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## **SEXUAL DIFFERENCE**

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In "the authentically democratic society proclaimed by Marx there is no place for the Other." (1) With this statement, Simone de Beauvoir summarizes her political standpoint in *The Second Sex*, which remains the best known and most revealing work in the tradition of socialist feminism. While this classic work has long been recognized for its brilliant critique of the oppression of women, it is also a powerful theoretical defense of the ideal of sexual equality. Integral to its attack on society's reduction of woman to oppressed Other is a plea for the ascent of woman to a position of full and equal humanity.

The present discussion will question the adequacy of such a problematic of "equality." In particular, it will be suggested that what is negated in the concept of "equality" is not only "otherness," in the pejorative sense used by de Beauvoir, but also "difference," in a quite liberatory sense. The critical implications of difference will be explored, and its place in an emancipatory sexual politics will be assessed. As a result, the repressive moment of socialist egalitarianism will be uncovered.

I will attempt to do three things along the way. First, I hope to show the manner in which sexual egalitarianism may suppress difference, misconceive of difference, and neutralize difference. Secondly, I will discuss the significance of difference in relation to the tradition of domination and its recent transformations. And finally, to sketch in rudimentary form some aspects of an ideal of unity-in-diversity, based on the recognition of difference, and on an androgynous conception of subjectivity.

### **De Beauvoir's Socialist Egalitarianism**

In *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir contends that the emancipation of women depends on the achievement of "complete economic and social equality," a condition that is said to produce "an inner metamorphosis." (2) This "metamorphosis" is found to take place at the level of subjectivity, so that a certain sameness of being issues in a certain sameness of liberty and self-determination. De Beauvoir cautions that we should not fear such a sameness, and cling to difference, which she sees as inseparable from the system of domination. We must remember, for example, that "doing away with the slave trade meant death to the great plantations, magnificent with azaleas and camellias." (3) Reaction has always impeded Progress (and De Beauvoir is a devotee of the Myth of Progress) through appeals to "philistine sentimentalism." By conquering all sentimental fear of loss of difference, we hasten our arrival in the realm of sameness and equality.

It turns out that the path to this sameness and equality is itself a path of sameness. "If the little girl were brought up from the first with the same demands and rewards, the same severity and the same freedom, as her brothers, taking part in the same studies, the same games, promised the same future, surrounded by men and women who seemed to her undoubted equals, the meanings of the castration complex and the oedipus complex would be profoundly modified." (4) It would be Modified, not surprisingly, in the direction of sameness. The two parents having the same "material and moral responsibilities," their "prestige" becomes, of course, the same. (5) Ideas of inferiority and superiority wither away. No longer is the female child "oriented toward passivity," but rather, like the male, she becomes "interested in what she was doing" and will "throw herself without reserve into undertakings." (6)

The young woman becomes, in the most essential and existential sense, (like) the young man. Not surprisingly, de Beauvoir asserts that what is no longer "perceived" ("*senti*") in this realm of sameness is a "masculine world." And, indeed, on the assumption that all significant feminine difference disappears, and that, as all can agree, "biological facts" have "in themselves...no significance," (7) there could, in principle, hardly be anything capable of definition as a "masculine world." Yet it is surprising that de Beauvoir defines the resulting realm of sameness as "an androgynous world." ("*un monde androgyne*"). Surprising in view of her suppression of any significant dimensions of subjectivity that could be conceived of according to any masculine/feminine polarity, dimensions which would allow "worldhood" to be constituted in any meaningfully "androgynous" sense. For what possible meaning can an "androgynous world" have in the absence of an androgynous subject living that world? And what elements of androgyny remain for de Beauvoir's subject?

De Beauvoir is certainly not oblivious to the problem of difference, and her thought, which always retains a certain dialectical element, a certain complexity, must be distinguished from vulgar forms of liberal and socialist equalitarianism. Thus, she rejects the simplistic, ahistorical view that both men and women should simply "be regarded as human beings," a position that resorts to vacuous abstraction, ignoring the concreteness of situations. (8) Furthermore, she admits that there may even be a transhistorical basis for difference. "(T)here will always be certain differences between man and woman; her eroticism, and therefore her sexual world, have a special form of their own and therefore cannot fail to engender a sensuality, a sensitivity, of a special nature. This means that her relations to her own body, to that of the male, to the child, will never be identical with those the male bears to his own body, to that of the female, and to the child..." (9) But what of this difference? We might ask of de Beauvoir what Derrida asks of Heidegger, "What if 'sexuality' already marked the most originary *Selbstheit*?"

