“Linking affect and agency. Simone de Beauvoir’s political fiction.”

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“Man is a political animal because he is a literary animal.” Ranciere

Philosophic supports for Beauvoir’s literature- embodiment and receptivity.

Anti-humanists (structuralist, semiologist and poststructuralism) were the flavor of the month in Paris in the 60’s. Beauvoir and Sartre were branded as exponents of universal humanism, culpable of rationalism and voluntarism. Far from reading her philosophy systematically, anti-humanists studiously avoided her work. Her philosophy of engagement was believed to ignore the complexity of life and hence underestimate resistances to change. However I will argue that Beauvoir’s philosophy and fiction is more of a resource than assumed. I will use the *Blood of Others*, her second novel, to explore the linkages of affect, emotion and commitment. Affect theorists, the most recent incarnation of anti-humanism, challenge the idea of the emotionally self-contained subject as a residual bastion of Eurocentrism. Affects are social in origin, hence exogenous, yet they have bio-physical and psychological effects on subjectivity. In the spirit of anti-humanism, it is assumed that things have agency, and that humans must

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partake or participate in their agency by entrainment. They do this unconsciously and should do so more consciously. These theories provide an interesting account of transitional or transitory affects, how affects associated with things, crowds or the environment can enhance or deplete agency. However in so far as they jettison mimetic processes explored through psychoanalysis or embodied versions of phenomenology, it is difficult to understanding why people aren’t more enhanced by the affective pleasures of the world. I do not believe these theorists sufficiently account for endogenous affects, or the persistence or stability of affects in a specific subject. Since they focus on non-human flows of energy, or human dependence upon the non-human, they gloss over prior psychoanalytic insights regarding subject formation- how affects get transmitted between people and how they are stabilized. Why is it that Jean assumes the negative emotion of guilt, rather than dwelling happily in his luxurious upper middle class home. From the novel It has to do with his strong attachment to his mother, his mimetic relation to her conduct and his estrangement from his father. While affect theorists would explain his behaviour in terms of pheromones, bio-chemical responses, entrainment, brain circuitry, I think this is inadequate. Affect theorist’s anti-humanist disposition glosses over subject-centered accounts of affect transmission. When they do treat humans, they employ theories of radical empiricism or behavioral models to explore human-to-human or human to non-human transmission. Focusing on affect and believing it is distinct from emotion, they diminish the significance of emotion in politics and the role of personal socio-psychic structures in the transmission of perceptual or sensual experience.³ In

³ Davide Panagia believes that disruption in sensation causes a radical democratic moment. While there appears to such moments that don’t engage emotion, since they happen unconsciously and are best perceived on EMRI machines, such experiences are
doing so they fail to provide a convincing way of how subject’s differentially assume/discern affects. How some subjects are drawn to negative affects and stabilize them psychically, whereas others are not. To do so requires exploring differential psychic lives. Affect theorists might explain this stabilization process bio-physically and behaviourally. Davide Panagia uses Hume to do so, and in the process sustains the distinction between cognitive and sensual processes, treating psychoanalysis as bypassed by neuroscience. Not surprisingly he turns away from the narration of stories and turns to aesthetics.

I think psychoanalytic thinking still has a contribution to make. Not as a scientific theory, but as a classic, that has some enduring truths into subject formation. I will use Beauvoir’s *The Blood of Others* to explore how conduct and action flow from the embodied intertwining of affect and emotion. Interestingly enough, Beauvoir herself, did not subscribe to psychoanalysis, however a case could be made, as I do, that it helps explain the transmission of affects between humans, and how humans differentially engage humans, things and their environment. However her distinctive understanding of embodied subjectivity (a form of non-rationalist humanism) derived from existential phenomenology also helps us proceed.

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trivial as compared to the emotional attachments that underpin xenophobia, chauvinism, racism, sexism, heteronormativty. Should all these emotively driven political sentiments be glossed over in the name of transitory affect and its potential for a democratic **moment**? I’m not convinced. Further he calls for the conclusion of narratocracy, or the privileging of the word over sensation or image.
At the outset of *The Second Sex* Beauvoir pays tribute to Heidegger’s notions of the *mitsein*- being with and his notion of *being in the world*. Since the English translator, Parshley excised most of the Heideggerian language from *The Second Sex* and this translation prevailed until 2009, it is not surprising that Beauvoir’s critique of abstract humanism (with its individualist and disembodied assumptions) is underexplored in the English world. In fact she is assumed to be culpable of the abstract humanism that she attacks. This has something to do with the commonplace treatment of Beauvoir as disciple of Sartre and the treatment of her philosophy as an application of his dualist ontology to the women’s question.  

Beauvoir took her distance from Sartre’s ontological dualism as early as 1945. In her positive review of Merleau-Ponty’s non-dualist approach in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, her critique of Sartre is evident.

> for Merleau-Ponty my history is incarnated in a body which possesses a certain generality, a relation to the world anterior to myself, and that is why this body is opaque to reflection, and why my consciousness discovers itself to be ‘engorged with the sensible.’ It is not a pure for-itself, or, to use Hegel’s phrase which Sartre has taken up, a hole in being: but rather a hollow, a fold, which has been made and which can be unmade. (Beauvoir 1945, 366-67)

The body subject is part of a generality and therefore has an anterior relation to the world. The body does not make itself out of nothing. This generality is layered and textured, not simply the product of choices and ideas. In *Pyrrhus and Cineas* she distances herself from Sartre’s assumption that *hell is other people*. The other is not simply someone who

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4 The dualist and voluntarist perspective of the young Sartre, is at odds with the more historically and materially mediated work of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Interestingly enough the anti-humanist critics focus upon the young Sartre to make their case.
has to be negated as threatening my existence, for as a mitsein—we experience solidarity. Others can share or extend my projects.

