

## **GENDER AS JUSTIFICATION IN SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S *LE DEUXIEME SEXE***

### **O GÊNERO COMO JUSTIFICAÇÃO NA OBRA DE SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, *LE DEUXIÈME SEXE***

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Work in contemporary feminist philosophy seems often to divide along a line between those who understand sexual difference to be originary and irreducible, and those who see “sexual difference” as an effect of patterns of social, political and material relations that have sedimented over time. I argue, along with other readers of Beauvoir, that this was a demarcation she refused, in favor of an affirmation of the ambiguity of sexual difference. My claim is that “femininity” and “masculinity” were, for Beauvoir, operations of justification that do their work in the very tension and ambiguity between nature and culture. Beauvoir’s account of what we might, today, choose to call “gender” is an account of the distortion or reversal of the process of “conversion” by which adults take up and affirm an intersubjective condition of freedom and responsibility. In this paper I explore the notion of “justification” in Beauvoir’s work as it is developed in relation to femininity, masculinity, sovereignty and plurality.

**KEYWORDS:** Beauvoir; ambiguity; Feminist philosophy; plurality; sexual difference

#### **RESUMO**

Trabalhar em filosofia feminista contemporânea parece muitas vezes dividir ao longo uma linha entre aqueles que entendem a diferença sexual como sendo originária e irreduzível, e os que veem a "diferença sexual" como um efeito de padrões de relações sociais, políticas e materiais que foram sedimentadas com o passar do tempo. Defendo, justamente com outras leitoras de Beauvoir, que isto era uma demarcação que ela recusou em favor de uma afirmação da ambiguidade da diferença sexual. Minha alegação é que "feminilidade" e "masculinidade" eram, para Beauvoir, operações de justificação que fazem o seu trabalho de muita tensão e ambiguidade entre natureza e cultura. Leva-se em conta em Beauvoir o que poderíamos hoje escolher chamar de "gênero", como um relato da distorção ou da reversão do processo de “conversão”, pelo qual pessoas adultas se assumem e afirmam uma condição intersubjetiva da liberdade e da responsabilidade. Neste artigo, exploro a noção de “justificação”

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na obra de Beauvoir, tal como é desenvolvido em relação à feminilidade, masculinidade, a soberania e à pluralidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Beauvoir; ambigüidade; filosofia feminista; pluralidade; diferença sexual

Readers of Beauvoir have long been preoccupied with the nature and status of sexual difference in her work. She has often been credited with developing one of the first compelling accounts of socially constructed gender, though she did not have or use the word “gender”. Her most famous sentence, “*On ne naît pas femme: on le devient*” (BEAUVOIR, 1949, Vol II, p. 13) has often been read simply as a manifesto for socially constructed gender. On this view, “sexual difference” is a product that is produced in and by particular patterns of discursive, symbolic, institutional, and material relations.<sup>1</sup> It is historically bound and specific to a particular time and place.

Others accuse Beauvoir of biological essentialism, arguing that she attached a long and egregious list of negative characteristics to feminine embodiment, and that she understood liberation to be that process through which the body is to be overcome (HEINÄMAA, 2003, p. 74)<sup>2</sup>.

“Transcendence,” on this view, is a masculinist enterprise that devalues nature and the body. On this reading, Beauvoir is hardly a feminist thinker at all, but rather one who accepts the values handed down to us through a long tradition of western masculinist thought—and only wishes to argue for women’s inclusion in the masculine enterprise.

More recently, feminist readers of Beauvoir have defended her account of sexual difference as neither strictly constructionist, nor biologically essentialist (HEINÄMAA,

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<sup>1</sup> The clearest representatives of this position in France are Monique Wittig and Collette Guillaumin, whose understanding of sexual difference as something that is social all the way down was a key influence, in the U.S., on the work of Judith Butler.

<sup>2</sup> See Heinamaa, 2003, p. 74 for a discussion of these criticisms. Gatens argues that “woman emerges from [Beauvoir’s] study as biologically disadvantaged” (Gatens 1991, 52). Léon puts it this way, “Breasts and buttocks are [for Beauvoir] fleshy proliferations that, in the fullness of their gratuitous immanence, dread mirrors and caresses. While she equates sex with an animal function of brutal reality, she defines female physiology in terms of inertia, passivity... In these horrifying passages, which inform more on the neuroses of their author than on a presumed feminine essence, nature is identified with woman who is, in turn, identified with the disgust generated by her sexual organs”(Léon 1995, 143-144). Chanter says that Beauvoir “ascribes a purely negative connotation to the ways in which women differ from men” (Chanter 1995, 49-50).

