

## Existential Theory

French philosophy, which has formed us, scarcely knows more than epistemology. But for Husserl and the phenomenologists, the awareness that we have of things is not limited to a knowledge of them. (Sartre, [1939] 1947: 31)

There had been a growing interest in Marxism in the France of the Third Republic and French communism split away from the other socialists (taking the journal *l'Humanité* with it) in alignment with Bolshevism after the Russian Revolution of 1917. Mauss held that Lenin had been influenced by Durkheim (via Sorel), and, as we have seen, wrote a sociological 'assessment' of Bolshevism. Mauss's texts can be seen retrospectively to have recognised that there could have been a *rapprochement* between Durkheimian and Marxist theory, but the way that Leninism and Bolshevism developed towards autarchy made this impossible. During the inter-war period wide groups of intellectuals in France began to take up positions relative to Marxist social theory and the political divisions, particularly the division between Stalin and Trotsky after the death of Lenin, within the communist movement. As we have seen in the last chapter, Georges Bataille had attempted to fuse Marx, Durkheim and Nietzsche together into a 'sacred sociology'. Sartre and de Beauvoir, however, stood off from politics in the 1930s. Gradually the two moved to take up radical positions in social theory based on their reading of German philosophical attempts to remedy the ungrounded nature of positive social analysis.<sup>1</sup> It is not significant here to ask whether or not their philosophy would lead inevitably, as Aron has suggested, to radical egalitarian conclusions as a logical outcome of their presuppositions; it is only important to note that in different ways Sartre and de Beauvoir brought their own version of existentialism into contact with the Marxist variant of Saint-Simonianism to develop a new body of theory. In this chapter I examine Sartre's route to Marxism, and de Beauvoir's attempt to develop an existential ethics, before looking at examples of how de Beauvoir applied the method in two famous analyses (Poster's account of 1975 discusses in detail the various existential groups but ignores de Beauvoir, whose importance is still underrated in Gutting 2001: 158–80).

### Sartre and de Beauvoir

Sartre was called into the army where he spent two years, and then he was imprisoned in a camp, Stalag, XII D, for nine months. This experienced



changed him fundamentally. During his imprisonment he began lengthy discussions on political issues with the camp priest Father Perrin, who concluded that Sartre 'had decided to leave his ivory tower' (Cohen-Solal, 1988: 157). The new political programme Sartre had worked out 'owed a great deal to both Fourier and Saint-Simon' (1988: 158). When he rejoined de Beauvoir in Paris – he was released on the basis of a false medical certificate (September 1940–March 1941) – he appeared to de Beauvoir to be a changed man, with a marked 'accusatory' attitude towards her (Bair, 1991: 248). In place of the contemplative thinker, Sartre had become anxious for political engagement, and involved in resistance to German occupation.

Back in Paris, Sartre took up teaching at the Lycée Pasteur, but also began with Merleau-Ponty to set up a group called 'Socialism and Liberty' which by June 1941 had fifty adherents. In the summer of 1941 Sartre wrote a political document of about a hundred pages, now lost, which outlined his vision of a new social constitution for France. It was anti-communist, yet inspired by the utopian socialists. He proposed a currency based on labour value, a form of political representation through occupational groups, and a separation of executive from judiciary (Cohen-Solal, 1988: 169). The 'Socialism and Liberty' group dissolved soon after as the wider resistance movement became organised.

During the rest of the war, Sartre spent much of his time writing the huge manuscript which was to appear in 1943 as *Being and Nothingness*, at the same time his play *The Flies* was produced in Paris. The immediate postwar success of novels, plays and his philosophical publications, combined with those of de Beauvoir, was also matched with the success of their new journal *Les Temps Modernes*, which Gallimard agreed to finance in 1944. Gradually Sartre's theoretical position moved towards Marxism, but with carefully guarded independence from the French Communist Party (PCF), to what Merleau-Ponty called Sartre's 'ultra-bolshevism' (1974: 95–202), through the Cold War and the subsequent period.