Sartre was aware that we are embodied and situated consciousness, yet for him embodiment is something to be escaped. Since the subject is a being in the world, a pre-reflective body subject, comprised of sensible and affective modes of experience that are anterior to cognitive experiences, she sees agency as embodied. Since one’s relation these experiences are opaque, it impossible to bring them to consciousness, however they are assumed to have effects. The body is not a drag upon consciousness or an impediment to freedom, but connects with the generality of my being. This does not mean that the conscious decisions are not possible, but they emerge from this non-rationalist dimension of experience. Picking up on Heideggers’ notion of being in the world, the anterior/ pre-cognitive embodied relation to the world is assumed. Instead of being in the world, like an object in a box, separate from the world, we are enmeshed in the world. As one’s point of contact with the world, as an interface between the inside and outside, the body subject optimally assumes the facticities of the situation in order to act. Her notion of “body as situation” it is the site upon which symbolic, material and historical forces are inscribed, it is able to express one’s personal as well as macro-forces. These she imagines structures the situation, but does not determine what is possible. She theorizes the body as physiologically, psychically, socially and culturally defined. Bodily agency is affected by biological/biochemical facts, but these are not brute (natural) facts, but are influenced by the society they are part of. The aging body and its bio-physical decline, will affect one’s agency, but so does the socio-historical situation, in which the body subject find itself
within. A retired worker, who defined his life by his work, will find old age more difficult, than someone who has enjoyed a rich social life. Furthermore someone who is more positively engaged in the world will be able to navigate the bodily and social decline better. The world one encounters always exceeds one’s bodily grasp, but a more responsive and open grasp upon the world is possible. Since we are situated we cannot ever have a sense of the whole world, however the specific and general is possible.

Engagement and embodied subject formation

I will rely upon the *Blood of Others* to explore how affect gets transmitted, not only from things or the environment, but interpersonally. Affect is entwined with emotion producing embodied conduct, this assists in understanding the motivation of action. Beauvoir is more invested in seeing affects, pre-personal generality entwined with the personal (emotion) rather than envisioning affects as exogenous and transitory, flows coming from things or the environment that are assumed by the process of entrainment. Since neuroscience or affect theories challenge psychoanalysis and more subject centered approaches like Beauvoir’s embodied subjectivity, they gloss over or diminish the role of emotion as a source of motivation of conduct and action, which are still important aspects of political commitment.

Beauvoir looks at how *being in the world*, being responsive to others, taking one’s bearing in history, treating the things of the world with care are privileged (ontological)
human experiences. These modes of being are not secure, but must be instantiated, repeated, if one is going to led to a fuller, freer and engaged life. So far from one becoming more autonomous, separating oneself from others and the sensory world, Beauvoir promotes a more rooted relation to the world- assuming the anterior generality of existence as well as the facticities of life. This does not mean one simply is a cypher for the world. Nor must one submit to existing facticities, but rather one must respect one’s embeddedness and find one’s bearing in the world to become freer and more fulfilled in human relations.

Is Ranciere’s term partager similar to Beauvoir’s notion of engagement or commitment. However his anti-humanist orientation would distinguish them. For Ranciere partager presumes a sense of attachment, being part of, yet also being capable of dissensus, acts of separation. Beauvoir is less interested in conditions of intelligibility and more interested in conditions of human action, and what facilitates ethical action. Engagement like partager presumes conditions of sharing, being a part of a collective and hence is a precondition of disruption or dissensus. One can only truly disrupt the system, if one is a part of it, if one is psychically attached to others, and therefore can subvert it from within.

In terms of human action, embodied habits are preconditions of political commitment or political freedom. In spite of the fact that Beauvoir was critical of psychoanalysis, her appreciation of relational freedom has some strong similarities with object relations or attachment theories of psychoanalysis. Though she herself did not read Klein and spurned
psychoanalytic thinking. If we take the infamous statement of Freud, “where it (id) was there I (ego) will be,” we get some sense of Beauvoir’s presumption, one must extend the ‘I’ to include the non-rational aspect of the self. Less driven by unconscious desires and fears, less impetuous, one will be able to be open to the sensible and engage in a world alongside others, one will be able to bind oneself to a project. Judith Butler in her book the *Psychics of Power* self consciously uses the attachment theory of Melanie Klein to explain subject formation. The vulnerable child in seeking approval, love and security submits to parental authority. The fear associated with loss of primary love, and the repressed anger towards one’s parental figures, leads to human conformity. Humans have to be healthy attachments to Others (i.e. parents, friends, lovers) if they are to be self-defining (free) later in life.

For Beauvoir, the anterior generality of existence and our embodied opening onto the world predisposes one towards others, however psychically and social structurally there are impediments to responsiveness. Commitment is not a voluntary act, but presumes responsiveness to others, as well as the ability to persist in a project and stand up to power. Unlike those who conform or submitted to the German Occupation, members of the resistance, resisted. They were able to stand up to stronger powers, risk their lives to respond to the needs of their time.

Standing up to power, oddly enough presumes a receptivity to the world as well as a freely willed act of fidelity. Instead of being driven by one’s needs/desires/whims one is

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able to respond to the needs of one’s times. The ability to defer gratification, bind and
direct one’s energies are also essential to commitment. So embodied habits are important,
but this has to do with one’s primary emotional attachments and investments in the world
and others. Given that Beauvoir is not inclined to psychoanalysis, she doesn’t explore
healthy or frustrated attachments in any detail, however she is apprised of the
significance of embodied habits and how engagement furthers action. Recognizing the
weight of the past, she departs from the voluntaristic spirit of the young Sartre, Zizek and
Badiou. For Zizek the revolutionary act unexpectedly happens—something the subject
has to do, it cannot do otherwise, it just occurs… 6 There is no historical or social
preconditions or preparations to further that universalization. Badiou also believes that
the revolutionary act emerges out of nowhere without preparation. He believes ‘true’
subjects are free of relations. They are sustained by their fidelity, the strength of their
conviction. Their acts are essentially without Other and without weight. Shared fidelity is
the basis for subjective community or being- together. Since the revolutionary act is
singular, it means “nothing historically or communally established lends substance to its
process.” 7 Badiou’s and Zizek’s subject is empty, free of relations. This is in contrast
with Beauvoir who relies upon an embodied and situated subject, whose conscious and
bodily relations ought to be cultivated to orient themselves towards freedom for all.