2003, p. 11).<sup>3</sup> These readers, often working through the traditions and practices of phenomenology, insist that Beauvoir be read as a thinker who thematized the ambiguity of the human condition. To be a woman, or a man, is always to be socially constituted as such, and always to live a particular kind of body and its particular relation to the world. More than this, to be a woman or a man is to take up a particular attitude toward embodied existence and its social formations/deformations—attitudes which vary greatly between individuals, between classes and cultures, between nations, between religious groups. On this reading, the joys and injustices of womanhood or manhood emerge precisely at the nexus of and in the tension between nature and culture.

In my own reading of Beauvoir, I have been both indebted to and have aspired to contribute to this third approach (MANN, 2008; 2009; 2013). My work has brought me to a particular conclusion about Beauvoir's understanding of femininity and masculinity that has not been explicitly explored in the secondary literature. I argue that Beauvoir's refusal to opt for either a strictly social-constructionist account of sexual difference or for a biological account of sexual difference, her insistence that we assume the ambiguity of the human condition (we are conscious bodies, we are situated freedoms), and that we dwell in and think from this ambiguity, allowed her to understand something about femininity and masculinity that we have, in our contemporary thinking, lost sight of. She turned our attention from what femininity and masculinity *are*, to what femininity and masculinity *do*. This question of *doing*, moreover, was not simply a foreshadowing of contemporary discussions of gender performativity, but went far beyond them to consider the *work* gender does in a larger social sense.<sup>4</sup>

I became preoccupied with this question a decade ago, after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon gave rise to an explosion of patriotic nationalism and bellicosity in the United States. Immediately after the attacks, the discourse of retribution

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<sup>3</sup> As Heinamaa puts it, “The nature of the subject is essentially ambiguous, paradoxical. The subject is a constant indecision between inwardness and externality, immanence and transcendence, finitude and the infinite. The paradox cannot be resolved; “it can only be endured and executed in various different ways” (2003, 11). As Veltman puts it, “bad faith is expressed either as a denial of our transcendence or as a denial of our immanence” (2006, 85-86). See also Scarth, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> To make this clear, gender “performativity” is the one way that gender as *doing* has been thematized in the literature, most directly by Judith Butler. “Performativity” in this sense is theorized in relation to individual subjects, who are taking up and relating, sometimes creatively or rebelliously, to social norms. I’m interested in what gender does in a very different sense, i.e. how does gender perform the work of justification on a broad social scale, as in patriotism or nationalism, for example.

that emerged from the white house and among the population was replete with metaphors of manhood, of masculine power and sexual violence. I wondered what the sex was doing in the patriotism, in the literal sense of: *What work was it doing?* It seemed clear to me that the appeals to masculinity were hard at work, specifically, they were creating an atmosphere of justification for the coming wars, the occupation of other people's lands and the world-historic corporate robbery of both others' resources and the billions of dollars in public monies that would be handed over to private profiteers over the course of the "War on Terror". In my efforts to understand masculinity, to understand what work it was doing, I turned to Beauvoir. I found she had already developed an account of masculinity as justification. In fact, I found that, for Beauvoir, masculinity and femininity are first and most fundamentally operations of justification. Let's consider this claim more closely.

Beauvoir's account of justification is complex and multi-dimensional. As with so many of her key notions, she never devotes extended, pointed attention to it, but simply sets it to work in her text. We first encounter the notion in the introduction to *The Second Sex*, where she notes that men have been put in charge of justifying women's existence (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 10), and then claims that men's hostility toward women "covers up a more or less skillfully camouflaged will to self-justification" (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 11). The third and final usage that appears in the introduction is in the context of a comparison of oppressions based on "race, caste, class, or sex" which all rely on a "justification process" that is the same, i.e. one that founds itself on the notion of an eternal essence which defines the subordinated group (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 12). Right away, then, we learn that existence is the kind of thing that might be justified, or not; we learn that men are engaged in a process of self-justification that is mystified or covered over; and we learn that attributing a natural essence to a group of people is a strategy of justification for the subordination of that group.