If so, then according to her account of the nature of being human, of being *pour soi*, this being can have only one sexuality, and it is not an androgynous one. De Beauvoir's subject, it turns out, is a masculine, and, indeed, a Promethian being who defines the self (himself) through striving, activity, and achievement. "Every subject plays his part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as a mode of transcendence; he achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out toward other liberties. There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future." (10) The ascent to transcendence does indeed "profoundly alter" castration, for a same guilt is rendered universal. One is certainly

under this regime "condemned to be free," as freedom becomes the "project" of justifying one's existence before the law. One's fate is at once a life sentence and a death sentence.

De Beauvoir's problematic of sexual equality fails to overcome the dualisms traceable in large part to the patriarchal heritage of Civilization. It may indeed be true, as she contends, that the categories of Self and Other (or, as she also phrases it, the Same and the Other, "*le Même*" and "*l'Autre*") are inescapable elements of human consciousness. Yet one must question the validity of her Hegelian psychology, which posits as a universal aspect of subjectivity "a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness," and claims that "the subject can be posed only in being opposed--he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object." (11) This formulation is, of course, quite coherent, to varying degrees, in regard to certain dominant and dominating forms of subjectivity appearing throughout the history of Civilization. Yet it seems quite incoherent in relation to many other forms of subjectivity--for example, the "primitive," numerous sorts of social and psychological marginality, and, not least of all, the feminine.

But another dualism which is even more primordial than the self-other dualism is preserved in de Beauvoir's egalitarian feminism. This is the dualism within the subject: the mind-body dualism. According to de Beauvoir, one of the great advantages of males in their monopoly on "transcendence" over the ages is their success in transcending their own bodies, a success aided materially by nature "herself." Women, on the other hand, have been condemned to be at the mercy of their bodies. By nature, woman's life is "less rich than man's." (12) Women suffer from weakness, instability, lack of control, and fragility. "These are facts." (13)

Yet de Beauvoir's "facts" are colored by valuations, and, indeed, highly negative valuations, concerning woman's corporeal nature. As Jean Elshtain has remarked, in de Beauvoir's account of the issues concerning woman, "the fetus is characterized as a 'tenant,' a parasite upon the mother's existence. Menstruation is horrific and disgusting. Nursing merely exhausts the mother--de Beauvoir nowhere acknowledges that it, or any other female reproductive or nurturant activity, can have meaning or profound emotional importance to and for the subject herself." (14) The imaginary significance given to the supposedly "factual" has far-reaching implications.

The achievement of transcendence for women means escape from the limitations of the body and the attainment of the active life previously reserved to males. The world into which they have gained entry is (despite the persistence of certain inessential differences "of a special nature") not androgynous, but rather masculine. A world that has a place for the "modern woman" who "accepts masculine values: she prides herself on thinking, taking action, working, creating, on the same terms as men...." (15) A world in which this sameness of activity is threatened only "so long as femininity is perpetuated as such," thus allowing the sexes to use difference in a struggle of one against the other. (16)

Finally, there will be a transcendence of nature by culture, and with it a transcendence of those aspects of difference which are presumably the residue of untranscended nature. The truth of human sexual relationships is thus allowed to reveal itself--as de Beauvoir puts it, "the human couple will find its true form." (17) And this true form, manifesting itself in the movement

beyond natural difference is, as de Beauvoir says in what is, quite literally, her "final word," "brotherhood." (18)

### Irigaray's Critique of "the Same"

De Beauvoir's egalitarianism illustrates strikingly how a form of socialist feminism can perpetuate, in the most "emancipatory" guise, important aspects of the dominant ("phallogocentric") tradition. As Irigaray notes, the "domination of the philosophic logos stems in large part from its power to reduce all others to the economy of the same," and perhaps most importantly, "from its power to eradicate the difference between the sexes in systems that are self-representative of a 'masculine subject.'" (19) Under this system, a putative heterosexuality has been "an alibi" to disguise the workings of what she calls "hom(m)o-sexuality": "man's relations with himself, of relations among men." (20) Her case for the overwhelming dominance of this system over Western thought from Plato to Freud is brilliantly stated (if at times brilliantly overstated) in *Speculum of the Other Woman*.

