the possession of particular advantages in the mode of the universal is not an easy undertaking," and it results in a mode of thought marked by the kinds of obfuscation and self-deception that Beauvoir (along with Jean-Paul Sartre) calls "bad faith" (1955, 7). Beauvoir's main concern in her book was with how ruling-class privilege is masked, or rationalized, in thought. However, her critique also resonates strongly with recent feminist critiques of the self-deceptions inherent in masculine, white-race, and other forms of privilege, as well as with the dilemmas of privileged would-be progressives<sup>1</sup> more generally.

In this paper I turn to Simone de Beauvoir to help think about 'privilege' as it is conceived in feminist theory and politics today, and particularly as it poses a predicament for those who enjoy significant social privilege while also being committed to fighting it. My concern is not with those who remain either unapologetic about, or else "culpably ignorant" of, their privilege (May 1992; Bartky 2002), but rather with the difficulties that their personal privilege

presents for those who actively seek to diminish injustice and oppression. For this latter group, privilege is a term of moral disapprobation, for it bestows unjustifiable benefits on certain groups (and consequently on their individual members) by virtue of the exclusion of others. Privilege, then, is *intrinsically* a scarce resource. For some to enjoy a privilege entails a structural relationship in which the benefits one group enjoys are denied to another. Moreover, as Beauvoir notes in her Preface, such benefits are often obtained through the systematic exploitation of one group by another.

Today, many feminists in the United States, particularly (though not exclusively) white feminists, are concerned about privilege less as a matter of what they themselves are denied as women than as a matter of what they unjustifiably enjoy. Typical are the remarks of the white, feminist legal scholar, Stephanie Wilderman: "The conflicts I have faced have not been about oppression or the privileges I do not have, being a woman in a male-oriented society. . . . Rather, the conflicts are about the privileges I do have, including class, race, and heterosexual privilege, and how to live my life of privilege consonant with my beliefs in equal opportunity and inclusive community" (Wilderman 1996, 2). It is in addressing the dilemmas that their whiteness, their heterosexuality, their class benefits, or (increasingly in a globalizing world) their first world nationality, pose that many feminists now discuss privilege, and they tend to identify themselves as oppressors, rather than acknowledging their multiple locations as both oppressors and oppressed.

The meaning of *privilege* has altered dramatically over time. I begin my paper with a brief overview of the origins of the term and of some of the shifts in referent it has undergone. Next, I examine the dilemmas that privilege presents for privilege-bearing progressives today, examining in particular the race privilege of white feminists (among whom I include myself). Although this privilege has certain *sui generis* qualities, I believe it also provides a lens through which to examine the problem of privilege more generally. I describe the ways in which white feminists in the United States most commonly address their race privilege, through what I describe as a politics of self-transformation, and I argue that although in some ways productive such a politics may also be problematic. To sketch out another political repertoire in which privileged progressives might also appropriately engage, one that instead acknowledges and consciously deploys privilege, I then go back in time to consider the ideas and actions of Simone de Beauvoir. Of course, in many ways Beauvoir's era is no longer ours, and her life was highly idiosyncratic. Yet, I argue, her insights about human action, privilege, and politics remain profoundly relevant today.

Historically, the term privilege was initially used to denote individual exemptions from the law. The term derives from the Latin words *privus* (private) and *legis* (laws). In Rome, a *privilegium* was a special ordinance referring to an individual, and often providing an exemption from the normal requirements of the law. Within medieval and premodern Europe, the term continued to have strong legal connotations. But insofar as entry to certain privileged groups (notably to the nobility and the upper echelons of the clergy, but also to guild-membership, or citizenship in a free city), came to be by birth, privilege came increasing also to denote an exclusive and advantageous *social* status, albeit one still primarily subtended by differences in legal status, or other formal means of distinction. Here, privilege began also to acquire the meaning of an *ascribed* social status, which it frequently connotes today. For one's entitlements (or the lack of them) usually depended on where, to whom, and with what set of apparent or attributed qualities, one was born.

It is only since the era of the "rights of man" and the advent of liberalism, with its claims about the universality of human rights and demands for equal treatment under the law for "all" (however narrowly that has been defined), that privilege by birth has come to be viewed as morally suspect in the West. However, one should note that the liberal tradition—the dominant political tradition in the West—has always maintained an acceptance of earned privilege. It has tended rather to label this as "just reward," or "just entitlement." Why may not property acquired, as John Locke put it, through "industriousness"—be it one's own, or that of one's forebears<sup>2</sup>—entitle one to enjoy the kinds of differential treatment that money can buy? (Locke 1690/1988, esp. paragraphs 34, 72). Or why, today, may not the efforts one puts into becoming highly educated entitle one to the economic rewards and social privileges still conferred by formal professional status?<sup>3</sup>

However, among progressives, including most feminists, the term privilege is used to describe structural differentiations that variously affect the life chances and well being of large groups, and that do so in ways that produce morally *unacceptable* differences in their levels of well being. As I've already observed, the term is also now used with a wider range of referents than those of class and occupational status, with which Beauvoir was primarily concerned in 1955. We talk of the privileges of masculinity, of whiteness, of heterosexuality, of nationality, of the able-bodied. It should be noted that in some of these usages, privilege is now said to accrue to very wide sections, or even to the majority, of the population (as in the notion of 'white privilege' in the United States; or in references to the privileges of the able-bodied by the disability movement). Thus the term no longer retains its traditional connotations of narrow exclusivity, even though it still implies exclusion.

Moreover, privilege is not conceived only as a source of wealth or material advantages for its beneficiaries. Many note that it may also confer on the select high social status and what today is often called recognition, at the cost of those

whose identities are despised (Taylor 1991; Fraser 1995). Privilege is also seen as conferring on specific groups or individuals, and to the harmful exclusion of others, the power exclusively to define knowledge and truth. What is now often called epistemic privilege has become of considerable concern. Theorists now ask: "Who speaks?" "Who is silenced?" And so also: "Who is objectified?" "Whose experience is appropriated by whom?"<sup>4</sup>

However, a peculiar contradiction pervades many of the recent feminist analyses of privilege and tends to reinscribe forms of individualism of which feminist theory has long been critical. It is generally accepted that privilege of all kinds is systemic or structural. Indeed, there are numerous and highly sophisticated feminist analyses of the institutions, practices, discourses, representations, and performances that position selves differently within society. Many feminist scholars insightfully demonstrate the multiple and sometimes dissonant ways that power distributes material resources, respect, and knowledge along axes that may include gender, sexuality, race, and class. Concomitantly, most also argue that selves are to a significant degree constructed, whether the dynamics of construction come to be theorized as social, cultural, discursive, or performative. However, what is striking is that when feminists, notably white feminists, come to reflect on their own privilege a peculiar analytical shift usually takes place. Privilege generally ceases to be thought about as structural. Instead privilege is presumed to be the personal possession of an autonomous self, a self that is also assumed to be the bearer of strongly neo-Kantian qualities of reason and will.

This self is also then conceived as one that should be held individually accountable for what it does with its privilege. The analysis of privilege tends to become not only intensely individualistic but also frequently moralistic. Where feminists' own privilege is the issue, the discourse on privilege generally shifts away from structural (and poststructural) analysis, "inward" toward a discourse of personal self-discovery, confession, and guilt, and thence to the moral imperative to engage in a project of self-transformation through, as is often said, "working on oneself" (Frye 1992; McIntosh 1988/2001).<sup>5</sup>

Most frequently, so these narratives go, the white (or wealthy, or well-educated, or heterosexual) woman who is in possession of privilege is ignorant of the fact, and so simply takes for granted the benefits she enjoys. In so doing she is also oblivious to the ways in which she reproduces racist (or other) stereotypes and so in culpable ignorance, if not worse, she objectifies women who are different from herself. Because privilege is generally invisible to the privileged, the struggle against it becomes cast as, in the first instance, an epistemological project. The necessary, if not sufficient, condition, for overcoming privilege must be to disclose the truth about it.