Existence, for Beauvoir, when it is human existence, must strive for justification—in other words every human subject wants to be *worthy* in the eyes of others. Beauvoir is, on one level, a philosopher of recognition, deeply influenced by Hegel; she believes that "alterity is a fundamental category of human thought" (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 6), and that "nothing comes to me except through what is not myself." This is simply part of the human condition, for Beauvoir. "It is above and beyond all sexual specification that the existent

seeks self-justification” she tells us (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 74). When I explain this notion to my students, I ask them to think of those moments, late at night, when they are awake and possessed by an urgent question, something like, “Why am I here?” “What difference would it make if I weren’t?” “To whom?” “What will be different in the world because I was part of it?” While these questions often emerge most urgently in moments of solitude, the answer does not; the answer can *only* arise in a world in which I am engaged both with things and with other people. This is true both existentially and developmentally. I encounter objects that resist me or delight me as a child—but the mere fact that I encounter them makes me aware of my embodied presence in the world; as an adult I work on the world, and in working transform both the world and my consciousness of myself. But as important as the object world is, a person is “unable to accomplish himself in solitude” (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 160). “The intervention of others in the infant’s life is almost originary,” Beauvoir tells us; the child “tries to win the approbation of others in order to justify himself.” The most primal moment in which such justification is accomplished is when “the feeling of justification finds physical confirmation in the kisses and caresses received: it is the same contented passivity that the child experiences in his mother’s lap and under her benevolent eyes” (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 285). The feeling of justification, for the child, is that of being loved, or cared for, or *recognized* by an adult whose authority confers meaning on her existence even as her labor insures the child’s very survival; its most primary form is touch. Later touch is augmented by the parent’s gaze, which signifies both “you are here,” and “you matter to me.”

For the adult, who has moved into the grown-up world of freedom and responsibility, justification is a product of doing, rather than just being. I act *into* a world populated by others, and hope that through my actions my existence will be recognized and affirmed by them. I still seek a kind of belonging, ideally love or care, but I no longer suspect that this belonging will be simply bestowed on me by others—I suspect that my own actions will impact how and where I belong, and to whom I belong, and in what way—while knowing that I cannot determine these things in advance. I hope my acts do not leave me homeless. I am always and only someone if I am someone to someone else, so I hope that they point back to me, that they are recognized by others as the worthy acts of this particular someone.

This recognition happens, of course, not only in an encounter between *two* subjects, it happens among a plurality of subjects, in communities, in institutional contexts as well. The notion of “plurality” is one that is very important to the analysis that follows, and one that is perhaps most explicitly developed not by Beauvoir, but by her contemporary, Hannah Arendt.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt argues that “plurality” is a fundamental aspect of the human condition. By plurality she means the very simple reality “that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (ARENDR, 1998, p. 7). Arendt accords particular weight to plurality, claiming that, “while all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically *the* condition—not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam*—of all political life” (ARENDR, 1998, p. 7), since we always and only must organize our lives together amidst one another. In a description that is resonant with Beauvoir’s own theory of action, Arendt ties action to plurality, claiming that “plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live” (ARENDR, 1998, p. 8), in other words “human plurality has the two-fold character of equality and distinction” (ARENDR, 1998, p. 175). The two-fold quality of human plurality is important to the analysis that follows; what Arendt is claiming is that the human condition of plurality is affirmed only when both equality and distinction are recognized and affirmed.

But this two-fold structure also makes action “calamitous”, since our action “lands” out in the world among others, “its results fall into a predetermined net of relationships, invariably dragging the agent with them.” (ARENDR, 1998, p. 234). In other words, the human condition of plurality means that no actor has sovereign control over her own action, its meanings and effects will always fall short of, exceed, or in some way pervert the intentions of the actor. This is why the temptation to seek sovereignty is so strong, resulting in our “seeking shelter from action’s calamities in an activity where one man, isolated from all others, remains master of his doings from beginning to end” (ARENDR, 1998, p. 220). We seek one-man rule to free us from the calamities of action (ARENDR, 1998, p. 221), but this solution is, at the same time, a repression of and a naïve flight from the human condition itself. “Sovereignty, the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership,

is contradictory to the very condition of plurality. No man can be sovereign because not one man, but men, inhabit the earth" (ARENDR,1998, p. 234).