Irigaray calls for the recognition of difference, and of long suppressed or ignored aspects of "feminine" experience that threaten the system of domination. Such as that described in "*La Mystérique*," where she directs us to a realm where "consciousness is no longer master," (21) where it forsakes its path of conquest, of strivings and "projects" in favor of a path of "jouissance." In such experience, the hostility between subject and Other, as described by de Beauvoir, breaks down, as "one term mingles into another." (22) This experience doubly threatens the sovereign ego, on the one hand by revealing it as empty and void, and on the other, by overstepping its bounds, or whatever bounds we seek to establish for it. For "the 'I' is empty still, ever more empty, opening wide in rapture of soul." (23)

But it is not only in mystical or "hysterical" experience, but also in more ordinary modes of being that the feminine threatens the integrity of the dominant subject. For to the extent that woman herself has escaped determination by the masculine imaginary (outside the history of domination, rather than merely in the history of dominant ideas), she has escaped the hierarchical channeling of desire, and thus remained open to difference. "(T)he geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined--in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on sameness." (24) For Irigaray (and here it becomes evident that she speaks of a certain "feminine," and a certain "woman",) "ownership and property are doubtless quite foreign to the feminine. At least sexually." (25) For she does not take possession, and the other is not alien, but rather "so near that she cannot have it or have herself." (26) As a result, all "speculation," all economies of possession and of accumulation are placed in question.

Irigaray attempts to avoid interpreting this "feminine" or this "woman" as a universal essence, as a natural or historical condition to which they can be reduced, and which defines them as an identity. Woman does not have simple location in the feminine. She "must reach the place where she takes pleasure as woman," and the path to this place may require "a long detour by way of analysis of the various systems of oppression," and a "process of going back through a social practice that her enjoyment requires." (27) In recovering liberatory experience such as that of "*la Mystérique*," one finds that this feminine experience is not limited to the female. It is

"the place where 'she,'" and "in some cases he" speaks, "if he follows 'her' lead." The word "her" is placed in quotes to indicate that this is not a question of any particular female, or all of them, but rather of that feminine that oversteps boundaries of determinate subjects and determinate sexes. (28)

Neither "woman" nor "the feminine" are reducible to any form of identity. "Woman is not to be related to any simple designatable being, subject, or entity," nor is there any "generic entity: woman." (29) Furthermore, a "femininity that conforms and corresponds too exactly to an idea-- Idea--of woman...has already frozen into phallogorphism." (30) So "femininity" always escapes reduction either to determinations of nature or those of culture. In its openness to difference it challenges the dominant subjectivity, which embodies in its structures the heritage of domination (though, as will be discussed, this tradition is itself in a process of self-destruction and self-destruction).

But Irigaray, having announced the non-establishment, the non-foundation of the feminine, falls, or begins to fall, into the trap of positing the kind of determination she had presumably rejected. For at times she describes a "femininity" that seems founded on a biological and psychologicistic basis, on sexual identity, on the exclusion of the male, and, implicitly, on the non-recognition of androgyny.

According to L. Godard, Irigaray, in her description of masculine and feminine sexuality (which are intimately related to all dimensions of character and sensibility, including "écriture" in the widest sense), falls back on the most specific physiological determinations. (31) Godard cites Irigaray's claim that "woman's autoeroticism is very different from man's. In order to touch himself, man needs an instrument: his hand, a woman's body, language... And this self-carressing requires at least a minimum of activity. As for woman, she touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman 'touches herself' all the time, and, moreover, no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two--but not divisible into one(s)--that caress each other." (32) Irigaray proceeds to describe the "violent," "brutal," "separating" activity of the male, who destroys feminine eroticism through "intrusion." (33) It is a discussion not without ambiguity, but which resonates with echos of "anatomy is destiny."

Yet, there remains an indecidability in the text, offering the possibility of a more generous reading than Godard's. For Irigaray states that it is "Western sexuality" with which she is dealing. Therefore it is possible (despite the universalizing, essentializing tendencies in the text) to interpret these statements of "what is" and "what is necessary" as conditions of existence and exigency determined not only and merely by biology, but also by culture and imagination. So that even if one concedes that there are biologically determined dispositions, possibilities, and even limitations, which will always play a part in the nature of feminine or masculine sensibility and experience, this will not of itself explain the nature of the existing forms. Nor will the acceptance of some such differences as inevitable necessarily imply any continued opposition between the feminine and the masculine.