Many contemporary writers offer echoes of Beauvoir's remarks about the self-deception and bad faith through which the privileged obscure the source of their benefits. Thus, in *Invisible Privilege: A Memoir About Race, Class and*

*Gender*, Paula Rothenberg moves back and forth in time, between her youthful, ignorant self and her now-mature and more insightful one,

sometimes using the voice of one who fails to understand that the world she takes for granted is riddled with “privilege,” and sometimes using the voice of the narrator years later, when she is capable of making this distinction and commenting on it. At times the early voice may sound prideful, insensitive, cruel—even racist to some people. (Rothenberg 2000, 5)

The memoir tells of Rothenberg’s personal struggles to achieve what she believes is an adequate critical consciousness of her own privileges. Through her own story she wants also to explain the obliviousness to privilege of others, notably white liberals. She especially wants to show how privilege continues to remain invisible to what she calls “basically decent people who should know better” (8). Within this telling, and many similar ones, privilege comes to be addressed primarily as a problem of individual false (or at best “spontaneous”) consciousness (Harding 1991, 295), and so the struggle against privilege becomes cast as a politics of disclosure, as the struggle to reveal a truth that may help to set us free.<sup>6</sup>

Several strategies are suggested for disclosing the truth of one’s privilege. But although they include learning from others, the main emphasis remains on shifting the standpoint of the individual self. These strategies are thus variants of what I shall call a politics of self-transformation, in which awareness is primarily to be attained through one’s own individual endeavors: through actively addressing one’s own ignorance, through trying to be more sensitive, through using one’s imagination to grasp the reality of others. In one of the stronger versions of this politics, María Lugones argues that by renouncing “arrogance” and instead engaging in “loving playfulness,” it is possible to make the experiential shift that she calls “world-travelling.” We may, with effort, suspend our taken-for-granted world and cease to objectify others. “Travelling to someone’s ‘world’ is a way of identifying with them . . . because by travelling to their ‘world’ we can understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes. Only when we have traveled to each other’s ‘worlds’ are we fully subjects to each other” (Lugones 1990, 401).

But addressing our privilege is also more than an epistemological project from such a perspective. For as it is disclosed, one’s privilege is presumed also to become subject to one’s own personal volition. The claim is not that privilege can be shed or renounced completely, but rather that we are free radically to reform ourselves and that, as we do so, we will come to act in ways that are significantly resistant to it. Thus, for example, Marilyn Frye suggests that, even though we cannot fully separate ourselves from the “white club,” since “membership in it is in a way, or to a degree, compulsory” (1992, 150), still we can

through our own efforts unlearn many of the tacit assumptions and behaviors, the “ways of being,” that she calls “whiteness.” Similarly Sandra Harding has argued that it is possible for whites, like men or heterosexuals, to effect a shift in standpoint that undermines their privileged location, and that will enable them to take up what she calls “traitorous social locations” (Harding 1991, 288–95). Such locations do not involve literally shedding whiteness (or masculinity, or heterosexuality), but rather seeing the world from the perspective of the less privileged and developing a political practice from the perspective of the marginalized. It is a matter of free choice. We can “choose to become ‘marginalized,’” Harding says, not in the sense of actually leading marginal lives “in the ways that women and people of Third World descent are forced to do,” but rather by learning “to think and act *not* out of the ‘spontaneous consciousness’ of the social locations that history has bestowed on us but out of the traitorous ones we choose with the assistance of critical social theories generated by emancipatory social movements” (295).

Projects for developing self-awareness and overcoming one’s race (or other) privilege through self-transformative projects, by “working on oneself,” are important. They have had a significant impact in gradually producing a more widespread awareness among progressives of the erstwhile tacit functioning of their still-pervasive forms of privilege and oppression. Moreover, taken collectively, such individual efforts do, I believe, add up to an important contestation of privilege, and they help to shift (though probably not to eradicate) the broader social norms that legitimize racism and race privilege. However, I want to suggest that this is not the only valid form of political intervention and at times it will be preferable to displace it, since it may be beset with both practical and theoretical difficulties.

One problem of a politics of self-transformation is that it may easily collapse into a long-drawn-out, rather self-referential, even self-indulgent, concern with one’s own feelings, attitudes, and actions, a kind of “care of the self,” or a personal therapeutic. Indeed, as Frye herself has noted, “projects of consciousness-raising and self-analysis are very susceptible to the slide from ‘working on yourself’ to ‘playing with yourself’” (Frye 1992, 148). More often, however, working on oneself, “unpacking one’s invisible knapsack” stuffed with the subtle benefits of privilege, leads to a guilt-ridden focus on the self. But this too may be unproductive. Thus Frye also talks of experiencing all her thoughts and actions as being poisoned with privilege (147), and in *Invisible Privilege*, Stephanie Wilderman writes that, however hard she struggles against it, “I fear that my own racism will make things worse, causing me to do more harm than good” (Wilderman 1996, 20). Since the attempt to expunge one’s own last vestiges of obliviousness to race, or insensitivity, can never be brought to an adequate closure, “working on oneself” may heighten one’s feelings of guilt in ways that only lead toward despair, self-hatred, and demobilization.<sup>7</sup>

Sandra Bartky helpfully has argued that we should distinguish between guilt as an emotion and guilt as “an existential-moral condition.” The latter arises simply by virtue of who we are (white, middle class, heterosexual, and so on). She points out that we may be guilty in this existential-moral sense, implicated in a system of privilege and exclusion, irrespective of whether we feel guilt as an emotion (Bartky 2002, 142). But, conversely, I want to suggest, those practices that heighten emotions of guilt may not always be the best way to go about addressing the “existential-moral” condition of guilt in which we find ourselves. Guilt as an emotion may well be an important moment of an initial “conversion” process, in which we become aware of our privilege, but it may become quite crippling as a basis for effective long-term political action.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, a politics of self-transformation runs up against the limits that pertain to any politics primarily focused on individual consciousness and conscientization. In a world whose circumstances are often beyond our own making, we find ourselves always-already the possessors of social attributes that we did not choose, and yet that may be profoundly integral to who we are. This is not to say that we lack all possibilities of choice or volition, but that we will discover them to be severely constrained. In some areas, including race, our privilege will not cease to exist however much we may become aware of and try to abandon our previous styles of personal behavior. The process of “internal” self-transformation is one that could never attain completion, and furthermore, the world will continue actively to reinscribe our privileged status upon us. Even if we behave as “traitorous” whites, we will still be seen and treated as whites, even if deviant ones. The structural asymmetries of privilege, and so also our degrees of implication in it, may sometimes be mitigated but cannot be expunged through our own individual volition.<sup>9</sup>

The project of overcoming one’s privilege through a politics of self-transformation presupposes, in short, a conception of the self as more autonomous than is plausible. Moreover, such a conception is usually accompanied by a tacit, neo-Kantian ethics, in which it is deemed not only desirable but also possible that we treat all others as ends in themselves: we are always to respect the dignity of each person as the bearer of freedom, to recognize each as an autonomous rational will. Thus, we are judged to be morally at fault if the effect of our attitudes or actions is to objectify others. For, it is assumed, if we would only purge ourselves of our privileged attitudes we would all be able to treat each other as ends; we would all come to be (as Lugones puts it) “fully subjects to each other.”