Keeping Arendt's analysis in mind, let's turn back to Beauvoir's similar views about the intersubjective context in which every subject seeks to justify his or her life. What is certain is that, for Beauvoir, a life that does not seek recognition of some kind, on some level, is not a human life. What is different about a Beauvoirean theory of recognition from a Hegelian theory, is that it is not in any necessary way a theory of *conflict* between subjects. Recognition can come through a Hegelian struggle, but it also comes through reciprocity, friendship and generosity (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 159-160; BERGOFFEN, 1997; SCARTH, 2004, p. 123-127). In every case, however, *risk* is involved, outcomes are not guaranteed, since my own efforts emerge into a world of other freedoms.

In the adult world, this risk becomes fundamentally important. Here, justification is related to what Beauvoir calls *conversion*. "Man attains an authentically moral attitude when he renounces being in order to assume his existence: through this conversion he also renounces all possession, because possession is a way of searching for being; but the conversion by which he attains true wisdom is never finished, it has to be made ceaselessly, it demands constant effort" (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 160). Constant conversion is a necessary feature of "authentic" existence, for Beauvoir; the conversion is from being to *becoming*, from safety to risk, from irresponsibility to responsibility, from passivity to freedom. Another way of saying this is that one must assume (take up) the human condition of plurality in order to authentically justify one's existence, as an adult.

Fredrika Scarth is the feminist thinker who has most astutely analyzed the theme of conversion in Beauvoir's work. She traces this theme through Beauvoir's early work, then into *The Second Sex*. Because "our freedom is both dependent on the freedom of others and vulnerable to the actions of others," she writes, assuming full adult status requires that we accept the risks, limits, and vulnerabilities of freedom (SCARTH, 2004, p. 70). "Conversion, then, is an act of assuming the failure of the desire to be. It is through our failure to master others or external reality and our acceptance of our failure to impose our own meaning on the world to the exclusion of others, that we are able to delight in a world rich with intersubjective meanings" (SCARTH, 2004, p. 77-78).

Masculinity, in Beauvoir's critical perspective, is marked by a denial of the risks and vulnerabilities of freedom. In patriarchal systems, "men are able to avoid the difficult tension of living out their ambiguity as situated freedoms by projecting the troubling aspects of that ambiguity onto women. Men are able to avoid conversion, "to avoid the real risks of human freedom, and to experience themselves as solitary pure freedoms" (SCARTH, 2004, p. 8). For Scarth, then, Beauvoir's critique of masculinity amounts to a claim that the conversion from being to becoming, from being to the disclosure of being, is refused in the masculinist enterprise. The implication here is that masculine subjectivity in its patriarchal mode tends toward a nostalgia for the securities of childhood, that time when "joy and delight in our subjectivity had been aligned with the fulfillment of our desire to be and involved no risk" (SCARTH, 2004, p. 79-80).

But Beauvoir's critique of masculinist subjectivity goes further than this. While she doesn't spell it out for us explicitly, a careful reading of Beauvoir reveals that the operation of conversion that results in an affirmation of freedom and responsibility, and also in a recognition of the limits of my own freedom and the possibilities of a world of multiple or plural freedoms, is not the only possible operation of conversion. There are other operations of conversion that accompany even the most distorted and distorting modes of human existence. With careful reading, we can outline an account of the conversion that is key to femininity, and to dominant modes of masculinity, i.e. to sovereign masculinity.

Freedom is scary and bound up with an almost unbearable sense of responsibility for Beauvoir (here she follows the existentialists closely). Like Arendt, Beauvoir believes that when I act, my actions sediment into a world in unpredictable ways. She emphasizes that my actions shape possibilities not only for my own future, but for others who share my world as well. Because of this, Beauvoir reminds us again and again, humans run away from freedom and its attendant responsibilities more often than not, find ways to mystify or cover over both freedom and responsibility. We seek to alienate our world-making and value-creating capacities in a God, or biology, or a political party or a social role. What Beauvoir discovered was that femininity and masculinity are ready-made avenues for self-alienation that carry with them whole systems of values; they offer themselves as routes of escape for the freedom-wary subject. Far from being some substantive thing that is excreted by nature, or being simply the end-product of predictably patterned social relations, gender



here is an operation of justification under conditions of male supremacy. These conditions reorganize the self-justifying efforts of the existent in terms of gender.