### Marxism and ethics

Sartre's Marxism was conceived from the beginning as a form of *verstehende Marxismus*. Marxism, Sartre held, had become immobilised in *cliché* formulas. The entire general theory developed by Marx needed to be re-constructed on the basis of an existential humanism, in which individual freedom was the guiding principle (Sartre, [1945] 1973: 23–56). Drawing inspiration from the recently published writings of the young Marx, Sartre developed his new interpretation around the concepts of *praxis* (man makes himself through his projects), and alienation (in the modern capitalist world the products of man's projects were reified and turned against him). Thus the Saint-Simonian call for a new morality and society, and the Marxist theory of the capitalist mode of production, were in the Sartrean vision combined with a theory which tried to reintegrate social and individual existence.

theory of action and to recast this as a general theory of history. The radical nature of this project meant, according to Sartre, that

The dialectical knowing of man, according to Hegel and Marx, demands a new rationality. Because nobody has been willing to establish this rationality within experience, I state as a fact – absolutely no one, either in the East or in the West, writes or speaks a sentence or a word about us and our contemporaries that is not a gross error. (Sartre, [1957] 1963: 111)

*The Ethics of Ambiguity* ([1947] 1948) was de Beauvoir's major contribution to existential moral philosophy. Written by someone who was, scandalously, in revolt against bourgeois marriage, she became doubly infamous. First for living openly a life of an independent woman, gaining her own independent income from her intellectual work. But secondly, for establishing a relationship with Sartre that formed a privileged site for undisclosed discussions of the private relations with their other close sexual partners (as revealed in detail on the publication of de Beauvoir's letters to Sartre). In these letters de Beauvoir admits to Sartre in 1945 that at least one other person was deeply damaged on learning of the way she had been manipulated in these interpersonal experiments (see de Beauvoir, 1991: 389).

A literal translation of de Beauvoir's book on ethics would be 'For an Ethics of Ambiguity' (*Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*), and it examines from a number of points of view the consequences of recognising fundamental human free agency and responsibility for it. She considers the problem of whether this freedom is itself willed, or is the ultimate ground. Her conclusion is that 'my project is never founded; it finds itself' (de Beauvoir, 1948: 26). In this sense de Beauvoir can be read as one of the most radical of the existentialists, one who does not seek a ground for theory. At base, as it were, is not the will to freedom but *nothing*, and in order 'for meaning ... to justify the transcendence which discloses it, it must itself be founded, which it will never be if I do not choose to found it myself' (1948: 25). Freedom is not a 'thing or quality naturally attached to a thing', it is of the nature of 'the original upsurge of our existence' (1948: 25). In de Beauvoir's idea of existential morality then, the ground is a 'perpetual tension' not a kind of permanent substratum of the life-world. Thus the ethics of ambiguity in effect become de Beauvoir's ground. She is keen to take on the argument that the general idea of existential freedom is 'only a hollow formula and offers no concrete content for action' (1948: 78).

But de Beauvoir does not deliver a kind of existentialist ten commandments from her chosen ground. The argument is a complex one which arrives more at method than a positive content: 'Ethics does not furnish recipes ... one can merely propose methods' (1948: 134). It seems clear that the reason de Beauvoir's argument is complex is because she wishes to pursue a case that is based on a subtle dialectic of freedom, being and existence. Once one recognises the tensions inherent in human existence, then any ethical relation must recognise the situated necessity of the freedom of the other. Both



denials, but so too do the misplaced modes of triumphalism associated with successful liberation movements which find their victories turn to new forms of repression. Thus the very definition of a specific and concrete ethical content would freeze agency into being. The method 'consists in each case of confronting the values realised with the values aimed at, and the meaning of the act with its content' (1948: 152).

Existentialist ethics turn on the assertion of freedom but in the framework of a recognition of the 'concrete thickness of the here and now' and of the fact that 'human adventures stand out against the background of time, each finite to each, though they are all open to the infinity of the future and their individual forms thereby imply each other without destroying each other' (1948: 122). The examples and illustrations she provides are not trivial ones: concrete issues of Stalinism, fascism, the dilemmas of the activists of the liberation in France, are considered from the point of view of the moving configurations of antinomies of action. For example, the Resistance is considered as 'a negation, a revolt', but after the removal of the force which brought a unifying target to the movement there is a revival of 'old divisions and hatreds' (1948: 96ff., esp. 132). De Beauvoir at one point appeals to the idea of 'permanent revolution' as the most adequate concept of the process of liberation: 'the truth is that if division and violence define war, the world has always been at war and always will be; if man is waiting for universal peace in order to establish his existence validly, he will wait indefinitely: there will never be any *other* future' (1948: 119).