There is no sex that "is" one.

## Derrida, Nietzsche, and the Feminine

Derrida delineates in an even more uncompromising manner the far-reaching implications of feminine difference. More uncompromising, since his discussion is without any hint of positivism and reductionism. Indeed, his pursuit of difference aims at the destruction of any such tendencies. According to Derrida, it was Nietzsche who finally apprehended the significance of the feminine for the Western metaphysical tradition. (34) It was he who, almost alone among the philosophers, grasped the sense in which woman had escaped a nihilistic will to power that has been the secret of the modern age, of enlightenment, of disenchantment. As he writes in *The Gay Science*, "When a man stands in the midst of his own noise, in the midst of his own surf of plans and projects, then he is apt also to see quiet, magical beings gliding past them and to long for their happiness and seclusion: women. He almost thinks that his better self dwells there among the women, and that in these quietest regions even the loudest surf turns into deathly quiet, and life itself into a dream about life." (35)

The existence of this feminine challenges the dominance of that ever-striving ego that seeks in its heroic "projects" a satisfaction that it can never find through such a quest for power over all as object of appropriation. De Beauvoir never adequately explains why the male who has presumably reached the truly human condition of transcendence still longs, albeit secretly, for the despised feminine immanence. "In woman," she says, "is incarnated in positive form the lack that the existent carries in his heart, and it is in seeking to be made whole through her that man hopes to attain self-realization." (36) But how can the "abundance" of woman (based, in de Beauvoir's own view, on a dehumanizing reduction, a denial, in bad faith, of the highest aspects of woman's being) "incarnate," in any coherent sense, a "lack"? Indeed, as she explains, it is not through woman or the feminine that her subject finally seeks to find what is lacking, but in an endless, hopeless, phallic succession of "jets" and "projets." A succession terminated only in death, and given impulse through the denial of death.

But the tranquility of the feminine reminds him (this masculine subject) of the illusory nature of his escape. One is made whole through a return to the self, finding that self more complete and "better" than it has been judged to be according to the law regulating his projects. The lure of the feminine rests on the recognition of this possibility of wholeness. The feminine is thus not an "incarnation" of "lack" in the other, but rather the signification of the possibility of abolishing "lack" within the masculine self.

According to Nietzsche, it is the quality of the feminine "to act at a distance." (37) As such, the feminine opposes itself to the kind of presence that has been demanded of all beings according to the tradition: availability for use, for development, for disposition according to projects. But as Derrida remarks, "perhaps woman--a non-identity, a non-figure, a simulacrum--is distance's very chasm, the out-distancing of distance, the interval's cadence, distance itself, if we could still say such a thing, distance itself." (38) The feminine is that which escapes instrumentalization both in history and in thought. Plato's receptacle that resists form. Aristotle's matter that escapes knowledge. And a long lineage of mystics, witches, poets, dreamers, utopians, and marginal beings who have lived outside the law.

The feminine is neither the essence of woman that has been opposed to that of man, in order to dominate her, nor is it some other essence that purports to escape this domination. For the radical character of the feminine is to deny reduction to essence: to a truth which can be grasped, possessed, accumulated, utilized. "There is no such thing as the essence of woman because woman averts, she is averted of herself. Out of the depths, endless and unfathomable, she engulfs and distorts all vestiges of essentiality, of identity, of property." (39) Woman diverges, digresses, transgresses. She goes off the path--whatever path may be dictated to her. She even diverges from the path of herself (elle-meme), that is, any self that is defined for her as her essence. In this way, woman is untruth. But in a corresponding way, truth is woman. "Woman is but one name for that untruth of truth." (40)

### **Cixous and the Challenge of Androgyny**

While Nietzsche (or, at least, Derrida's selection of a Nietzsche) is insistent on behalf of the claims of difference and the feminine, his defense (despite its critical force) lacks a certain positive moment. This is inevitable, no matter how radical his purposes, given the inherited images of the feminine with which he works. Yet it is possible to combine such an openness to the reality of difference with a more emancipatory vision of differentiated subjectivity.