Beauvoir explores, throughout her 1,000 page text, the insight that women are the “Other” in relation to man in a way that exceeds and distorts the fundamental category of alterity, which is the condition of the possibility of reciprocity. “Lord-man” justifies the existence of “liege-woman” we are told in the introduction (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 10). He is woman’s destiny and her reason for being. “He is judge,” Beauvoir writes, and in “the moment of the masculine verdict” her existence is determined (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 392). Male judgment is the whole environment and atmosphere of feminine existence rather than just one factor in it. “He disposes of her,” Beauvoir tells us, especially through the institution of marriage which has, historically, been “her only means of survival and the only justification of her existence,” the place where the fairy tales end and narrative time turns into repetition. Feminine practices of self-abandonment, waiting, beautification, and renunciation, are means to the end of being-loved/being-justified, through the gaze of an adoring masculine lover. Women are “relative beings” because the very meaning of feminine existence is established through the mediation of the masculine subject. These are familiar themes for readers of Beauvoir. Essentially, she is claiming that femininity, its practices and its accomplishment, is itself a distorted and diffracted form of justification. “She chooses to want her enslavement so ardently that it will seem to her to be the expression of her freedom; she will try to overcome her situation as inessential object by radically assuming it” (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 683). What Beauvoir calls the “dream of annihilation,” “is in fact an avid will to exist...When woman gives herself to her idol, she hopes that he will give her at once possession of herself and of the universe contained in him” (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 687, translation modified). The key development here is that the possibility of true reciprocity, which is an inherent possibility in the intersubjective structure of human life, has been preempted. The first part of the dual structure of the human condition of plurality that Arendt identified, equality, has been repressed or denied.

For Beauvoir, masculine existence, as well, entails a distortion and perversion of the fundamental experience of human alterity. Masculine justification is discussed in two modes, by Beauvoir. On the one hand, it is a mode of justification for the subordination of women that resembles the patterns of justification that are in evidence in other forms of

oppression. Beauvoir notes that philosophy, theology, literature, science, biology and experimental psychology (among many other things) have all been at men's service when it comes to elaborating justifications for women's subordination (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 11; p. 14). The complex and internally contradictory paradoxes of "the Eternal Feminine," a set of myths we see at work in the way that the culture explains itself to itself, are deployed to justify the material injustices that structure women's existence.

At the same time, masculinity is described by Beauvoir as "a more or less skillfully camouflaged will to *self*-justification" (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 11). Here Beauvoir ties a social process to an existential and affective attitude, to the "disquieting hostility" men experience in relation to women (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 21), to the "feeling of superiority" that is one of the existential benefits of women's subordination (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 13), and to the sense of entitlement that men apparently experience in relation to the concrete material advantages and disadvantages organized by sex difference. This mode of justification is also ready-made and value-laden. But the way to manhood, while involving a refusal of the conversion that marks authentic adulthood in Beauvoir's work, still involves a conversion. In other words, the way to manhood that is made readily available to boys in the west is a pre-established path that distorts or even reverses the "conversion" that a more authentic existence demands. The process of justification that puts me out in the world among others, than involves risk and vulnerability in relation to others, is exchanged for the comforts of a process of *self*-justification.

Instead of a feminine abdication that alienates itself completely in the other, in masculinity-formation we have a disruption and distortion of the very intersubjective structure of *risk* that is at the heart of the human condition. We are embodied, limited, vulnerable, and mortal creatures. We are reminded of this in our embodied relation to nature, and to others. The masculine subject attempts to avoid this reality through a process of self-justification which is (apparently paradoxically) mediated by woman/women. She mediates his relationship with the natural world through her labor in the home, freeing him from it while allowing him to enjoy it. No subject can recognize himself, exactly, so he needs this Other for existential justification as well. But this is not an intersubjective relation—a fact that is revealed through the masculine conceit that this creature was either invented *for* him, or *by* him, or both. "She is so necessary to a man's joy and his triumph

that if she did not exist, men would have had to invent her. They did invent her,” Beauvoir writes, citing Nietzsche's claim that man invented woman out of a “rib of his God, of his ideal” (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 203). “Woman is certainly to a large extent man's invention,” she says again (2010, p. 212-213). So when he seeks “validation by this creature he has made,” he seeks, importantly, a mystified form of self-validation (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 200). When his wife mediates his relation to the natural world, since she has become part of him through the marriage ritual, this is a mystified form of self-mediation. Beauvoir uses the same image that Virginia Woolf used to try to capture the structure of this relation, the image of the mirror. “Woman has been compared to water, in part because it is the mirror where the male Narcissus contemplates himself” (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 202).