By the 1950s, the existential programme had become the centre of the most theoretical debates in France, and its influence was felt world-wide. Several internal differences had become important and the way that existentialism as a philosophy was united with political tendencies, organisations and parties was widely reflected on. One such characteristic reflection was written by the young Lyotard in 1954. In 1954 Lyotard joined the *Socialism or Barbarism* Marxist group: it was the year of the French defeat in Vietnam (Dien Bien Phu), the year the Algerian war of independence began. But it was rare indeed for any of these debates within the Marxist groups in the 1950s to refer to de Beauvoir, even though her work, *The Second Sex*, had posed and successfully overcome many of the problems raised in these methodological controversies.

### Simone de Beauvoir's analyses

Simone de Beauvoir wrote two important studies applying existential methods. *The Second Sex*, of 1949, is by far the best known; *Old Age* (1972) is another application, and deserves to be better known (Deutscher, 1999).

In de Beauvoir's eyes, philosophy was principally Sartre's invention; she 'took [her] cue from him' (in Schwarzer, 1984: 109). She emphasised in these interviews that '*The Second Sex* with its philosophical background of

women' (1984: 109). There has been considerable debate about just how far de Beauvoir influenced Sartre's own philosophical development. Some recent commentators have suggested that de Beauvoir might well be responsible for having created some of the key ideas hitherto thought to be Sartre's (Fullbrook and Fullbrook, 1993). But Sartre's dependence had already been suspected. Asked on these points in an interview, de Beauvoir replied that they had worked on many issues together and on specific points Sartre accepted her point of view. For example, 'in the first version of *Being and Nothingness*, he talked of freedom as though it were quasi-total for everybody ... But I insisted on the fact that there are situations where freedom cannot be exercised, or where it is simply a mystification' (in Schwarzer, 1984: 109). It seems clear that this Beauvoirian idea is worked out at length in *The Second Sex*.

### Woman: être-pour-les-hommes

*The Second Sex* is probably best known for the proposition 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (de Beauvoir, 1972: 295). In this work this proposition is put to the test in the most thorough examination. The idea that all human beings possess the same fundamental freedom – the freedom to act, think, choose between a range of possible alternatives – is examined against the fact that half the human species are subordinate to the other half. How does this come about as an outcome of choice? For de Beauvoir is rigorous in her method; this inequality is not an effect of some 'biological, psychological or economic fate' (1972: 295). Her first chapters subject biological, psychological and economic theories to a severe critique; it becomes clear that both Freud and Marx are not found helpful in the analysis of gender since they fall into parallel forms of explanatory reductionism and determinism. Even the biological evidence, which de Beauvoir examines in detail and considers 'of first rank' does not establish for women 'a fixed and inevitable destiny' and these facts 'are insufficient for setting up a hierarchy of the sexes; they fail to explain why woman is the Other; they do not condemn her to remain in this subordinate role for ever' (1972: 65).

It is significant that in her discussion of the history of women in the nineteenth century there is only a brief mention of Saint-Simon and socialism: 'with the utopian socialisms of Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Cabet was born the utopia of the "free woman"; the slavery of worker and of woman was to be abolished, for women like men were human beings. Unfortunately this reasonable idea did not prevail in the school of Saint-Simon' (1972: 143). That is all there is on Saint-Simonianism, and no mention of the feminism which grew out of it. But there is more on Marx, and here her view was equally severe: 'between the cause of the proletariat and that of women there was no ... immediate solidarity' (1972: 147). Curiously, de Beauvoir gives Léon Richier the credit for being the 'true founder of feminism' (1972: 153). And



Feminism itself was never an autonomous movement ... Never have women constituted a separate caste, nor in truth have they ever as a sex sought to play a historic role. The doctrines that object to the advent of women considered as flesh, life, immanence, the Other, are masculine ideologies in no way expressing feminine aspirations. (1972: 160)

Yet in economic terms, 'men and women ... constitute two castes' (1972: 167). 'Women are still, for the most part, in a state of subjection [*vassalité*]. They do not, according to de Beauvoir, make autonomous choices, but in relation to the definition man dictates, and that reflects directly women's being-for-men (*être-pour-les-hommes*) (1972: 169).