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6 Zizek, Slavoj (1999) The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology,
London: Verso. p. 375
University Press p.15
Beauvoir recognizes the significance of the micro-political, how the subject must be reconfigure one’s relations to be “free.” The revolution must instantiate new democratic subjectivities and forms of power. As a consequence she did not join the Communist Party in the late 40’s for it had authoritarian personal practices, yet she was strongly attached to their emancipatory project. In supporting *le Chosir*, a liberal feminist movement, that tackled legal injustices and institutional sources of women’s oppression, she hoped to challenge impediments to emancipation, even though this movement glossed over those that were socio-economic in origin.

Beauvoir supported the broadening human agency through writing, reading as well as acting. Here is where literature has a role. One needs to reimagine oneself and the world to foster the revolution. One must understand the limits of a situation as well as re-vision agency. The self must be able to detach him/her self from his/ her immediate desires/ drives and be open to the rich sensible order to creatively negotiate the world. One must cease ruminating on oneself, one’s body, and forego the desire to be loved above all else. Beauvoir portrays women, who are so desperate to be loved completely and absolutely-searching for that unquenchable infantile love- that they continually conform to what they imagine others want. This is evident in the conduct of Helene below, as well as Paula in *The Mandarins*; Francoise and Xaviere in *She Came to Stay*. Beauvoir’s novels have been particularly good at capturing women stuck in narcissistic and other directed relations. Helene’s transition from a narcissist to one capable of making a commitment and living a public life is an exception.
Revolutionary action and the commitment that is presumed do not emerge *ex nihilo*, but must take into account the anterior embodied relations. Engagement is not a rational choice flowing from reasoned arguments or ethical commitments, but is prepared for corporeally. This presumes one’s is corporeally open to the experiences of the world and others within the world. Thereby it precludes solipsism, narcissism and an instrumental relation to the world. But this openness is not a given, but an achievement. If findings from neuroscience are correct and the brain of a neglected child, has undefined prefrontal lobe and an amygdala incapable of regulating emotions, then the world will be a bombing buzzing confusion. Here sensations will not be experienced pleasurably, but rather will be disorienting and threatening. Consequently one will not be able to sustain an open and receptive relation to the world. Neuroscientists describe those who suffer from anxiety disorders resisting the intensity of these experiences or feeling overwhelmed by them. such people engage in anti-social behaviour.

Not only neuroscience, but social psychology and psychoanalysis would agree that receptivity is an achievement, not something everyone is capable of. Some neuroscientists believe there is only a small window of opportunity, under the age of three before the brain develops underdeveloped due to neglect. Whereas many psychoanalysts and social psychologists believe that one can psychically reconfigure one’s relations. Although phylogenically our body’s are openings onto the world and others, this openness can be impeded psychologically by early insecure relations (neglect, frustrated attachment, persistent fear) and socially by structures that cultivate consumerist and instrumental relations. The optimal embodied relation that Beauvoir describes allows
the transmission of affects, but also presumes the ability to discern, or ward off negative affects. Such a disposition is a precondition for free and creative behaviour. In Beauvoir’s novels we see humans, often women, living through others, submitting to the powerful partners, this has powerful social consequences. However in *The Blood of Others* we witness how Jean, a young male child assumes the affective energies of his mother.

For Beauvoir personal freedom is a project, not just a spontaneous act of will. His involves the body as much as the mind, habit as much as conscious choice, taking action as much as assuming the facticities of the situation. Furthermore it involves others, but more than that, it involves working towards the freedom of all. Beauvoir says “in willing one’s own freedom one wills the freedom of all.”

Helene’s becoming- from narcissism to commitment.

In Helene we witness protracted shift in conduct. From impetuous and selfish, she begins to partake of the world, to be more receptive to others. Sympathy, concern about the suffering of others prompts commitment to the Resistance. Helene’s character is complex and mediated by her embodiment. At the outset of the novel Helene is trapped in her own desires, she cannot let go of an overwhelming need to be loved absolutely and unconditionally. This tyrannical infant, albeit in the body of a woman, makes infantile demands, evident in her capricious and imperious acts. She eyes “this brand new bike with a pale blue frame, its plated handle bars that sparkled against the dull stone of the

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8 Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p.47
wall. It was so lissome, so slender, that even when not in use it seemed to cut through the air.” [BOO, 36] Attracted by its beauty, its slenderness, its speed. She covets this bike “What a splendid prize, she thought of it all the time, twenty times a day, yet she was unable to lay her hands on it. ‘I’m getting soft.’ she thought sadly, when she was a child she did what she wanted without a moment’s hesitation.” [36] She shot a glance at the porters lodge. ‘Yes, I want it and I shall have it.’

Her agency is made possible by this bike. “She pinched one of the frail spokes between her fingers, she tested the brick coloured tyre- it was as hard as iron-how strange to think that it was only a thin tube filled with air! How proud and free it was: I’ll go everywhere I want I will come home late at night.” Does the bike simply mediate her longing for action, for freedom, or does the bike have its own agentic capacities? In terms of affect theorists there is agency in the bike- strong affective attention to the bike allows for the transmission of affect and power to the biker.

While the bike empowered Helene, allowed her free movement, in a world where movement was difficult. Her use of the bike was an effect of her impetuous disposition. It expressed her impulsive and instrumental relations to the world. These were also evident in her relations with men. She tells her boy friend Paul, “if you love me than you won’t go for dinner with your friend.” She is intrigued by Paul’s friend Jean and insists upon joining them for dinner. When she gets to the restaurant before Paul, she has no qualms in asking Jean to collect her bike. She has no regrets in getting him to steal the bike she covets and bring it to the restaurant. When he does, she does not feel badly, nor does she
apologize for having deceived him or threatened his liberty. Her desire trumps her ability to care for others.