Masculine justification, then, seeks to rupture or break the intersubjective structure of human existence in favor of a mystified form of this same structure, in which the existential and material risks of our dependence on another are put out of play. Imagining himself to be both the origin and finality of “his” woman, her freedom is a tamed and docile freedom (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 160-161). “He does not like difficulty, he is afraid of danger,” Beauvoir writes (2010, p. 160), he is most fearful of all of reminders of that infantile helplessness that characterized his original relation with the woman/other. “He would have liked to have emerged, like Athena, into the adult world, armed from head to toe, invulnerable” (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 165). In other words, his fantasy is to emerge into manhood without dependence and without risk, without the intersubjective vulnerability that structures the human condition. The second aspect of Arendt's two-fold structure of plurality, *distinction*, is here repressed, disguised and mystified as the difference of the feminine other (a masculinist creation).

The kind of conversion that is at issue in masculinity formation then, at least the kind of masculinity formation that Beauvoir is concerned with, is a conversion from vulnerability to *sovereignty*. This is a perversion and disruption, even a reversal, of the constant conversion from being to becoming that is fundamental to adult human existence, even as it is a mystification and repression of the embodied vulnerability of childhood. As a child my sense of my own absolute, stable, already-given being is the only justification I need, and this is confirmed by the caring touch of others, which redeems me from death and abandonment over and over again. For the adult, this primary relation to being is renounced

in favor a *becoming* that is embedded in an intersubjective world where I encounter other freedoms who are not any more beholden to me than I am to them—where I *risk* myself in the presence of others. The perverse conversion that is masculinity formation, then, strives to put human *plurality* out of play; it represses, mystifies and hides the absolute embodied human vulnerability to others that is the original condition of every human existent, and it seeks to capture and subordinate, to make itself the origin and the destiny, of the feminine other. In other words, it turns an intersubjective structure of justification in which I am urgently dependent on *others* to a fantasy of sovereign *self*-justification.

Of course the “ontological and moral ambitions” of the masculine subject are embedded in, dependent on, and reinforcing of material conditions of domination and subordination that are economic, institutional and legal. The metaphysical pretensions wouldn’t matter so much if they weren’t. Beauvoir constantly reminds her readers of this connection. If I have stressed, here, the existential structures of sovereignty, we cannot forget the material structures that ground and reinforce them.

The account of masculinity that Beauvoir develops on the underside of her account of femininity, in which the *conversion* at the heart of masculinity formation is a conversion of *intersubjective* justification to *self*-justification, is one that I take up and develop in much more detail in my forthcoming book, *Sovereign Masculinity: Gender Lessons from the War on Terror*.

Here, I argue that lived, embodied gender, gender in the life of the individual subject, is keyed into the life of the nation through operations of gender. Gender is the *circuit* or *charge* that connects lived experience to masculinist, patriotic nationalism in the United States. The regime of gender is so useful to the regime precisely because of its self-justificatory structure, which puts the need for any external legitimation out of play; the opinions and the needs of other nations or other peoples, the policies of international bodies and institutions, are simply not relevant to the masculinist patriotic enterprise. It is Beauvoir, I argue, who first gave us the philosophical tools to interrogate this process in.

This is a contribution that we have not yet begun to fully appreciate, even with the recent burgeoning of Beauvoir scholarship. We ourselves have been too preoccupied with the question of sexual difference as a metaphysical question, wondering in what way sexual difference exists. Does it exist as any other *produced object* exists? Does it exist as an

*originary source of meaning?* Beauvoir spent some time on these questions, but from the very opening pages of *The Second Sex*, she addresses what we now call gender not primarily as some existent thing, but as an operation of justification. She concerns herself less with what gender is, and more with what gender does. She reveals gender in its *working* life, describes its particular relation to the human condition of plurality and aspirations to sovereignty. It is my conviction that if we come back to this account of gender, we will be more able to address the conditions of the present.

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