Cixous does exactly this in her exploration of the possibilities opened through the liberation of difference within subjectivity, once masculinity and femininity have been diverted from the tradition of domination which has shaped them according to its ends. She expresses a utopian hope that a kind of consciousness of difference can exist which will overturn the logic of appropriation. The phallogocentric scheme of recognition requires that difference be allied with a hierarchical inequality, an inequality in which the subject gains "Imaginary profit," and "Imaginary victory" through possession of the object. (41) Cixous opposes to this Hegelian formulation the possibility of mutual recognition, in which the difference of the other is not negated. In which otherness is not conceived of in terms of objectification, opposition, or hostility, but is instead granted value in itself, and permitted to reveal itself. Rather than reliving the perennially repeated (but not inevitable) symbolic struggles of subject and object, the subject thus takes the path of "non-action" (that is, non-dominating action), finding in the other "the unknown that is there to discover, to respect, to favor, to cherish." (42)

This openness to the other also implies an openness to the diversity, including the sexual difference, within oneself. Whatever biological differences may exist transhistorically, and whatever cultural differences may have been determined historically, there is no difference which divides itself discretely or discreetly along lines of sex and sexuality. The universal bisexuality recognized by Freud will have an entirely different meaning when it is no longer subordinated to the demands of an economy of domination and appropriation (as, for example, when it is organized Oedipally). The feminine has taken on a liberatory character in part because under the regime of domination it has been allowed to retain a greater bisexual and androgynous component (given the relegation of feelings to the feminine realm, the greater "indulgence" given to the "weak" and inferior, and the limited approval given to the emulation of the "higher" by the "lower"--a non-reciprocal relation).

Yet androgyny is not of significance only for woman. As Cixous points out, the self-mutilation deriving from the denial of androgyny has also been at the expense of men: "men's loss in phallocentrism is different from but as serious as women's." (43) Androgyny means openness to the uniqueness of personality of each subject, to the diversity negated in the channeling of desire according to the master-plan (*strategie d'ensemble*) of the economy of domination.

There is no way to determine in advance the direction of evolution of the "masculine" and the "feminine" made possible through such liberation of desire. As Cixous claims, "the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes" is "evident and insistent in different ways according to the individual." (44) Thus, there can be no norm or essence of androgyny to set up as a new law. While androgyny means openness to diversity and difference, there can be no "quota system" specifying how this diversity is to manifest itself (for this would merely reintroduce a new, more disguised, form of repressive egalitarianism).

It is difficult even to imagine the forms the concepts of "masculine" and "feminine" might take after they are disentangled from the values of hierarchy and domination. What is "given" is the irreducible reality of some biological and psychological difference (which must be recognized as a determining factor, if an implausible cultural idealism is to be avoided), and the ambiguous heritage of historically determined difference (the imaginary as a material force, in constant process of self-transformation). In short, "nature" and "culture." The question remains of what will be done with these "givens." How they will be "taken." What significance they will be given in an imaginary which is not oriented toward appropriation, but is, rather, open to the diversity of experience, to the play of difference, and to creativity.

### **The Narcissistic Imaginary**

But there are other excellent questions that have hardly begun to be asked. The most radical currents in feminist theory have succeeded in subjecting the masculine imaginary, especially as it has been reflected in Western thought from Plato to Freud, to a thorough critique. This project has been based on certain assumptions about the nature of the masculine, dominating subject. This subject is said to be organized according to certain relations of power, expressed in the concepts of Oedipus, castration, and the Patriarchal Law. Masculine character structure is described as rigid and hierarchical, and the imaginary is explained to be focused on a problematic of accumulation and profit. All of which is quite valid, and captures a moment of the dominant subjectivity which is quite powerful even today. Yet it is not the only moment, and to take it as the exclusive object of critique prevents an adequate grasp of the dynamics of contemporary culture.

No analysis of cultural phenomena can overlook the increasing predominance of the consumptionist moment of modern economic society, nor ignore its significance for sexual difference. Granted that this society depends on a dialectic between the productivist and consumptionist sectors (both institutional and ideological), during the course of social evolution the relative importance of these sectors is in a state of constant change. Thus, during the period of "early capitalism," the stage of accumulation, productivist institutions and corresponding ideological forms predominated. A striking development in "late capitalism" has been the vast expansion of consumptionist institutions and of the ideology of commodity consumption.