De Beauvoir provides a long account of men's myth of the feminine (1972: 171–292). But this only provides the essential background for the detailed analysis of the woman's life cycle which is the heart of the book. It is very extensive (1972: 295–741) and certainly rests on the problem: given the nature of human freedom at each moment, how is it that women are the second sex? It has appeared to many readers that the exposition is really simply a sham, since at the end of the book it is very difficult to see how such consistent patterns of inequality could be the outcome of individual choices. But this is a serious misreading of de Beauvoir's thesis, which is a sustained attempt to relate the concept of the human as always in a condition of existential freedom and the situations in which the complexity of the action of others is a necessary part of the way in which outcomes are made. Thus her thesis is that a 'new civilisation' is coming into existence and with it new possibilities and opportunities. Yet the old traditions and obstacles still exist: 'the truth is that her situation is out of equilibrium' (1972: 167). In her view the changing world cannot be grasped on the basis of a theory which reduces too quickly sex to biology or essence. But it was only later that she made explicit any connection of this 'lack of equilibrium' and new possibilities with socialism:

At the end of *The Second Sex* I said I was not a feminist because I believed that the problems would resolve themselves automatically in the context of socialist development ... I am a feminist today, because I realise that we must fight for the situation of women, here and now. (de Beauvoir 1972 in Schwarzer, 1984: 32)

The general thesis of the book is that woman, having been object or Other for man, is in the process of becoming subject for man. In other words, women, having been that 'non-existent' that all patriarchal thought mythologises, is only now coming into being. De Beauvoir's political interpretation of this transition made her notorious. Women will not bring an (old) essence into existence, by reconstructing it, as a new 'partner' to man. This process is open, to be disclosed by projects to come. But the new conditions that make this possible are the same as those that make socialism possible: industrial capitalism, the formation of modern classes and citizens, and the radical reformation of masculinities which accompany these processes. The analysis seems often to read as an absolute, literal account of the facts of life, and

often been read as if the woman is essentially alienated by the encounter. It is rare for her to declare 'in a sexually equalitarian society, woman would regard menstruation simply as her special way of reaching adult life'. Today, however, it throws her 'into an inferior and defective category' (1972: 340). But there is no analysis of individual experience, the discussion is in terms of men and women, of different ages, classes, etc. Yet this is not a positive sociology, since there is a philosophical and theoretical tension established in the analysis which forms the thematic throughout: these conditions are changing and this analysis, she argues, is a project in this very history.

Some of her theses seem to derive from her presuppositions directly, and some of these are the most shocking: 'the foetus is part of her body, and it is a parasite that feeds on it' (1972: 512); 'it is much more difficult for the woman than for the man to recognize an individual of the opposite sex as an equal' (1972: 701); her conclusion that real independence and liberty require a woman to abstain from marriage and motherhood. Part four of the book is called 'Towards Liberation'; its first chapter is a discussion of 'The Independent Woman' and it is soon clear that for de Beauvoir even that situation and condition of independence for women is different from that for men: 'she refuses to confine herself to her role as female, because she will not accept mutilation; but it would also be a mutilation to repudiate her sex' (1972: 691). At this point de Beauvoir's language becomes Durkheimian: 'because the concept of femininity is artificially shaped by custom and fashion, it is imposed upon each woman from without' (1972: 692).

This formulation, with its resonance of Durkheim's notion of the social as 'external constraint', seems to lead back into the very structures of sociology that de Beauvoir's method sought to criticise. But in what sense is de Beauvoir's analysis a resolution of these methodological questions, and the 'in' terms which, for example, Lyotard had sought to use? It seems evident that the study is aware of most of the main currents of nineteenth-century sociology, certainly the French tradition, and Mill, and of course the Marxist tradition, and is certainly not naïve. The study makes a unique contribution to sociology, not just because of its philosophical adherence to certain principles, but because it finds new resolutions to key problems. The analysis of the life-cycle of the modern woman could certainly not have been written by Durkheim and there is no direct application of the sociological method of that school. But it does come close to meeting many of the requirements identified by Lyotard's critique of phenomenology without violating Durkheim's rules. Although feminists have often criticised the text as giving the appearance that its author is above the struggle, not written by 'one of us', it is very clear that this is a monumental critique of the assumptions and outcomes of patriarchy and patriarchal power, even its continuing effects for those women who have struggled to achieve a degree of independence. It does not use the concept of social pathology for the condition of women. It does, however, present a sense of evolutionary development to a new situa-



type of intellectual at the head of a new liberation movement. But this is not far from the surface of the text.