Such conceptions of the self and of self-other relations are problematic. Indeed, they fly in the face of a now voluminous and persuasive feminist literature that effectively criticizes the masculinism—and hence the privilege—implicit in notions of the self as a bounded, rational, freely willing, entity. But in the works I have been discussing, the self is yet again presumed to be such an

autonomous agent. For even though it is initially influenced by its circumstances (from whence it derives its original, “spontaneous,” or unreflective stance on its own privilege) *once* it becomes aware of them, *once* it attains consciousness, then this self becomes free: it is able to transcend its circumstances and radically to remake itself through its own individual will.<sup>10</sup>

But if some thinkers are overly sanguine about our individual ability to renounce privilege, others, adducing the ubiquity of self-interest and moral failure, are less optimistic. For example, Elizabeth Spelman has argued that, in the United States, white women’s attention to the suffering of black women has always had an appropriating and self-serving strain. She warns that compassion for those at whose expense their privilege has come threatens only further to reproduce the existing dynamics: “people enjoying being in the saddle of compassion may have disincentives to cancel the suffering that provides the ride . . . the means by which attention is brought to suffering may prolong or deepen it rather than alleviate it” (Spelman 1997, 158–59).

Spelman rightly cautions us that given unequal relations, such as those between middle-class white women and enslaved, or (nowadays) poor, black women, there are real dangers of self-interested *appropriation* of those we set out to support. That is, there are risks that we will use them for our own ends, not theirs, and so reduce them to objects of our own knowledge and practice. But what conclusions should follow from this warning? Should white women (or members of other privileged groups) simply refrain from acting on behalf of others lest they become guilty of reaffirming their own privilege? In some instances, I do think silence and inactivity may well be the best course for the privileged to follow. This is especially so for the epistemically privileged when an underprivileged group (or individual) has become capable of articulating its own demands. But in other instances, where the subaltern cannot speak, or cannot speak as effectively, or where one is asked to be an ally, the better use of our privilege may well be to use the advantages we have in order to speak and act for others.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, this may still be the case even when one also objectifies, or appropriates, those on whose behalf one acts. Spelman is probably correct in arguing that nineteenth-century white feminists did self-interestedly appropriate those slave women on whose behalf they claimed to act. But that was not all they did, and their actions still may have been greatly preferable to inaction. We often act from multiple motives, and our actions will have manifold outcomes and carry multivocal significations. Our field of political action is often too untidy, to imperfect, for us to be able to meet the Kantian imperative always to treat others as ends. Thus there is, I believe, a dangerous *purism* implicit in Spelman’s critique, as well as in the exhortations of many other white feminists that we “work on” our privilege. This purism is presaged on views of agency, guilt, and responsibility that are too all-or-nothing; and these in turn are grounded in overstrong assumptions about the autonomy of the self.



Thus, in what follows, I propose to shift the ground. Of course, privileged progressives are often motivated by a dismayed realization of their personal privilege. But emotions of guilt and engagement in a politics of self-transformation may not always be the most appropriate response to this realization. In some instances it will be preferable to switch to another repertoire. Rather than investing oneself in the more self-referential task of disclosing the subtle benefits that accrue from one's personal privilege and struggling to renounce them, it may be preferable to acknowledge them but then to act *from* one's privileged location, to deploy one's privilege as effectively as possible, to endeavor to use it well.

It is here that I turn to Simone de Beauvoir. Two key postulates frame Beauvoir's approach to privilege: first, she argues that because human beings are always selves "in situation" our actions are once constrained *and* free; second, she insists that situated human action is always *ambiguous* in its practical and moral import. What we do has always multiple meanings and consequences, and so we must realize that our best intentions may not lead to the best outcomes.<sup>12</sup> Beauvoir does not directly address the question of white women's privilege in her writings. But in her numerous reflections on privilege—on privileges of class, of sex, of nationality, of education—her analyses of situated selves insightfully navigate between strong notions of the autonomous self (such as subtend a politics of self-transformation) and strong forms of social constructionism, which tend to deny any us significant degree of individual agency, casting us as mere victims of our circumstances.

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To begin my discussion of Beauvoir I shall briefly move back in time from 1955 (when Beauvoir published *Privilèges*) to 1949, when she published *The Second Sex*. For in *The Second Sex*,<sup>13</sup> she began explicitly to formulate her ideas about privilege: as something unchosen, as social ascription, as a form of caste. Today, class position is not necessarily acquired at birth. But in *The Second Sex* Beauvoir argues that, like other caste designations, gender privilege and subordination are given at birth.<sup>14</sup> Of course, anatomy in itself confers no privilege; rather, privilege "by birth" refers to the *situation* into which one is born and raised. For famously "one is not born a woman"—or a man—but "becomes one." Thus, "Woman is not defined by her hormones or by mysterious instincts, but by the manner in which, through outside [that is, masculine] consciousness, she grasps her body and her relation to the world" (1989, 725 TA).

But ascription of anatomical sex to an individual at birth, like ascription of noble or servile "blood" at birth, instantly confers a situation of privilege on some and of concomitant exclusion or subordination on others. Beauvoir thus describes the young girl who discovers in her femininity a ready-made destiny

as a person who necessarily lives an ascribed status (1989, 297). That is, she finds her lot in life preconstituted for her in much the same way as it was for a medieval vassal.

There are, of course, different ways of taking up one's preexisting status. To "become" a woman, or to "assume"<sup>15</sup> one's femininity is, as Beauvoir sets out to show in *The Second Sex*, at once a process in which the self is shaped by social practices, institutions, and discourses beyond its control, and an active process of self-formation within these constraints. For the self is not a pure, disembodied consciousness, but is rather a "body-subject"—and a woman's body is gendered.<sup>16</sup> The goal of overcoming one's subordinate gender status can never fully be attained through one's own individual efforts, since it is socially ascribed and not wholly of one's own making.<sup>17</sup>

But if women's inferior status is socially ascribed, so also is the privileged status of men: "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute" (1989, xxii). Thus, even should they wish to do so, men, the members of the "first" sex, find that they are unable fully to shed the privileges of masculinity. Beauvoir writes: "A colonial administrator has no possibility of acting rightly towards the natives, nor a general toward his soldiers; the only solution is to be neither colonialist nor military chief; but a man could not prevent himself from being a man. So there he is, guilty in spite of himself and oppressed by this fault he did not himself commit" (1989, 723 TA). This passage raises a complex set of questions about what degrees of freedom, complicity, and responsibility exist when individuals benefit from unchosen privileges.

Where a clear choice of entry to and exit from a situation of privilege exists—nobody has to become a colonial administrator, just as nobody has to become a corporate executive—a clear-cut moral judgment is possible about a person's actions. But more often—not only when privileges inhere in gender differences, but also when they arise from distinctions such as race and nationality, or from the advantaged location in the global economy of even most "working class" individuals in Western societies today—matters are far more ambiguous. For just as one "becomes" one's gender, so one also "becomes," for example, white, French, or American, in ways that are both inescapably given to one and yet also self-produced. Just as Beauvoir will say "I am my [gendered] body," so one may also say: I am my race, my ethnicity, my nationality, even perhaps "I am my class."<sup>18</sup> For these social ascriptions, usually acquired at birth itself, are instantiated over the course of a life history, and they become integral to one's way of being in the world. They become elements of a lived experience that is deeply embedded in one's selfhood.<sup>19</sup> Although Beauvoir continues to insist that we have responsibility for our own actions, still this responsibility may be significantly qualified by our situation: we cannot fully jump out of our skins; nor can we fully shed our personal histories, for they are never purely our own.