Accordingly, there has been a dramatic change in the nature of subjectivity, of character structure, and of the imaginary.

One of the most salient features of this social and psychological mutation has been a process of destructuring, which has accelerated as contradictions between institutional structures have intensified, and the more rigid structures of the productivist institutions have come under increasing pressure from the growing consumptionist sector. This development is only comprehensible in relation to the parallel phenomenon of the erosion of productivist character structures, which are under attack from conditioning processes that are increasingly consumptionist in nature. Late capitalism thus contains a deeply "post-structuralist" dimension.

What does this mean for the "masculine imaginary" and the "masculine subject," as these have been conceived of by many of their critics? In part, it means that the system of domination can dispense with rigidly productivist, "patriarchal" values, which henceforth appear increasingly "obsolete," and propose instead a consumptionism in which all can achieve "equality." But this "equality" is an ideological term disguising the status of being at once the consumer of commodities and the commodity to be consumed.

In this context, Irigaray's complaint about society denying woman's autoerotic pleasure seems a bit out of touch. (45) For in the society of consumption this pleasure is not only permitted, but even enthusiastically promoted as a means toward the production of more commodities (self-help books, magazine articles, erotic films, ingenious sexual gadgets, an infinite variety of psychotherapies, etc.). Desire is propagated in a multitude of forms, so long as these forms can be assimilated into the consumptionist imaginary. Society cannot be understood as if the repressive mechanisms that were so perceptively (if ideologically) described by Freud early in this century remain somehow identically and ahistorically at work.

Yet the consumptionist imaginary is in fact a transformation of the dominant masculine imaginary. The patriarchal roots of this genealogy must be traced, so that we will not be misled by the adoption or adaptation of this imaginary by women, or on behalf of women. It is a transformation, in that an always-present narcissistic dimension has become preeminent, and has had far-reaching implications for the destructuring and restructuring of subjectivity.

Cixous's comments on "phallogocentric narcissism" are revealing in relation to this development. According to her, the "traditional man" wants above all to "gain more masculinity: plus-value of virility, authority, power, money, or pleasure." (46) This is a rather uncritical listing, and overlooks the distinction between the primordial and the epochal, the primary and the secondary. But we may set aside the question of the primordial (Freud's undecidable question in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*): whether it is pleasure, power, or something else. What is more significant here is that Cixous puts her finger on some particularly salient features of the masculine imaginary as it appears in the present epoch, and which are relevant to its present movement of self-transcendence and self-disguising.

Cixous correctly notes the obsession with self-image, and the importance of mirroring. Masculine narcissism is "self-absorbed," obsessed with "making sure of its image, of being seen, of seeing itself, of assembling its glories, of pocketing itself again. The reductive look, the

always divided look returning, the mirror economy: he needs to love himself." (47) The nature of this imaginary can only be grasped through the most concrete analysis of its foundation in the evolution of the culture of commodity consumption, and of the transformation of personal and institutional relations as that culture strives for hegemony. And what one finds striking in the course of this investigation is the extent to which the "phallogocentric" or "masculine" imaginary comes to appear to be neither, the extent to which the hollowed-out narcissistic ego, incorporating a lack more radical even than "castration" (in which "something" lacks "something") achieves universality. Cixous rightly opposes to this consuming ego a feminine that still lives in a world and recognizes the other: "she launches forth; she seeks to love." (48) But the spiritual crisis of our time is that increasingly "she" is no more capable than is "he," of "launching forth" and "loving," as each looks around to find only a prison of mirroring walls. (49)

### **The Dao of Difference**

There are thus two distortions of subjectivity to be avoided: both the traditional subject-object opposition based on a sadistic, hostile, appropriating imaginary, and the universalistic transcendence (*Aufhebung*) of this opposition in a narcissistic, consumptionist imaginary.

If this can be accomplished, then perhaps we can recommence the development of the submerged, non-dominating tradition of unity-in-diversity expressed so well two and one-half millennia ago in the *Daodejing*, in which the "phallogocentric" tradition (and, thus, Civilization itself) was confronted with a thorough critique at its very beginnings. Indeed, this work presents us instead with an "androgynous" ontology from which we can draw much inspiration even today.