Her self-centered/ narcissistic conduct is evident in her intimate relations. She describes greeting Paul with pleasure but after five minutes being bored with him. [38] She enjoys listening to Paul’s musing about their future life together. “I’ll fix up a nice little home for us, I’ll make you a big work table, strong in a nice quality wood. And a bookcase for your books. She allowed these pictures of homely happiness to pass before her mind’s eye: the beef simmering among baby onions, the cinema with choc ices.” [79] She allows herself to be caressed and held by his loving thoughts and deeds. Suddenly in the midst of bodily caresses, she rejects him. Paul’s physical caresses become dangerous. Beauvoir describes in vivid detail her negative affective experience of desire: “She felt enveloped in some pale sickly, vapour, she abandoned herself unresistingly to the charm which was slowing metaphorsing her into a plant….She felt her bones and muscles melt, her flesh became a humid and spongy moss, teeming with unknown life, : a thought buzzing insects stabbed her with their honeyed stings. … Paul put her on the bed and stretched out beside her, his fingers wove a burning tunic around her belly. Paralyzed by that net of burning silk, she would remain enclosed in that viscid darkness, for every an obscure and flabby jellyfish lying upon a bed of magic sea-anemones.” [80]

She pushed him away, “leave me alone.” He proposes to her, but she dismisses his proposal. ‘Would you kill yourself if I die, if you had to choose between me and your political work, what would you choose?’ He does respond in the way she wants, he is
dismissed. She sends him off, but is unhappy when he leaves, but refuses to call him back. She is frightened by her desire: her metamorphosis into a tree, a moss,\(^9\) then a jellyfish. She melts; she feels the stabbing of insects. How does one explain her imagination? She has strong negative affects associated with lovemaking and desire.

Psychoanalytically one can see this as frustrated attachment; fear of her desire, fear of being consumed or dominated by Paul, so she abjects him. She describes herself as “fond of him, but doesn’t really love him. She wanted to keep him, she wanted him to love her with no hope of return, but he left.”

Helene is impetuous: when her wishes get foiled, she responds angrily. Having cruelly dumped Paul in the midst of their amorous relations, she then pursues Jean. Jean is not so easily seduced. Respectful of his friend, Paul, Jean does not respond to her attention. He rebuffs her and she is furious. Not only cruel to Paul, unable to respond to his love, but cruel to herself. She wanted so desperately to be loved, that she goes off with someone else, someone who she is not particularly attracted to. She ends up having sex, getting pregnant and suffering a dangerous and painful abortion. Her desire to have Jean, is not diminished, but only magnified, by his refusal to respond to her overtures. She gets Jean to watch over her during the backstreet abortion. Witnessing this painful and near death experience is so moving that Jean feels responsible for her and leaves his longstanding girlfriend.

\(^9\) Beauvoir has been taken to task for fictionalizing such fantasies around female desire, however it appears to me totally consistent with Helene’s inability to be open to others. That such a vulnerable position for Helene would be terrifying.
Helene’s narcissism is characteristic not only of her relationship to Paul, but to Jean. She responds flippantly to Jean’s deep soul searching around the impending the Second World War. She doesn’t want Jean to leave her. She says “[the war] is not possible… it is stupid? Oblivious to Jean’s dilemma: his anxiety about fighting, as a communist and sympathizer with the USSR. He does not want to fight the Soviets, but he believes the Nazis must be stopped. The war he wanted to fight was the class war. Should he wait on the sidelines and wait out this war? Yet he expresses his desire to fight for France’s future freedom. Helene is not listening: she is only concerned that he might leave her. She blithely says she is shocked that he would think of fighting and insists that he should rely upon his father’s connections to get discharged on medical grounds [158]. Given that Jean hasn’t spoken to his father for years, rejected his patrimony and his middle class lifestyle, her response is infantile. Helene is unable to engage in a reasoned discussion, let alone listen to his dilemma. She is driven by her desire to be cherished over all else, she responds: “If you love me, you won’t be in such a hurry to go to war and get bumped off.” [158]

Again in psychoanalytic terms, we witness Helene’s infantile imperiousness. After having managed to get out of occupied Paris to the French countryside, she then decides to return to Paris. Her decision is spontaneous. Waiting for car to secure its gas supply, when the car is ready to leave she eyes a woman holding her baby – “she suddenly felt the weight of the child on her knees and the appeal of its reproachful eyes. With
astonishment she heard within her a voice from the past- others exist. You must be blind not to see them.” [202] She offers her place in a car to this young mother and infant, to expedite their journey to the free zone. The weight of the child was transmitted to Helene; the baby’s reproachful eyes trigger her action. It is not deliberate, but affective and spontaneous. She seems to open up, to be responsive to the situation and suffering of others. A moral sentiment is produced, “a voice from the past”- others exist Her selfishness is countered. Yet it is equally a symptom of her impulsiveness. All of a sudden the isolation of a country village, her distance from city life feels intolerable. She had to return to Paris, in spite of it being occupied by the Germans. Her ride had no sooner left, then she befriended a young woman and her grandmother. Although the latter two were starving, they shared their remaining bread with her. This exchange of bread was as significant as if the subsequent assertion of their sorority. When these women manage to hitch a ride back to Paris with German soldiers, they are told they will only take two riders, the young woman lies and tells him, Helene is her sister.