Thus, it is important to recognize that the *degree* of responsibility we have for forms of injustice and oppression in which we are implicated may vary significantly. As Larry May has argued, responsibility is a “scalar” concept, and how far we are responsible will depend on to what extent we are autonomous agents in any given case (May 1992, 120). In many instances (including benefiting from white-race or some other forms of privilege) we may be implicated in, or complicit with, injustice but in a less than voluntary manner. What is at issue is not individual culpable actions (or failures to act) so much as what follows from our group, or even national, identities. May suggests that in these instances, where we have not committed an identifiable wrong, rather than talking of actual “moral guilt,” we should talk of “shame,” of “moral taint,” or of “metaphysical guilt.”<sup>20</sup>

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In 1955, in *Privilèges*, Beauvoir did not include herself among the ranks of the privileged. Rather, “they,” those obfuscators who mask class privilege in the language of the universal, were at fault—not she. But, as she was shortly to learn, she enjoyed many privileges of which she still remained perhaps surprisingly unaware, and not only those of class. For in 1955 a violent war had already begun in Algeria, between a movement for national independence (the Front de Libération Nationale, known as the FLN) and the French colonial regime. This war was soon to precipitate in Beauvoir profound emotions of guilt, overwhelming feelings of shame and moral taint. It was to shatter her world. Over time, caused Beauvoir to reflect profoundly upon her privileges as French and as a prominent member of the French intelligentsia.

Beauvoir, along with Sartre, had long held a principled objection to colonialism and had earlier been critical of French policy in Indo-China.<sup>21</sup> But, even so, it was only in 1957 that the war in Algeria truly burst in upon her life. French atrocities and the widespread, systematic use of torture against Algerians, militants, and civilians alike, became increasingly well documented. *Les temps modernes*, the monthly journal of politics and thought with which Beauvoir was deeply involved from 1945, was one of the places that published this documentation. In her autobiography, Beauvoir later described the war as invading “my thoughts, my sleep, my every mood” (1992, 87). Surely without exaggeration, she added, “my own situation with regard to my country, to the world, to myself, was shattered by it all” (1992, 87 TA). The second volume of *Force of Circumstance*, published in 1963, covers Beauvoir’s autobiography from 1952–1962. She began to write it in 1960, while the war was still going on; and Algerian independence was declared in July 1962, only eight months before she completed her narrative. Her account of her life, from 1957 onward, dwells almost continually on the war and its ramifications, both personal and political. Beauvoir was haunted

by the ungraspable brutality of what was going on in Algeria, by the systematic use of torture as a tactic against a whole people—and above all by her own complicity in it as French. She began to see herself through the eyes of others, as one of the oppressors, and to realize that, in spite of herself, she really was. Experiencing the radical decentering of self and shift to the perspective of the other that Harding, Lugones, and others urge, along with the strong emotions of guilt that so often initially accompany it, Beauvoir writes:

In 1957, the broken bones, the burns on the faces, on the genitals, the torn-out nails, the impalements, the cries of pain, the convulsions, they reached me, all right. . . . I could no longer bear my fellow citizens. . . . whether I wanted to be or not, I was an accomplice of these people I couldn't bear to be in the same street with. . . . I needed my self-esteem [mon estime] to go on living, and yet 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. . . . I wanted to stop being an accomplice in this war, but how? (1992, 89–91)

How indeed? Clearly, as well as feeling guilty and being morally outraged, Beauvoir was immediately empathetic to the physical suffering inflicted on others in the name of France. But these emotions of guilt, and her initial gut recognition of her complicity, were at first thoroughly unproductive. Until 1960 she found herself depressed and demobilized, and she felt she could not do much about the war. Later, she criticized herself for her inactivity, commenting in 1961 that “today, however little it might affect the outcome, I could only throw all my weight into the struggle” (1992, 91–92). She also later criticized, as an “absurd maneuver,” her initial dismissal of the clandestine support work that she knew Francis Jeanson, a former colleague at *Les Temps Modernes*, was organizing. She told herself that people were only engaging in underground activities for dubious motives, such as a self-indulgent desire to assuage their own guilt (1992, 92). She also says that she was not yet ready to appear a “traitor” in the eyes of her compatriots: “Something inside me—timidity, vestiges of mistaken beliefs—still prevented me from contemplating such a thing” (1992, 93).<sup>22</sup>

One might reasonably suggest that Beauvoir was guilty of classic bad faith in the late 1950s: of the evasion of responsibility and the flight from freedom that she, as well as Sartre, had criticized in others. By claiming that no appropriate action was open to her, she was deliberately veiling from herself her own refusal to act. And yet, I suggest, it is not that simple. For her case also bears out her own insistence that we must pay attention to the ways in which our situation, which is not wholly of our own making or choosing, may permeate our subjectivity. It may shape the self so very profoundly that action that destroys it may also become dangerously destructive of the self. For if, as Beauvoir had

argued, our freedom is not absolute, it follows also that bad faith is a matter of degree. "I needed my self-esteem to go on living," she had written; and she was surely right.

Without embracing a crude chauvinism, Beauvoir was profoundly and consciously French.<sup>23</sup> Born and raised in Paris, she had lived there all her life; the city, as built, social, and cultural space, was woven tightly into her existence. For Beauvoir's generation, the German Occupation during World War II had also heightened a positive sense of Frenchness. Under the eyes of the Germans, to be French was to have a despised identity that one needed proudly to affirm. Moreover, "France" stood in this context (its own warts now paling to insignificance) for freedom and civilization, as the antithesis to Nazi brutality. Beauvoir's world was saturated with French culture, philosophy, history, politics. After 1945, it revolved largely around *Les temps modernes* and the people associated with the journal. Although the sweep of *Les temps modernes'* concerns and coverage was truly international, it saw its task primarily as engaging a French public, and intervening in French public discourse. Thus, the degree of alienation Beauvoir felt from her compatriots over Algeria, and her simultaneous reluctance to be cast out as a traitor should not be dismissed as simply bad faith, or as neurosis.<sup>24</sup> She was in the process of making the startling discovery that she was complicit, and it was initially overwhelming.

For now, being French meant she was part of the oppressor nation.<sup>25</sup> It also meant that she was protected by privilege of birth from the risks of torture and death to which every Algerian woman, man, and child was now subjected. Like her compatriots, she also had the freedom to ignore what was being done and to distance herself from the suffering of others inflicted in her name. "I deserved their [Algerians'] hatred," she writes, "because I could still sleep, write, enjoy a walk or a book" (1992, 106). In *Force of Circumstance*, Beauvoir repeatedly made comparisons to the experience of the German Occupation. "I could feel the familiar lump forming in my throat, the old impotent, raging disgust: exactly the same symptoms the sight of a SS man had always produced. French uniforms were having the same effect on me that swastikas once did. . . . Yes, I was living in an occupied city, and I loathed the occupiers even more fiercely than I had those others in the forties, *because of all the ties that bound me to them* (1992, 106–107; emphasis added).<sup>26</sup>

These ties were real. By this time Beauvoir could no more say "I am not French" than she could say "I am not a woman." But Beauvoir was not any or every French woman: she was a highly visible French intellectual woman and writer. In the opening pages of *The Second Sex* she had declared "I am a woman." Now, in the Epilogue to *Force of Circumstance*, she writes, "I am a writer—a woman writer," that is, "somebody whose existence is commanded by her writing" (1992, 370 TA). The privileges of Beauvoir's status were considerable. They included not only material benefits but also the recognition and respect accorded

to prominent French intellectuals, and the epistemic privilege that adhered to this status.<sup>27</sup> As she became increasingly clear about her social identity, she did not try to renounce these privileges. In spite of her ambivalence, did she not “work on herself” in an effort to become less French, to reject her own privileged culture. Nor (as far as I know) was she concerned to “world-travel,” or to attempt to take on elements of Algerian identity. Her strategy was very different. Becoming increasingly aware of her privileged status, she learned to deploy it as a basis for effective political intervention.