There is a clear methodological invention. It is to be found in her adoption of life-cycle analysis. Childhood, the young girl, sexual initiation, the lesbian, these chapters make up the first section on 'The Formative Years'. Then the second section focuses on the married woman, the mother, social life, prostitution and hetairas, maturity and old age and woman's situation and character. The next section is called 'Justifications' – the narcissist, the woman in love, and the mystic. The last section is called 'Towards Liberation', and has one chapter, 'The Independent Woman'. Thus: formation, situation, justifications, towards liberation. But these are transitions without ritual. The underlying presuppositions in the analysis are clear from the start: men and women are first human beings, not two different species (1972: 321). The account is thus posed in terms of a universal experience in which the body is encountered, as is the milieu, the social, culture, but always in terms of possibilities and choices – against the existence of 'external constraints'. It could be said, perhaps, that this massive study is one individual's own unique attempt to live and to make an individual 'ethics of ambiguity'. But there is no substantial ethics as a conclusion, only a recommendation that if a woman wants independence, then such and such are the costs: no family, no children. The conclusion is that men and women *should live out* 'the ambiguities of their situation ... both should assume the ambiguity with a clear-sighted modesty'. She insists at the end that 'the fact that we are human beings is infinitely more important than all the peculiarities that distinguish human beings from one another; it is never the given that confers superiorities' (1972: 737). It is almost certain that

sooner or later [women] will arrive at complete economic and social equality, which will bring about an inner metamorphosis. However ... there will be some to object that if such a world is possible it is not desirable. When woman is 'the same' as her male, life will lose its salt and spice. (1972: 738)

De Beauvoir is quite conscious that she is dealing with a pivotal cultural transition. The transition from world of (symbolic) otherness, to that of identity and 'fraternity' (1972: 741). It is clear where de Beauvoir stands: she defines the culture of symbolic otherness as that world which has become oppressive, and 'nothing seems more debatable than the opinion that dooms the new world to uniformity and hence to boredom' (1972: 740).

Thus there is something in de Beauvoir's analysis which tries to capture the openness of the situation, a situation in which modifications in the man's world are making new demands on the sexual division of labour. In this context her analysis is retrospective, from the perspective of a universal in humanity, not from an analysis based on givens in a comparative sociology. This undoubtedly inserts values into the analysis as commentators (e.g. Aron) have suggested. And this idea provides something of an observation on modern social theory generally: it is universalising in its very presuppositions.

'absolute consciousness' (Sartre, [1957] 1957: 106) forms the basis of ideas of liberation that are generalised out from specific historical situations (e.g. France after 1940), to human issues of liberation in a global context. Thus de Beauvoir maintains that it is not only in modern France that women may feel humiliation in certain relationships because of a certain structure of patriarchy or masculine privilege, but that in all patriarchal cultures a basic and fundamental conflict and tension exist, since in all the artificial structures of self-Other are, against resistance, imposed by patriarchy and thus individual men and women on women and men. In her conclusions, however, de Beauvoir is very careful to restrict her ethics to the situation in which her book was produced, and her remarks are phrased in utilitarian terms: 'there is no denying that feminine dependence, inferiority, woe, give women their special character; assuredly woman's autonomy, if it spares men many troubles, will also deny them many conveniences' (1972: 739).