She felt transformed in the presence of these women. These events and acts trigger her change in behaviour. Beauvoir was wary of literature being didactic, producing exemplary characters and offering pat solutions to dilemmas. In her philosophy since humans are situated, always impure, struggling, failing as much as succeeding. And furthermore since human existence is always ambiguous, no absolute consciousness is possible, there is no perfection. However people like Helene manage to come to good judgments and good political decisions. While Helene manages to change her conduct, she does not undergo a total metamorphosis, nor does she become a model citizen.
After having had transformative, politicizing experiences in response to the German occupation, she entertains a German businessman’s promise of a job in Germany. Her enthusiasm is untarnished by her friends and family’s distain about this project. As the dinner continues, she has second thoughts. She begins to think of the lavish spread that German officers enjoy, in contrast to meager food supplies food in the French countryside or elsewhere in Paris. She asked if she could get her friend’s husband, Marcel, now a prisoner in Germany returned, he said it was unlikely. “Not all the French were reliable friends, he said in a courteous voice, things are necessities of history.” [211] Is the dinner the agent of change? Or is it that the dinner leads her to muse of the austerity, suffering and coercion that her friends and she have been subject to? Mr. Bergmann ate steak, leeks and Marcel would have eaten nothing, why am I here? She refused desert – strawberries and cream, chocolates and cigarettes. She wants nothing except Yvonne’s security Marcel’s liberty, the life of the Engineer shot this morning mattered, she moved away… there was an icy silence…All at once a 1000 daggers stabbed her heart; I exist and I have lost Jean forever. I do not think I shall be able to leave for Berlin. [214]

In being responsive to the suffering of others, Helene makes good decisions. Her commitment is driven not by rational deliberation, but by an affective/embodied reaction to events. Her friend Yvonne, a Jew in hiding, is under threat of been rounded up by the police. She sees Yvonne’s mother being harassed by the Germans and she herself is almost arrested as Yvonne. Furthermore she witnesses the carting away of Jewish
children on the Contrascarpe. Taken from her mother’s arms little Ruth cries out. There is nothing that anyone can do to intervene, without risking their life. Witnessing this act of a child being torn from her mother’s arm is unbearable. Helene decides to go to Jean, her former boyfriend, who she swore never to see again, and asks if he can help Yvonne escape. Beauvoir describes Helene as having found herself asking if she could join the resistance. The words tripped off her mouth, she did so without forethought. Again this attests to the importance of emotion as a motivator of just decisions and action. Helene’s decision to join was not deliberative, but happened spontaneously, though it was foreshadowed by her previous embodied practices. Her strong emotional attachment to the suffering of Yvonne, baby Ruth being ripped from her mother’s arms, Marcel’s imprisonment lead her to act. These affective/ emotive experiences are entrained, shared, foreshadowing her political commitment. After several acts of very risky work as a driver for the Resistance, she is killed.

Over the course of the novel, we witness the transformation of Helene: from impetuous, instrumental and cruel towards others, she acts with generosity, receptivity and sympathy. Her judgment and commitment are motivated by emotion, but also reason. At the outset of the novel she scorns politics as stupid, but as the German Occupation persists she experiences our lives are interdependent. In order to further France’s future freedom, she joins the resistance.

_The incipience of commitment- linking affect/emotion to action- the life of Jean_
In the *Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir is critical of forms of Marxism that sees the meaning in history as a “mechanical resultant” – (EA 21) For Beauvoir commitment is not predetermined by one’s class position: many members of the working class are not committed to the revolution and some members of the middle classes are. It depends upon one’s mode of being in the world, one’s sensibility and embodied subjectivity. Political commitments are foreshadowed in ones corporeal relations to others. This is evident in her treatment of Jean. Conscious political decisions, in the case of Jean, compliment his early corporeal mode of being in the world. Again, his action is much less a product of free choice than one might have expected from an existential thinker. Beauvoir respects the role of the body subject in action: personal and public actions both.

Affect is transmitted via Jean’s house. “The blue upholstery velvet was soft to the cheek; the kitchen, gleaming with copper, exuded a good smell of fat and caramel; from the drawing room came a murmur of silk smooth voices.” These pleasant sensual experiences of the upper floors of his house, clashed with the darkness, griminess, boredom of ground level workshop. His experience of his luxuriant environment was tainted by the suffering of those who worked in his father’s factory below their apartment. “Under dirty panes, boredom stagnated, the smell of other’s work: sunlight flooded the old oak furniture whilst the people below were stifling in the dull light of green shaded lamps; throughout the afternoon the machine purred monotonously. Sometimes he fled; sometimes he remained motionless for hours, allowing the sense of guilt to enter him through his eyes,
ears and nostrils.” [8.] His response to the house is triggered more by smell, taste, touch and sight as words. Witnessing the pain on the “lifeless faces of working women” “the swaying of their journey mingled their sweat and their sorrows and the heavy atmosphere,” he was sensitized to their suffering. Their pain was communicated through his senses: his eyes and his nose: he smelt their suffering. “I was silent but I sensed the truth: voluptuously, as if it were incense, the corrupt odour infested the town, the world, the underground, it was the same anguish that choked me.” [14] It was not only a smell, like incense, that infested his environment, but he describes the experience of choking on the soup that was put before him. Having accompanied his mother, to visit Louise, the cook upon the death of her baby, he is unable to swallow his soup. His father chivied him to eat: “it’s very sad that Louise’s baby is dead, but not all our life are we going to mourn it. Now, just hurry up! I drank…the hard voice had loosened the tightness about my throat, with each mouthful something flowed into me which was more nauseating than the smell of the printing presses. [11] What is so hard to swallow was the sufferings of others. While he was supposed to enjoy his well-cooked meal, supposed to partake of festivities that evening, he could not for he could not stop thinking about Louise’s tears and suffering. He tells us of “his sin” – “the sin of being another.” His guilt was transmitted from his mother to him via embodied affect.

Affect theory would have us respect the agency of the house, the affects communicated and responses assumed. But if we look more carefully into Beauvoir’s descriptions, the affective is entwined in emotion. Jean’s guilt regarding his class privilege permeates his family house. “From the dark ground floor the odour of guilt insinuated itself in the
whole house. ‘One day, it will be your house.’ On the front of the building there were letters engraved in the stonework: Blomart and Sons, Printers. [9] His family house was infused with feelings of privilege and guilt surrounding that privilege. In order to stop feeling guilty he had to change his relationship to the world. Jean had to leave the house and re-configure his relations to the world.