By 1958 Beauvoir had overcome her earlier doubts about clandestine work, but she remained clear that she could not herself participate in it.<sup>28</sup> With considerable candidness she observed:

If one wanted to remain faithful to one's anticolonialist convictions and free oneself of all complicity with this war, then underground action remained the only possible course. I admired those who took part in such action. But to do so demanded total commitment, and it would have been cheating to pretend that I was capable of such a thing. I am not a woman of action; my reason for living is writing; to sacrifice that I would have had to believe myself indispensable in some other field. Such was not by any means the case. (1992, 182–83)<sup>29</sup>

Now, however, one may not accuse Beauvoir of bad faith. For she is very conscious about who she is and what she values. But she is also clear that in making our decisions we will do so as who we have become: that is, we will do so as what we have been made, as well as what we have made of ourselves in the course of our lives. In her later autobiographical volume, *All Said and Done*, Beauvoir emphasizes the continuity of her life: she has lived for most of it, she says, “on rails” (1993, 12), for what she has already done always seems to propose her future actions to her. She writes: “I have never had to *ponder* over important things. My life has been the fulfillment of a primary design; and at the same time it has been the product and expression of the world in which it has been developed. . . . The past dwells in me and hems me about” (1993, 30 and 31).<sup>30</sup> How then, at fifty years of age, could she not have chosen herself as she now was, as a writer and public intellectual, and not a clandestine activist? Nothing had prepared her for the latter role. But it was as a writer, with all the privileges of public recognition and voice that it brought, that she began to develop effective forms of political intervention.

\* \* \*

A call from Gisèle Halimi, anticolonialist, feminist, and attorney, opened a path. Halimi was of Jewish Tunisian birth, but a French national. She had already

been involved in the defense of several Algerian torture victims. In May 1960 she contacted Beauvoir about a young woman FLN member called Djamila Boupacha. After her arrest on charges of planting a bomb in café in Algiers, Djamila Boupacha had been repeatedly tortured over several weeks and raped with a bottle, before confessing to a crime she afterward said she did not commit. Halimi's main goals were to have Boupacha's case deferred and moved to France, where it might be heard more fairly than in Algeria, and to get her acquitted on the basis that there was no evidence against her other than her own extorted confession. At Halimi's instigation, Boupacha also filed countercharges against her (unknown) captors, for illegal confinement and "corporal torture."

In order to pressure the French government, Halimi wanted to mount a highly public campaign. It was here that Beauvoir came in: here was how she could use her privilege as a source of resistance. When Halimi contacted her and asked her to write about the case, Beauvoir immediately agreed. She simply tells us in *Force of Circumstance* that "I limited myself, more or less, to transcribing Djamila's own account of the affair and sent the article to *Le Monde*" (1992, 222). She describes receiving a reproachful phone call from the paper: Boupacha looked a pretty suspicious character, and would Beauvoir mind not using the word *vagina* when talking about the rape, "in case adolescents read the article." But Beauvoir does not appear to have been concerned that *Le Monde* might actually refuse to publish her article, and perhaps the thought did not even cross her mind. For access to this major national forum was self-evidently part of her privilege: who would refuse to publish Beauvoir, and run the risk of the uproar that would ensue? In the event, the June 3, 1960, issue of *Le monde*, carrying her article, was seized and confiscated by the government in Algiers. The ensuing controversy and international outcry gave yet more publicity to the case.

Beauvoir's article was, as she noted, primarily a summary of Djamila Boupacha's own legal deposition. But Beauvoir's privileged position meant that her retelling of the tale functioned as a significant intervention in the formation of French political discourse. She reframed what many saw as an uncomfortable but peripheral fact of the Algerian war, the regrettable but perhaps necessary use of torture, as an issue that members of the reading French public had personally to confront.<sup>31</sup> In the final paragraphs Beauvoir bluntly asserted the responsibility of her readers to pressure their government. With an ironic inversion of the colonial trope, she insisted that it was inexcusable that Algeria be abandoned to the "savage caprices" of enraged settlers. If the law of France continued to be defied with impunity, she wrote, "it is France as a whole that would be betrayed; it is each one of us, it's me, it's you. For whether we have chosen those who rule us willingly, or submit to them grudgingly, willy-nilly we find we are their accomplices" (1962, 223). By affirming her own complicity along with theirs, Beauvoir was better able to appeal to her readers to join with her in collective resistance.

Beauvoir energetically threw herself into political activity. She was the moving force in immediately forming the Committee for Djamila Boupacha.<sup>32</sup> She chaired its meetings, spoke in public. She was a member of the delegation that went to talk with the Minister of Justice, who alone had the power to move Boupacha's case from Algeria to France (which was later done). As in the instance of the *Le monde* article, Beauvoir could use her privilege to help open doors. But her goal was not only to obtain the release of this one young woman, or simply to end the use of torture. She also wanted to help shift opinion in France against the war in Algeria and in favor of full independence. By 1962, Boupacha had been moved to France but was still in prison awaiting trial. Halimi decided to write a book about the case, and Beauvoir agreed to serve as its coauthor. The book, in French simply entitled *Djamila Boupacha* (1962), provided a damning exposé of the failures of the French legal system, as well as of the physical abuse to which Boupacha had been subjected. Although she had written only the preface, Beauvoir agreed to assume full coauthorship with Halimi, "in order to share the responsibility" (1992, 336). Yet again she would use her privilege, here both to protect Halimi from prosecution and to ensure a wider audience for the book.<sup>33</sup>

But if Beauvoir felt entitled to use her privilege to intervene in French politics, she did not think she was justified in intervening in those of the FLN. After Boupacha was finally released from prison in 1962, FLN militants in France ordered her to go back to Algeria. Boupacha was reluctant, wanting instead to stay in France and obtain further education. According to Halimi (who later wrote of these events in her own autobiography), Boupacha was entrapped into a meeting with FLN members and was forcibly returned by them to Algeria (1988, 319–22). Horrified, Halimi phoned Beauvoir and asked her to intervene. But Beauvoir refused. The FLN had the right to tell its militants what to do, she said. It was not up to her and Halimi, as French women, to intervene (321). Halimi was upset by Beauvoir's apparent indifference to Boupacha's plight, but Beauvoir was clear that Halimi's personal concern and compassion did not justify overriding the boundaries of their appropriate sphere of action. Beauvoir would not speak out for Boupacha against the FLN. She would speak out for another against her own government, but not against a Third World independence movement that she supported.

I argued earlier that it is not always possible to treat others as ends in themselves and that, in the imperfect world of politics, objectifying others is sometimes unavoidable. Clearly Boupacha was objectified by Beauvoir and Halimi throughout the campaign. Although Halimi consulted with Boupacha, she and Beauvoir were the ones who made the final decisions about how Boupacha would be represented to the French public. They carefully chose the tropes that would most arouse public empathy and concern. In the book they present her as violated young virgin; a loving member of a loving family; a modern young



Algerian woman. She is photographed in her nurse's uniform, and a sketch by Picasso (the frontispiece of the book) presents her looking directly at the viewer: she is no veiled "oriental" woman but rather, it is implied, could be the French reader's own daughter. In addition, Boupacha's plight was publicized not only to secure her release. Beauvoir's greater concern was to bring attention to the issue of torture in Algeria and to rouse the French public from its indifference. Indeed, Halimi later complained that Boupacha was used by Beauvoir as a case to further a wider political agenda (1988, 317). Clearly then we are dealing with modes of objectification, and even of appropriation. But are they of the self-serving variety against which, for example, Spelman, warns us?