#### Old age is 'unrealisable'

Some twenty years later, de Beauvoir went on to write an analysis of ageing and ageism. Her analysis does not adopt the developments in social theory that Sartre had been working on and which were published in 1960 as *Critique of Dialectical Reason* ([1960] 1976, volume 2 was published unfinished in 1985). Her analysis remains focused on the paradoxes raised by the refusal of all biological determinism, and in this case that ageing is not a simple process of physical decline. Her argument is divided in two parts that deal with the Durkheimian mode of objectivity and then goes beyond this into 'lived experience'. The first she describes as examining ageing 'from the outside' in its scientific and social determinations. But in the second, she examines ageing from the point of view of the 'intimate, inward knowledge' the individual has of this state and how the individual 'reacts to it'. Her aim, she says, is to 'examine what happens to the individual's relationship with his body and his image during his last years, to his relationship with time, history and his own praxis, and to his relationship with others and the outside world' (1977: 313). In order to do this she sets up a contradiction: her principal presupposition is that there is no universal transcendental consciousness outside of time – it is the body, and its image, which ages (1977: 15) and 'individuals understand one another, not inasmuch as they are all men in the abstract, but by means of the variety of their praxis' (1977: 243). Unlike aspects of an identity such as nationality, however, 'old age is something beyond my life, outside it – something of which I cannot have any full experience ... my ego is a transcendent object that does not dwell in my consciousness and that can only be viewed from a distance' (1977: 324). Thus, in the case of old age it is never possible for me 'to coincide with the reality that I assume' (1977: 324).

As with the analysis of gender, the analysis of old age predates movements



the same issues: what is the connection between this kind of inequality and class relations? Again her analysis does not suggest that radical changes in the condition of old people can be made without radical socialist changes, but even here her conclusion is that the socialist countries 'still have a very long way to go' (1977: 603). In this sense, as with gender, the matrix role of the socialist struggle forms again for de Beauvoir the condition for radical restructuring of social relations. This problem seems to be completely new. In the early history of the socialist idea, utopian feminism was an immediate outcome. In the 1960s second wave feminism was in part inspired by de Beauvoir's analysis of women's inequality, but it was accompanied by the recognition of new problem of ageism as a form of oppression.

Looking at de Beauvoir's development from *The Second Sex* to *Old Age*, it seems that she came to embrace fully the idea of the social as external to individual experience and constraining. Clearly, however, in opposition to Durkheim, this approach did not rule out examination of individual experience – 'being-in-the-world' – as well. In fact her discussion of this side of her problem is quite different from anything Durkheim could have written. This is because she has recourse to the idea of the transcendental ego as produced by others and to which the inner experience is either in conflict or in concordance: becoming old is still 'particularly difficult to assume because we have always regarded it as something alien, a foreign species' (1977: 315). So it is that 'our private, inward experience does not tell us the number of our years ... Old age is more apparent to others than to the subject.' So this awareness which comes from outside it is the 'Other that is myself' (1977: 316). The individual can 'adapt' to the changes in the body, and in this sense the individual 'does not notice the change' (1977: 316). Her analysis follows what she calls this 'assumption' of old age, the fact that the recognition by others of someone having become old is communicated to others or the person in question and comes as a discovery, a surprise, but 'whether we like it or not, in the end we submit to the outsider's point of view' but not without wavering. Indeed there is an insoluble contradiction between the obvious clarity of the inward feeling that guarantees our unchanging quality and the objective certainty of our transformation'. And this is why old age is an 'unrealisable' (1977: 323), a concept she did not use in her analysis of woman as other. One might say here that her formula would be 'one does not become old, it is impossible to realise it'.

The apparent logic of the development, then, of de Beauvoir's approach is that it seems to combine existential with the methods of positive sociology in an exemplary way. At the end of the book *Old Age*, the questions are not so much those that concern an ethics of ambiguity, though these are never far away for obvious reasons, but rather: 'What should a society be, so that in his last years a man might still be a man?' Her discussion here flirts with a certain utopianism:

We may dream that in the ideal society ... old age would be virtually non-existent ... The last age would [be] a period quite different from youth and

open to the individual. We are far from this state of affairs ... It is our whole system that is at issue.' (1977: 603–4)

This casts retrospective light on the nature of the contradiction. For this 'unrealisable' between the inner experience of old age and the external 'transcendental ego' within modern society is not a universal condition. In fact de Beauvoir appeals (referring via Grotjhan) to Freud's notion of the unconscious to resolve this point, for the unconscious 'knows nothing of old age' (1977: 325). The rest of her examination of the assumption of old age discusses a host of instances where this ambiguity has been lived through (1977: 325–402).