In the Daoist ontology, there is no hierarchical opposition between being and non-being. Existence is not oriented by means of the horror of a lack. There is no terror of non-being, since the supreme reality itself, the Tao, is "empty," while still lacking nothing in its maternal abundance. It is neither a self-identical One, a self-dependent substance, nor a self-evident principle. It seeks to totalize neither itself nor all else through itself. It is anarchic, surpassing all principles in its self-differentiation. The Dao is "vague"; it flows everywhere. It does not flow toward any end, including any end of history (though the flow of Tao is like the flow of water, which returns to the maternal sea from which all emerges).

Early Daoism's critique of domination was expressed through its advocacy of the "way of weakness" rather than strength. "Reversion is the action of the Tao. Weakness is the function of the Tao." (50) Reversion, the way of weakness, means return and reciprocity, as opposed to the way of strength, which seeks to take without giving. This way of weakness is the way of self-restoring nature and life, while the way of strength is the path of aggressive self-destruction, whether this be physical or spiritual annihilation. "(T)he stiff and the hard are the companions of death. The tender and weak are companions of life." (51)

For the subject, the path of strength requires a well-defined, well-defended self. A territorialized self with border guards, with a state machinery, a national defense, and national interest. It means the death of the organic self for the sake of the objectifying and self-objectifying ego founded on power and appropriation. But the way of nature, the Tao, means non-appropriation.

The "non-action" of the Tao is non-egoistic, non-appropriating action. "It accomplishes its task, but does not claim credit for it." (52) The Tao produces "the ten thousand things," but "does not take possession of them." (53)

In short, the Tao is associated with powers of being and acting freed from their subjection to ends of domination and appropriation. In attempting to express the meaning of this way for humanity, the *Tao te Ching* could find no better image than that of the feminine. Civilization was beginning to follow a path of destruction founded on dominant social forms and forms of consciousness associated with the masculine. This was a "masculine" out of control, out of balance with its complement. Furthermore, it sought to deny the presence of its complement at its own core (failing to apprehend the universal interpenetration of opposites), thus creating within itself a lack.

The cure to this imbalance is seen in the rejection of hierarchical dualism, in which such "masculine" values as being, unity, identity, action, strength, and appropriation are associated with the good and their "feminine" opposites are despised. Instead, there must be a recognition of the relation of mutual dependence between being and non-being, unity and diversity, identity and difference, action and passion, strength and weakness, receiving and giving. "He who knows the male (active force) and keeps to the female (the passive force or receptive element)/ Becomes the ravine of the world." (54)

In no way is this an affirmation of the essential reality of these traditional oppositions. It is instead a ruthless ("inhumane") critique of our narrow cultural concepts. It is the application of the Taoist principle that "naming," or applying rigid, static categories destroys "the Uncarved Block," the unfolding of differentiated being. We must abstain from this murder of being, albeit at the painful cost of killing the self-identical ego, with its illusions of domination. To do this, the rejected "feminine" aspect of the self, and indeed, of all of nature, must be given recognition. In the authentically anarchic society proposed by Taoism, the other is discovered within the self.

### **Some Conclusions**

It has become clear over the course of the modern period that "equality" is an ideological concept, perpetuating in a mystified form elements of the system of domination. We should therefore be suspicious when confronted with a concept of "sexual equality." Simone de Beauvoir's socialist egalitarianism exemplifies well the manner in which this concept can be used to disguise the continuing presence of the dominating subjectivity of Civilization, and more specifically, the productivist subjectivity that the socialist tradition developed in dialectical opposition to modern capitalism.

In relation to this mystification, the concept of sexual difference retains a powerfully critical and liberatory dimension. Though the post-structural feminist critique has often lacked an adequate politics, it contains an implicit political dimension that must be developed. (55) By retrieving the repressed aspects of "the feminine" and "androgyny," it becomes possible to regenerate a subjectivity which is open to diversity and to the unfolding of being. Such a subjectivity will no longer be oriented by problematics of production and consumption, and the larger project of

appropriation that has plagued the history of Civilization. The pursuit of such a subjectivity is thus integral to both the critique of forms of domination and to the politics of liberation.