Affect theorists see agency in things (Davide Panagia, Jane Bennett). In this situation they would attribute powers to the house, its vibrant matter would further the agency of Jean, if he could only apprehend it. People who visited the house would be in touch with its luxuriant affects, its pleasurable smells, and sensual inviting fabrics. Presumably this provides warm and inviting experiences and even democratic moments. However the experience of guilt, that overlays Jean’s experience precludes such sentiments. So we can hardly assume affect, is shared by all. To explore this subjective aside of affect transmission experience, the stability and disposition towards specific affects, an embodied phenomenology or psychoanalysis will help us proceed.

In The Blood of Others, both Jean and his Mother felt guilty of their privilege, and did much to minimize it. The experience of guilt was not verbally communicated to Jean, but rather picked up, or sensed in the presence of his mother. Guilt appears to have been communicated through his mother’s gestures and her embodied relations to things. Jean “was sure his mother knew of his uneasiness which dulled the brilliance of the sunniest days: for her too through the shining parquet floor, through the hanging of silk and deep pile carpets seeped guilt.” The presence of this emotion was not something that was
articulated, but was transmitted prereflectively, bodily. Jean speculates “perhaps she had meet it [guilt] somewhere else, in unknown shapes; she carried it everywhere, under her fur coats; under the dresses gleaming with sequins which clung to her little rounded body.”[9] Guilt informed her embodied gestures, and conduct. “That was why she spoke apologetically to the servants and to the trade’s people, she walked with small hurried steps to reduce event the amount of space she required on earth. He would have liked to ask her about it about he never quite knew what words to use.” [9] Transmission of this affect was a bodily experience, even when Jean tried to have a conversation about it, he was stymied, for she weakly defended their familial privilege. “One day he tried to talk about the workmen, and she said quickly” oh they don’t mind so very much- they are used to it… her words never did carried much weight… but when she feverishly cut a baby’s layette for the cook’s infant, which she could have bought quite easily at The Bon Marche, he understood.” She did not speak of her guilt, but her unease with her privilege was evident in her habits. Her need to sew for the cook’s baby, rather than to buy a layette at the department store, expressed her need to say, I too work. Her tentativeness around workmen, her care and affection towards those who worked in her house, were her way of mitigating her guilt, and class privilege.

The guilt that Jean sensed in his mother’s conduct- her tentative embodied habits (i.e. her timid steps, her cautiousness around workers, her inability to feel as if she deserved this luxurious house) were not evident in his father’s embodied conduct. He describes his father as “unmoved by the thick air that lingered on the stair way,” Jean’s father stymied his suggestion that the air circulation be improved in the workshop. While Jean’s mother
conduct was unassuming, his father took charge and exuded entitlement. “He had a right to the luxuries that surrounded him since he did not trouble to enjoy them… his cigars, his burgundy and his Armagnac 1893, were honorable distinctions. [14] Jean sensed his father’s sentiments. “When I innocently began to ask him questions, at first he smiled: later he spoke with bitter pride of his abstemious and hardworking life.” [14] Not only did Jean’s father feel his luxury was well deserved, he was so busy, he couldn’t enjoy the pleasures of his labour, but he sneered at Jean’s equalitarian sentiments.

“Equalization merely reduces everything to its lowest level…. you will never raise the masses; all you will succeed in doing is to abolish the elite, his voice was cutting unanswerable, deep in his eyes was fear.”[14] Jean was not convinced by his father’s words, because he had already sensed that the disadvantaged, the poor as exploited. His mode of being in the world: his sensibility, his sense of responsibility for the suffering of others, had been transmitted via his mother. So although he heard his father’s words he had already made up his mind.

In the character of Jean, we see Beauvoir exploring the complexity of political commitment and freedom. Jean was member of the bourgeoisie, the owing classes¹⁰, yet he was bodily connected to the poor and disadvantaged. His affective relations had been transmitted from his mother’s embodied relations to the world. Affective and emotion are entwined, in Beauvoir descriptions of the luxurious house, the pleasures of ownership are

¹⁰ Beauvoir and Sartre’s political commitment to radical ideals often came under attack, because they were members of the working class. In this novel and in Mandarins Beauvoir tackles the complexity of one’s lived. As jean worked for the revolution, so did Sartre and Beauvoir. It is not surprising that the two main male figures were Jean and Paul.
snubbed. Attentive to their suffering and boredom, he felt guilty about his privilege and felt responsible for all. This led him to change his circumstances (live the life of a worker) and support communism. It is no surprise that during the German Occupation he becomes one of the leaders of the Resistance movement. His political commitment cannot be read off his objective class position, but it was anticipated in his lived relations with the material world. His embodied experiences and sentiments foreshadow his life choices- to become a trade unionist and later organize the resistance movement. His personal disposition, habits, identities, emotions and sensibility, bear the traces of his adult political commitment.

He tells us of “his sin” – “the sin of being another.” Jean describes his home as luxurious and light, in contrast to the grim, dim lighting of the workshop, the liveliness on the upper floors versus the boredom on ground floor. His father experienced this house differently. Jean’s commitment to the working classes, his efforts to join the communist party are an expression of his embodied habits and emotions: his weekly visits to working class parts of town, his sympathy for the suffering of the working classes. His relation to his body and others were marked by his guilt and sense of responsibility for others. He could not eat or enjoy the festivities of his house party knowing of Louise’s suffering.

Consistent with Beauvoir’s embodied phenomenology free choices do not emerge ex nihilo, but must emerge from an embodied subject “en situation.” Historical and social factors have a role to play, but how one lives them, takes into account one’s personal relations to those structural forces. In this way Beauvoir accommodates social structural
factors and history, without denying human freedom: the capacity to have some influence upon how they affect one’s life. Jean’s plans to “clear out”: to leave his home and privileged life behind. He cannot simply change his mind, but must change the material conditions of his life. It is not that he doesn’t make conscious choices, but Beauvoir wants to appreciate that they arise out of embodied conduct and material conditions. While he made conscious choices - to pursue an apprenticeship with his father’s firm, to become a worker rather than an owner, to forego his inheritance, these acts were consistent with his sensibility, emotional connection to his mother and the working classes. His embodied habits/ disposition were not chosen. He did not choose to assume his mother’s guilt nor did he choose to feel responsible for Louise’s suffering, but he did. Transmission of sentiments and sensibility is approached best by mimesis: affectively charge identification and bodily imitating of experience.