The FLN had made it clear that it needed and welcomed the support of French allies who would speak to the French public on its behalf. Moreover, locked in jail, Boupacha could not speak and be heard except through the representations of others. Thus these were forms of objectification and appropriation that were justified.<sup>34</sup> But Beauvoir also engaged in forms of appropriation that may have been more problematic. Some years earlier Frantz Fanon had bitterly complained about French intellectuals who protested about atrocities in Algeria only because of the corrupting effect they were having on the *French*: "The gravity of the tortures, the horrors of the rape of little Algerian girls, are perceived because their existence threatens a certain idea of French honor." In the process, he said, the Algerian victims were shut out of consideration in "that form of egocentric, sociocentric thinking which has become a characteristic of the French" (1988, 71). Although these accusations were not aimed at Beauvoir's role in the Boupacha affair, and would have been profoundly wide of the mark if they had been, still a certain appeal to restoring French moral worth was also part of Beauvoir's strategy. Thus, as we saw, at the end of her article in *Le Monde*, Beauvoir's appeal for action was also cast as an appeal to rescue France. The government must not be allowed to "betray" France—that is, to betray all the good that *France* signifies—by its failure to curb the atrocities. Beauvoir's use of such patriotic emotions to rouse the readers of her article may have been a deliberate rhetorical strategy on her part; or it may have been simply an expression of her own feelings—or both. Irrespective of her motives, it was a highly effective means to rouse public opinion. Yet it did also function in the self-referential way that Fanon had described. It appropriated the people of Algeria insofar as it deflected attention away from them and back to the needs of France.

Should Beauvoir have used such a strategy? In an ideal world, surely not. But in the specific context of the Algerian War the strategy was probably justifiable because it was an effective means toward valid goals. I am not arguing that an end justifies any means or that, when they conflict, the needs of an individual should always be sacrificed to the needs of a wider movement. But I am saying that that an insistence on the purity of means at all costs may be self-defeating.

As Beauvoir had argued earlier, in the *Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), political efficacy and a neo-Kantian ethics that asserts as its overriding good the treatment of others as ends in themselves may often be incompatible; and it is not a foregone conclusion that when they conflict we should always try to choose the Kantian course.<sup>35</sup>

This incompatibility is also evident in the conflict between Beauvoir and Halimi over whether or not to speak out against the FLN's forcible return of Boupacha to Algeria. Halimi later accused Beauvoir of objectifying Boupacha, of caring more about the cause than the individual. Her diagnosis of Beauvoir's priorities was probably correct, but it is not evident that these priorities were wrong. To create a public outcry over Boupacha's treatment by the FLN might have played dangerously into the hands of the French Right, and Beauvoir's assertion that she and Halimi did not have the right to do this on Boupacha's behalf serves only to exemplify how we must sometimes choose between incommensurable ends in politics.<sup>36</sup> A purist commitment to any one value to the exclusion of others—be it to the Kantian imperative, or to an ethic of care, or to perfecting one's own antiracism—may become self-defeating and may undermine progressive politics.

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Reflecting back over her life, in the Epilogue to *Force of Circumstance* Beauvoir meditates on the privileges she enjoys. She focuses less directly here on her Frenchness than on her wealth, social status, and enjoyment of the fruits of high culture. "Economically I belong to a privileged class" she writes (373); and even more bluntly, "I am a profiteer" (374). She has earned a great deal of money from her books and lives in comfort and financial security. On the one hand, this is a reward for her own talents and efforts. But on the other, she realizes it was because of class privilege and other accidents of birth that she was able to develop these talents: "I am [a profiteer] primarily because of the education I received and the possibilities it opened up for me" (374). For Beauvoir, what some would straightforwardly regard as one's just entitlement is not unproblematically one's own. For in becoming oneself one always takes up, in one way or another, the ascriptions given one at birth and the possibilities assigned to one in childhood. In Beauvoir's case, of course, although the extensive education she received did not by itself make her a "well-known writer," she recognizes that without it she would not have become one.

In the face of her privileges, Beauvoir addresses questions about the responsibility and complicity of a situated self, a self that is not autonomous and that makes decisions while dwelling in a world not fully of its own making. It is, of course, possible to renounce certain material benefits. One can, for example, refuse to accept what one is offered, or decide to give one's wealth away. But by

doing so one does not significantly challenge the social structures of privilege. Nor does one simply become one of the nonprivileged through such actions. For this kind of generosity is only open to the privileged, and it may merely function to reaffirm their status.<sup>37</sup>

In an unjust world, the privileged are unable to avoid elements of complicity, of what Larry May calls metaphysical guilt. Beauvoir writes: "When one lives in an unjust world there is no use hoping by some means to *purify* oneself of that injustice; what is necessary is to change the world, and I don't have the power. To suffer from these contradictions serves no good purpose; to forget about them is to lie to oneself" (1992, 374–75. TA; emphasis added). Lying to oneself, the bad-faith refusal of the "culpably ignorant" to acknowledge their complicity, is unacceptable to Beauvoir: we do indeed need to try to see the world from a viewpoint beyond the confines of our privilege. But to engage in a politics presaged on our individual moral guilt may also be dubious. One may, of course, choose to give one's wealth away to charitable or political causes—but one still chooses to do so from one's privileged location. Giving away one's individual wealth may assuage personal feelings of guilt, and it may even be morally desirable, but it is not *per se* a solution to structural privilege.

Moreover, as we have seen, other kinds of privilege are even less open to renunciation than wealth or class position. The privileges of whiteness (as too those of masculinity, heterosexuality, or Western nationality), are continually reproduced through us and for us by the surrounding world. Thus, even if we assume them critically, as Beauvoir began to do her Frenchness, and many white feminists do their whiteness, they are still ours. They are integral to who we are, and to how the world continues to treat us. Although we are not the passive victims of the accidents of our birth and our life histories, these continue to suffuse our selves and the situations within which we act.

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Beauvoir's life was, of course, unusual. For others of us who bear such privileges as whiteness, middle-class levels of income, respected professional status, or Western nationality, but who are not famous French women writers and intellectuals, what insights may we draw from this story? Through examining Beauvoir's ideas and actions this paper argues that privileged progressives (white feminists and many others) should acknowledge the complexities and ambiguities that must attend the actions of a situated self. It also argues that we should explore forms of action other than those consonant with a politics of self-transformation. For Beauvoir suggests that another important political repertoire is open to us: one in which, instead of attempting to renounce our privileges, we learn to use them responsibly. This is not to deny the importance of "working on" our privileges, of becoming aware of what we have previously

taken for granted, or of “travelling” to the worlds of others who are marginal. But it is to say that serious difficulties may also attend these practices, that they are not always the most effective ones, and that we need at times to displace them and switch repertoire. Sometimes, the best way to combat privilege will be to acknowledge it and then—in lucid awareness of the impossibility of “pure” political action—to deploy our privilege as effectively as possible, to endeavor to use it well.

## NOTES

I wrote the first version of this paper while in residence as a Visiting Scholar at the Gender Institute of the London School of Economics. My thanks to all there who welcomed me and made my stay so pleasant and productive, especially Anne Phillips. Several colleagues provided valuable comments on earlier versions of the paper: Debra Bergoffen, Penny Deutscher, Frances Hasso, Wendy Kozol, Harlan Wilson, and two insightful anonymous referees for *Hypatia*. My thanks also, for many suggestions and thought-provoking questions, to audiences at various venues where I presented the paper: in England, the London School of Economics, and the universities of Oxford and Manchester; in Canada, York University; in the USA, Bucknell, George Washington, and Villanova universities.

1. I use the term *progressive* here because it best serves as an umbrella for a wide range of politics that militate against injustice and privilege. I avoid the term *radical* because I am not convinced that radicals and liberals are as distinct as is often claimed. Under the ‘progressive’ umbrella one may also locate socialists and critics of globalization, as well many of those involved in single-issue politics.