### Conclusions

Thus de Beauvoir reveals aspects of the Saint-Simonian idea as it is developed in its Marxist variant. Since the class struggle is seen as the central locus and pivot of what happens to the society more widely, first the other sites of inequality such as gender and age are seen as *dependent* sites, and second, they form there structures of inequality assumed an alienated mode (a contradiction between the imposed structure of the ego and inner experience). Some aspects of the nineteenth-century historical method are evidently transferred to these analytic sites. These include the static/dynamic analyses of a defined portion of humanity (the female sex which is the subject of the life-cycle analysis for example); how to theorise within existential analysis a transition from one state to another (one civilisation passing another is being born, de Beauvoir says). The analysis suggests that the key to this transition is the class struggle at the heart of industrial capitalism rather than a cultural logic. In theory this struggle comes first historically and causally. Gender and age relations, themselves fundamentally affected by capitalism, change as a consequence of more fundamental changes. By implication of course in the strategic calculations of political engagement, involvement in anti-sexist and anti-ageist movements is doomed to a limited horizon of reforms since they do not act on the causes of the problems of inequality in these domains. Gradually de Beauvoir broke with these latter assumptions.

Becoming clear now is a double articulation which rewrites the two principal aspects of Saint-Simonian theory and is much closer to its Comtean than its Durkheim variation. First a cultural transition between hierarchical symbolic cultures (relation to the Other), and modern cultures (relation to Other as same). Secondly, a social transition between societies whose structure rests on economic systems or 'modes of production', e.g. feudalism, capitalism, communism. Basic to existential theory is the attempt to understand the articulation between the sociological dimensions of social phenomena (constraining the individual), and the dynamics of inner experience with respect to the Other, or to others. De Beauvoir is crucial then in revealing how existentialism can be used as a method for radical social research in a



substantial studies of the forms of alienation of 'woman' and 'old age', she demonstrates how the aim of a fusion between the objective and subjective could be achieved.

There were many competing currents of existential social theory at the beginning of the 1950s; one of the most significant, which I turn to in the next chapter, was Lyotard's early political writings which provided an exemplary analysis of the Algerian war of independence which brought the Fourth Republic to an acute crisis.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> This was quite a different outcome from that of Aron's visit to Germany in the same period (Aron, 1964) and other thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre came to existentialism before Sartre (Shields, 1999: 127).

## 10

### The Algerian War

... a remarkable sociological situation: if French imperialism has not to this day managed to provide this society with any other mode of organisation than that of terror, it is because no institution can currently respond satisfactorily to the needs of the Algerians ... Algerian society is 'destructured' [*déstructurée*]. (Lyotard, 1993b: 223)

After the moment of the Resistance and Liberation of the 1940s, the 1950s were dominated by the Algerian movement and war for independence. This again radicalised many intellectuals on the left. Baudrillard later reflected 'the Algerian War ... had a vital part to play, a kind of Marxist-type politicisation' and for him the main influence in this was Sartre (1993a: 20). Sartre's own involvement was significant, but his writings reveal that his main concern was the 'colonial system' and the role of de Gaulle in the war and its resolution (Sartre, 2001). Sartre also played a key symbolic role for intellectuals such as Fanon (1967, 1970), and by his support for the development of journals such as Diop's *Présence Africaine*, and organisations and conferences like the Congress of Black Writers and Artists at the Sorbonne in 1956 (see Young, in Sartre, 2001: xx).

Other intellectuals like Bourdieu, who had done anthropological fieldwork in Algeria, composed studies such as *Sociologie de l'Algérie*. Bourdieu presented a survey of the different cultures and communities in Algeria, focusing mainly on the ones he had closely studied, but sketched his own picture of the colonial system (Bourdieu, 1958: 106f.), the imposed 'deculturation' it effected, and then presented a profile of an emerging new class structure. This, he said, was a completely 'original social classes structure' composed of an immense 'sub-proletariat, uprooted, and unstable' at the base of a hierarchy of proletariat, petite-bourgeoisie, and bourgeoisie arising around a very feeble industrial development (1958: 124–5). But this very passive objective sociological account was complemented, as was the anguished reflections of a writer like Fanon, in these years by the incisive theoretical analysis of Lyotard writing for the dissident Marxist journal *Socialism or Barbarism* (with its important contributions from Lefort and Castoriadis).

### Lyotard

Lyotard (b. 1924) had graduated from the Sorbonne, where he had been friends with Deleuze, and took up a two-year teaching post in Constantine