Beauvoir’s anti-humanist critics excoriate her for prioritizing freedom of choice, yet in my careful reading of the Jean’s embodied being, willful choice and reflection take up a secondary role. This brings me to a second shortcoming of affect theorists, how do they make sense of judgment, rational political decisions? While the primacy of rational deliberation in political judgment and action has been noted for some time, they still have a role to play in politics, however qualified. For this reason, Beauvoir’s entwinement of affect and emotion and the emergence of judgment and choice from one’s embodied situation is worth rethinking. His conscious decisions and acts compliment his prior embodied affective relations that infuse his early domestic life. His embodied being, what
Heidegger calls one’s mode of being-in-the world, allows for the entwining of affect/emotion and the emergence of judgment and action.

The Event- navigating between voluntarism and historical materialism

Through Beauvoir’s concept of the situation, she captures the significance of the event. Again this points to the wrongheadedness of seeing Beauvoir as a rational humanist. The event is an exterior that imposes itself upon subjectivity: this event exceeds conceptualization and action. As the Nazi’s were entering Paris, and Helene was preparing her exodus, this moment was transformative. She describes “the impetuous flow of motorcars, the farm carts of refugees slowly rolling past, transporting whole villages. Huge wagons, laden with hay covered with tarpaulins; mattresses and bicycles were piled up from and back, and in the middle, as motionless as waxwork figures, the family was grouped under the shade of a big umbrella.”... [192-3] “The ceremony of retreat in face of defeat, the experience of evacuation, leaving one’s home and most of one’s belongings behind, is a painful one. At that moment Helene sees “the future as ebbing, drop by drop, and the past was being liquidated... “the whole world was nothing but an exile without hope of return” [193.] The event of exile is imposed externally, an event shared by all the evacuees as well as those that stayed behind. The Nazis occupation meant the French were no longer free- they no longer had a future. While this event is imposed upon the Parisians, how individuals responded to the event is specific. Helene’s description of her life in Paris as she prepares to leave, is personal. She describes her past as “amongst these islands of stone.” 193. The coldness,
imperviousness, separateness of an islands of stones, is to be contrast with the warmth, shared conviviality of human relations in peace time France. This experience of exile is formative for Helene. At the outset of the novel she scorns politics for preoccupying the men in her life. When Jean was in the process of deciding whether or not to join the war effort, she was distracted and uninterested. She thought the war was “stupid.” Over time and with the outbreak of the war and the Occupation, she begins to realize that she is part of a community and that the evils that the Nazi’s have inflicted upon her friends and herself can and must be stopped.

As we shall see, an event, like the German Occupation, may call forth a response, but the response in part depends upon the particular individuals’ receptiveness to respond. Beauvoir eschews a voluntarist position, which presumes that one is always free to respond as one wishes. For Beauvoir one’s acts are not free in this way, one’s past encroaches upon one’s present. Helene’s ability to respond to the War in this way, presumed her shifts in conduct.

Beauvoir recognizes the generality of the event as well as its specificity. She believes that literature is capable of appreciating this leveled and layered experience. During the German Occupation, Nazi’s regulations and laws constrained French citizen. Some where more constrained than others, but none were free to do as they wished. Beauvoir, here takes her distance with Sartre’s notion of absolute freedom. Evident in his renowned claim that “the slave in chains is as free as his master. [B&N 1956,550] For Beauvoir, the Occupation, limited one’s effective freedom, as the slave’s chains limited their actual
freedom. The War called forth a response, but not everyone responded to it similarly. How one responds to Nazi’ regulations may depend upon one’s social status, religious faith, but also one’s personal history and choices. As a Jew, Yvonne was not able to free to move around as Helene did. She would not have hitched a ride with German soldiers as Helene did, since she was being pursued by the Nazis. Helene, not only fraternized with German soldiers, but managed to get a job offer from a German businessman. Not all Catholic women, who were daughters of small shopkeepers, were like Helene, her personal history affects her ability to act in the public space.

Beauvoir wants to avoid the deterministic implications of historical materialism, without denying the structuring effects of one’s class, gender and race. One is not a free chooser, for one must assume one’s embodied factities to order to act. The War and the Occupation were events that were imposed, but they were lived differently. How events are lived has to do with one’s personal history as well as the situation in which one finds oneself. At the outset Helene felt politics were annoying and irrelevant. Her reaction to her lover Jean’s decision to become a French soldier was impetuous. “You must not love me if you want to run off and get bumped off.” She later understands his commitment to liberate France from the Nazis, for she herself joins the Resistance.

In these last few sections I have look at how affects get entwined with emotion, and how emotional attachments impede or facilitate the transmission of affects, affect theorists in sharply distinguishing affect and emotion, energies associated with sensorium and cognition, in doing so they leave these social experiences behind, and since they affect
agency, this I think is a problem. However as I have shown they are important to explore the micro-political and how the micro-political feeds into broader political fields.

Beauvoir believes literature is able to explore aspects of the specificity of human conduct as well as its general milieu. Quote.

Literature as democratic pedagogy.

In addition to exploring the complex process of agency, from affect to judgment and action, Beauvoir also fictionalizes specific political problems and dilemmas that faced her times. Some literary theorists discount such ‘work’ as didactic and hence not good literature. Maurice Blanchot, renowned literary critic of the day, argues that Beauvoir ‘s *The Blood of Others*, is a “thesis novel” offering exemplary characters, whose personal contradictions get resolved in pat solutions and producing directives. Personally I don’t agree. As I have shown, Helene is no heroine, she does not overcome her selfishness in response to the war, rather in one of her last acts, she still imagines she could have worked for a German businessman in Berlin. Her personal life is not resolved. She experiences setbacks and failure. Nor is Jean a hero. While he has some admiral traits: he acknowledges the source of his privilege and is committed to change the world, however he suffers from being overly responsible for the suffering of others. In his relationships with women he tells them what they need to hear and therefore does not connect with his own desire. After he witnesses Helene’s suffering from an abortion, he feels so badly for her, he accepts the role as her lover, since she needs him.
The origins of the resistance movement - reflections on violence.