2. Locke’s silent elision of the right to property earned through labor and the right to inherited property has effectively remained unchallenged within the modern liberal tradition.

3. Thus, for example, although developing (through the device of the veil of ignorance) principles of justice that initially disregard accidents of birth, John Rawls still argues that inequalities of wealth and authority may be just “if they result in compensating benefits for everyone, and in particular for the least advantaged members of society.” Degrees of disadvantage and privilege will, it seems, always be with us and certain ones will be acceptable even in a “just” society (Rawls 1973, 14–15).

4. The locus classicus for these concerns is, of course, Spivak 1988. See also Alcoff 1995; Code 1995; Roof and Wiegman 1995.

5. I find a similar shift also among my students. Although eager to engage with the theoretically sophisticated work of Butler, Spivak, and others, they quickly revert to a rather simplistic and self-referential discourse of individual guilt when matters concerning their own privileges are discussed in class.

6. The titles of some recent books and articles on white women’s privilege are indicative here. As well as *Invisible Privilege* (Rothenberg 2000) and *Privilege Revealed* (Wilderman 1996) see, for example, the articles “Resisting the Veil of Privilege”

(Ferguson 1998); and "Locating Traitorous identities: Toward a View of Privilege-Cognizant White Character" (Bailey 1998). See also "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," which, originally published in 1988, continues to be republished and widely used in teaching (McIntosh 1988/2000).

Minnie Bruce Pratt's early, and path breaking, autobiographical reflections on white feminist privilege also take as central the project of revealing truth: "I am learning that what I think I *know* is an accurate view of the world is frequently a lie. . . . So I gain truth when I expand my constricted eye, an eye that has let in only what I have been taught to see" (1984, 17). See also Frankenberg 1993 for an important analysis of the invisibility of whiteness.

7. I am not, of course, accusing any of the specific feminist theorists I discuss of excessive self-referentiality, or of being politically demobilized. My point is that these are general tendencies inherent in the practice of a politics of self-transformation.

8. Furthermore, having laboriously and painfully "worked on oneself," one may feel inclined to be over-judgmental about those who do not appear to have done so as diligently. One's newfound consciousness may then provide a facile platform from whence to pronounce others guilty of failure. Thus Rothenberg's moralizing remarks about the failings of those white liberals "who ought to know better" find common echoes among many antiracist white feminists. The emotional guilt we feel as we work on our own racism may all too easily get displaced onto others in ways that are counterproductive.

9. Thus, for example, Linda Alcoff has rightly warned about the dangers of reinforcing white privilege that inhere in personal lifestyle-oriented projects of "crossover," in which individual young white Americans choose to "act black." She remarks that "the core of white privilege is the ability to consume anything, anyone, anywhere," and so crossover often ends up by erasing difference and becoming "coterminous with a colonizing desire of appropriation, even to the trappings of social identity" (Alcoff 1998, 19).

10. Thus, for example, Harding insists that the privileged should not be allowed to "get away" with claiming they can't help being who they are: "we should refuse to believe that there are no ways for overly privileged white men to take responsibility for their identities. Most of them may not *want* to do this, but they *can*" (1991, 290). But to "want" to do something is a necessary but is not a sufficient condition for it to be possible. My point is that, even when they white men or women do want to take responsibility for their privilege, their ability to do so effectively may be sharply delimited by societal structures and processes beyond their control.

11. Whether the subaltern can speak is, I suggest, an empirical question, repeatedly to be asked anew in different sets of circumstances. Moreover, dominant and subaltern positions do not always neatly align; a group or an individual may be at one and the same time privileged and subordinate, a point that has been made by Spivak herself and by many other feminists of color.

12. Beauvoir explores this disconnect between intentions and outcomes at some length in her early essay, "L'Idéalisme moral et réalisme politique." Naming Antigone as the prime exemplar, she berates the "idealist" who refuses to accept responsibility for the consequences of her actions so long as her motives are pure (Beauvoir 1948a, 55–100).

13. Page references for this work, and other works of Beauvoir that are available in English, are given to the English translation. I have sometimes altered the translation, in which case this is indicated with the abbreviation TA. The translation of *The Second Sex* is especially poor. See Simons (1983) and Moi (2002) on its inadequacies.

14. As Beauvoir later summed up her position: "In *The Second Sex* I did say that women were an 'inferior caste,' a caste being a group one is born into and cannot move out of. In principle, though, one can transfer from one class to another. If you are a woman, you can never become a man. Thus women are genuinely a caste. And the way women are treated in economic, social, and political terms makes of them an inferior caste," (Schwartz, 1972/1984, 37–38). Today, for those who can afford it, it is possible for a woman in the United States to "become a man." But since this is not the desired by most women, and since it can hardly be a practical solution to the general oppression of women, this does not invalidate Beauvoir's point.

15. The French verb *assumer* may be translated into English as "to assume," in the sense of agreeing to bear something, as in "taking up" or "assuming" a burden or a responsibility.

16. Beauvoir takes her cue from Merleau-Ponty here. In the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/1962), Merleau-Ponty argues that we can never escape from our situatedness in the world, nor from the always partial perspectives that ensue, because we are each a "body-subject" and never a pure subjectivity or consciousness. In *The Second Sex* Beauvoir writes, with direct reference to Merleau-Ponty, that "woman, like man, is her body," but instantly adds that (because of her alienation) "her body is something other than herself" (1989, 29).

17. Thus Beauvoir writes of the no-win situation of the would-be "independent" woman: "She refuses to confine herself to her role as a female, because she does not wish to mutilate herself; but it would also be a mutilation to disavow her sex" (1989, 682).

18. Although not always as rigorously ascribed from birth, over time one's class may also become integral to one's way of being in the world, suffusing one's habits, one's styles of comportment and expression. Thus Merleau-Ponty writes of working-class existence: "What makes me a proletarian is not the economic system or society considered as a system of impersonal forces, but these institutions as I carry them within me and experience them" (1945/1962, 443).

19. It may be the case that these lived ascriptions give rise to a more stable experience of the self for the privileged than for more marginalized people. Thus, some feminists of color have argued that tensions among the many ascriptions that they have to negotiate give rise to a more "mobile" experience of the self in the multiply oppressed (Anzaldúa 1987; Sandoval 1991; 2000; Lugones 2003).

I leave out of consideration here the special case of acquiring nationality through naturalization. Naturalization (and sometimes immigration) imposes new demands and offers new possibilities that may require that we profoundly reorganize our previous ways of being and sense of self. Likewise, transgendered selves must, in significant ways, start out anew.

20. May draws the notion of "metaphysical guilt" (which I think corresponds to Bartky's idea of "existential-moral guilt") from Karl Jasper's discussion of the way in which one may say all Germans were complicit in the Holocaust (May, 146–48).

To give an example nearer home, a white feminist who accepts a promotion is not morally guilty of racism even if she knows that, simply given the statistics, she is likely to be promoted ahead of her equally qualified African-American colleagues; whereas the Klan member burning a cross in front of an African-American church is. But even so, this feminist may experience shame when her promotion letter comes; and when she learns of the cross-burning she may, as a white person, experience a certain guilt by association, or a feeling of moral taint, even if she is not in a position to do anything directly about it. She is not directly culpable in either of these two instances, and yet she is implicated in a white supremacist system that preferentially rewards her, and in which Klan terror mechanisms play a part. These lesser levels of complicity certainly may place us under a degree of moral obligation to address wrongs that we did not ourselves commit. But in such cases, although we may experience what Bartky calls “emotional guilt” and engage in individual self-blame (we may for example feel, as Frye does, that all we do is poisoned), this is not necessarily the most helpful response.

21. Anticolonial resistance had begun in Vietnam by 1945. As early as 1946, the journal *Les Temps Modernes* (for which Beauvoir was a member of the editorial board) took a firmly anticolonial position. Indeed, the journal adhered to a pro-independence position for all the French colonies well before most of the French Left, including the highly influential Communist Party, did so. Most of the Left urged a degree of reform in the French colonies, but until the late 1950s, saw actual independence as far fetched (Drake 2002, 97–117).

22. The name *traitor* of course had a very specific connotation in France for Beauvoir’s generation: those who had collaborated with the Germans during the Occupation.

23. “It’s a question of my country and I used to love it. . . . it’s pretty hard to be against one’s own country,” she observed (1992, 130). And, in a 1959 letter to her American lover, Nelson Algren: “Now we don’t feel we belong to this new kind of France; we are strangers in our own country” (1998, 528).

24. Toril Moi, for example, attributes the intensity of Beauvoir’s feelings in large measure to the termination of her affair with Claude Lanzman in 1958 (Moi 1994, 240–41). But Beauvoir’s crisis over Algeria begins earlier than that, and is explicable without adducing such extraneous factors. For a critical overview of claims that Beauvoir’s reaction to the war was excessive, neurotic, or “really” about something else, see Murphy (1995, 263–97, esp. 276–79). It is important to understand how profoundly Beauvoir’s previously stable sense of her world, and of her place within it, were being shattered at this time. This was a metaphysical, or existential-moral, but not a neurotic, crisis. Beauvoir was effecting the kind of displacement of self, the shift to the viewpoint of the other, that many later feminists have applauded—and it was horribly painful.

25. However, Beauvoir does not seem to have recognized her Frenchness as a form of whiteness. She had been acutely aware of her white skin privilege when traveling in the still-segregated U.S. South in 1947 (Beauvoir 1948b, 200ff). But once back in France she did not engage reflexively with race as integral to her own identity, even though she recognized racism as an element in the French treatment of Algerians. But, of course, when Frantz Fanon, a young black man who had French nationality and who thought of himself as French, arrived in France in 1947 to study, he very quickly discovered how white-raced the French identity was (Fanon 1952/1967).

During her travels in the United States in 1947 Beauvoir became friendly with the African American writer, Richard Wright. Margaret Simons has suggested that Wright may have been a major intellectual influence on Beauvoir and that she adapted the concept of the “oppressed other” that he had elaborated with regard to race, for her treatment of women in *The Second Sex* (Simons 1999, 167–84). If this is indeed the case, then Beauvoir’s inattention to the racial elements of French identity (though understandable, given the far greater racial homogeneity of France than of the United States) appears as a striking lacuna in her thought.

26. In his essay, “Albert Camus’ Algerian War,” Michael Walzer says he finds the depth of Beauvoir’s reaction “slightly comic,” and he argues that her attempt to “detach” herself from the French people was dangerous, leaving her uncaring about French casualties and indifferent to FLN-inflicted violence. “Wrenched loose from bourgeois France, unable to become Algerians, Sartre and Beauvoir see an ideologically flattened world. The FLN represents liberation, the French are fascists. . . . Reading the account of her Algerian years, one feels the force of E.M. Forster’s injunction: ‘Only connect!’” (Walzer 2002, 141–42). But Beauvoir never wanted to “become” Algerian, and she recognized that she could not break the ties that bound her. Hers was the anguish of having a connection that one at once hates and loves.

27. In France, intellectuals have long been held in much higher esteem than in the U.S. Beauvoir was what Foucault later dismissively called a “traditional” intellectual—but such people were, and still remain, important in the shaping of French political discourse.

28. As a well-known public figure, who by this time could not sit in a café without being recognized, she was not practically speaking a good bet for underground activity. She was far too visible easily to shelter FLN militants, to transport money or materials for them, as the “Jeanson network” and others were doing.

29. In fact, Beauvoir did at times offer practical support to the network: she lent members her car and allowed her apartment to be used. On at least one occasion, she helped to find a secure hiding place for a fugitive (Hamon and Rotman 1982, 158, 283).

The Jeanson network consisted predominantly of middle-class professionals whose engagement in clandestine support work was motivated by a combination of moral outrage at French policies and commitment to anticolonial struggle as a means of revitalizing the French Left. As Martin Evans remarks in his history of the network: “It was not. . . . French people who ran the risk of being tortured. This was the plight of Algerians alone. For French people, therefore, the dynamics of resistance to the Algerian war were more intellectual than experiential. Taking a stand against the war was a moral choice which involved a long process of reflection. Central to this process was an ability to sympathise with an experience which was not their own” (Evans 1997, 208–209). Beauvoir would not be alone in developing a passionate commitment that was stimulated by a gut empathy with torture-victims, yet that did not depend on (or inspire) an intensive politics of self-transformation.

30. Here Beauvoir’s reflections on the relation of the self to its past are reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty’s. He writes: “An attitude towards the world, when it has received frequent confirmation, acquires a favoured status for us.” Thus, the stark alternatives of freedom or determinism do not describe our set of possibilities. Rather one’s past,



"though not a fate, has at least a specific weight and is not a set of events over there, at a distance from me, but the atmosphere of my present" (1945/1962, 441–42).

31. Plus ça change! In the wake of the disclosure in spring 2004 of abuse of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. soldiers, earnest discussion about whether the use of torture (though regrettable) might be justified has also ensued. For example, see the article, "What's Wrong with Torturing a Qaeda Higher-Up?" *New York Times*, May 16, 2004.

32. This is according to Halimi (2002, 294). Beauvoir is more modest about her role, as she presents it in *Force of Circumstance*.

33. Under the emergency powers of the time, the book was in fact illegal (Halimi 2002, 294). In addition, from 1960 Beauvoir also began to engage in acts of highly public illegality. In 1960 she signed the "Manifesto of the 121." Planned to coincide with the trial of members of the Jeanson Network, this benchmark document, signed by many prominent intellectuals, fell afoul of emergency laws by supporting those being prosecuted for refusing to serve in the French army, as well as for assisting the Algerian independence movement. She also attended banned demonstrations. In addition to the threat of prosecution, Beauvoir also faced death threats, including one telephoned to the concierge at her apartment the day after the book appeared (1992, 336).

34. See Murphy for a rather different kind of defense of Beauvoir. She argues that Beauvoir engaged in "an ethics of intersubjectivity" in the Boupacha case (1995, esp. 280–85).

35. For a fuller consideration of how Beauvoir's Algerian politics offers a concrete instantiation of her earlier arguments about the necessarily ambiguous nature of politics, see Shelby 2002.

36. In fact Beauvoir's refusal to help Boupacha turns out not to have had such negative consequences as Halimi feared. Having been raped, Boupacha feared she would never find a husband. However, according to Halimi, Boupacha met and married an FLN militant after her return to Algeria, had children, and lives a satisfying life. Halimi is still in contact with her (communication from Halimi at the conference "De Beauvoir à Sartre; de Sartre à Beauvoir, Paris, June 2003).

37. Thus, elsewhere, Beauvoir remarks of charity: "There is nothing more arbitrary than intervening as a stranger in a destiny which is not ours: one of the shocking things about charity . . . is that it is exercised from the outside, according to the caprice of the one who distributes it and who is detached from its object" (1967, 86 TA).

Of course, the line between charity and political solidarity may sometimes be blurry, insofar as objectification may be unavoidable in both cases. However, I think what Beauvoir has in mind in her critique of charity is something akin to Spelman's concern about appropriation: in charity the benefit of compassion accrues too much to the giver and not enough to the recipient.

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