In the case of Jean, we see how his affective/emotive relation to his mother foreshadowed his political commitment. Internalizing his mother’s guilt and egalitarian attitudes, his caring relations to others, he tried to join the Communist Party, however they were suspicious of his privileged class position and he was spurned. Nevertheless, Jean is the prime mover of the resistance, he was the one who pushed for real action. Again his decision to fight the Nazi to build France’s future, came out of the demands of the situation as well as was consistent with his mode of being in the world. Unless France resisted and tried to challenge the German occupation they would have no future of freedom. They would be under the thumb of the Nazis. This was unacceptable.

Jean’s political commitment requires self-sacrifice, even though he realized he loved Helene more than anyone else, to commit himself to the cause, he had to “break with Helene for good.” He had to be free to face the demands of the moment, and possibly make sacrifices that he might not be able to make had he been married.

In addition, he knew Helene’s personal needs trumped all political concerns, that she did not understand the war. She managed to get him transferred from active duty to a desk job in Paris, without consulting him. He would be a proof-reader. He was mortified. “You have spoilt everything, Jean tells her, you treated me like an enemy. Helene response you never loved me, you are only too pleased to get rid of me. [181] He was ashamed by this transfer.” He had often hated his face, but this aspect was the most odious - that of a
coward. [178] “they will go to the front line without me, I shall sleep alone… when leaving the station as if on leave…I kept close to the walls as I feared meeting Laurent or Gauthier…they would say ‘Blomart got himself posted to Paris.’ [179]

Again emotions and affects associated with them drove Jean to make a huge political commitment. His feelings of shame for retreating from the line of fire to a safe office job, were vindicated by his founding the resistance movement. Whereas some wanted to sow the seeds of rebellion by disseminating subversive literature, Jean believed more had to be done, he wanted direct action. Again the decision to found the resistance was a complicated one. Beauvoir fictionalizes how the decision might have arisen. It did not arise from a consensual decision of interlocutors. In fact, affect theorists might say that the august surroundings of the meeting might have had something to do with it. The organizers of the movement were not working men, but powerful ones. “Curtains, heavy carpets, leather portieres. Deadened the echoes of the world. On the massive desk glasses filled with spirits. What could we do?

Leclerc was happy to found a newspaper, produce and distribute newspapers [188] But Jean Blomart had real action in mind. “if we want to establish a body capable of rallying the masses, capable of holding out until the end of the war and building the future, we must act, said Blomart. “We only exist if we act.” Parmentier interjects: “I can’t see the use of murdering a few unfortunate soldiers.” 189. “Endangering men in a profitless manner and what about reprisals? Blomart says, “ French blood must be shed, so that the policy of collaboration may be impossible. And failure is possible.
In this conversation, Beauvoir plays out various arguments, for and against the use of violence for a good cause, for France’s freedom. Unlike the communists of her day, she did not believe that the Parti Communist Francaise were justified in using violence to protect the revolution. In fact she argues that the taking of lives is never justified, even though it is necessary. Given the situation, that France would be condemned to Nazi domination for the next generation without violent struggle, it is necessary. But no one is exonerated of these acts, everyone involved has dirty hands. “What ever one did one is always guilty, but we must presume we will succeed. [189] Do you think all means are good, asked Leclerc. On the contrary, Jean says, all means are bad. [190] How are we to be sure we are not fighting for bourgeois capitalism. Blomart argues “we can not know for sure, but anything is better than fascism.” In this short passage Beauvoir has condensed the arguments for violence. Violence is not justified, even if the cause is a good one, like the resistance, collective struggle against Fascist domination. All means are bad – violence is necessary, and political actors must accept responsibility for those acts. Furthermore there is no certainty that violence will yield the desired outcome, yet one must take the risk, otherwise fascism will prevail.

Beauvoir’s reflections on political violence reoccur throughout the novel. I don’t believe Beauvoir delivers pre-formulated messages. On the contrary she fictionalizes the complexity of using violence. Nonviolence in the situation of war (armed struggle) is unlikely to be successful, however too much violence can be risky. When the resistance successfully blows up a Nazi headquarter, these acts of sabotage are met with reprisals -
hostages are taken and punished by death. Jean is responsible for the loss of blood of others, the blood of his comrades. However, his situation is difficult, if he refuses to hurt the Nazis then the resistance will lose ground and ultimately the Germans will succeed. His conviction is complicated by from his mother’s comments, she intuits that he is responsible for these acts of sabotage as well as the Nazi reprisal, but does not openly confront him, but judges these acts reprehensible. “Those responsible should give themselves up. “Let those who want to fight, fight and shed their own blood this is murder.”

(224) This time when the soup is served during the family dinner, he eats. Unlike the previous incident where he refused to swallow his soup, chivied on by his dad. This time his father supports him. “They cannot give themselves up they owe it to the cause.” 223 Jean ‘s mother condemnation of violence was not without weight. If the Nazis are to be defeated violence is necessary, but she also alludes to the problem with communist violence, people can’t be sacrificed to a cause, that would deny their individuality and they can’t be treated as ants. He leaves his home tormented, torn between is mother’s words and father’s, struggling between a moral position and political needs. “I will not give myself up. … she will not forgive me.” 224 “I leave a criminal resigned to my crime. I cannot go on, but I must go on.” 225

His responsibility is complicated by the death of his former girlfriend. The novel begins and ends with Jean describing Helene as his inspiration and his responsibility. She made the choice to join the resistance; but it was not his choice, however he feels responsible for her choice. He feels guilty. We also is torn between his mother’s moral position and
his Father’s political realism. In the end, politics and the need to triumph over the Nazis prevail. Lives had to be sacrificed.

Again to say that this novel is directive, didactic, as Blanchot claims is to miss much. *The Blood of Others* is a good political fiction.