### Notes

- (1) Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 160.
- (2) *Ibid.*, p. 811.
- (3) *Ibid.*
- (4) *Ibid.*, p. 807.
- (5) *Ibid.*
- (6) *Ibid.*, pp. 807-808.
- (7) *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- (8) *Ibid.*, p. xvi.
- (9) *Ibid.*, p. 813.
- (10) *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p. xx.
- (12) *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- (13) *Ibid.*
- (14) Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man and Private Woman* (Princeton: Princeton Un. Press, 1981), p. 309.
- (15) De Beauvoir, p. 798.
- (16) *Ibid.*, p. 799.
- (17) *Ibid.*, p. 814.
- (18) *Ibid.*
- (19) Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Un. Press, 1985), p. 74.
- (20) *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- (21) Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Un. Press, 1985), p. 191.
- (22) *Ibid.*
- (23) *Ibid.*, p. 195.
- (24) Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 195.
- (25) *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- (26) *Ibid.*
- (27) *Ibid.*
- (28) Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 191. In the French, there is no "leading," but rather "*recours*," perhaps implying a refuge, or, more primordially, a flowing back to a source. *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974), p. 238.
- (29) Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 229.
- (30) Linda Godard, "Pour Une Nouvelle Lecture de la Question de la 'Femme': Essai à Partir de la Pensée de Jacques Derrida," in *Philosophiques*, vol. XII, no. 1, p. 162.
- (32) Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 24.
- (33) *Ibid.*
- (34) Though there is no one "woman" or "feminine" in Nietzsche's thinking. See Jacques Derrida, *Spurs/Eperons* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 96-97, for the three "propositions" on woman.
- (35) Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 124.

(36) De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 160.

(37) Quoted in Derrida, p. 47.

(38) Ibid, p. 49. The play and much of the force of the point is lost in the translation: "*elle-meme*" can never be said, it being impossible to thus link the feminine and sameness.

(39) Ibid., p. 51.

(40) Ibid. As Derrida notes, Nietzsche's "anti-feminism" consisted of a rejection of the incorporation of woman into the masculine imaginary founded on lack, striving, and the appropriation of the object. Or, as Derrida formulates it, the desire of a woman "to lay claim to truth, science and objectivity in all their castrated delusions of virility." p. 65.

(41) Helene Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 79.

(42) Ibid., p. 78.

(43) Ibid., p. 83.

(44) Ibid., p. 85.

(45) Irigaray, *This Sex That Is Not One*, p. 26.

(46) Cixous and Clément, p. 87.

(47) Ibid., p. 94.

(48) Ibid.

(49) For more extensive discussion of the crisis of subjectivity in consumptionist society, see John P. Clark, "The Labyrinth of Power and the Hall of Mirrors" in *The Anarchist Moment: Reflections on Culture, Nature, and Power* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1984), pp. 229-250 and "Giant Economy Size Brother" in M. Hewitt and D. Roussopoulos, eds. *1984 and After* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1984), pp. 38-65. Joel Kovel has correctly noted that the present discussion is inadequate without detailed articulation of "matters such as dependency, childhood, and most of all, the Mother, the warm, dark unsignifiable place from which we all come." (personal correspondence) I can recommend no better analysis of these matters than Kovel's magnificent work *The Age of Desire: Reflections of a Radical Psychoanalyst* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), which is unsurpassed in its treatment of the dialectic of institutions, ideology, and subjectivity in late capitalist society.

(50) Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book In Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton Un. Press, 1963), p.160. (*Tao te Ching*, ch. 40).

(51) Ibid., p. 174. (*Tao te Ching*, ch. 76)

(52) Ibid., p. 157. (*Tao te Ching*, ch. 34)

(53) Ibid., p. 163. (*Tao te Ching*, Ch. 51)

(54) Ibid., p. 154. (*Tao te Ching*, ch. 28)

(55) Critics of post-structuralist thought claim that it results merely in gleeful destruction of all meaning, and thus serves the system of domination by making impossible any constructive alternative. For example, Kenneth Asher, in "Deconstruction's Use and Abuse of Nietzsche," interprets it as a kind of perverse Nietzscheanism that ironically results in what Nietzsche himself saw as "passive nihilism." *Telos* 62, pp. 169-178. That post-structuralism should become a consumptionist ideology is inevitable in the society of mass consumption. What I am arguing here is that this "recuperation" does not negate the critical and liberatory dimensions of post-structuralist feminism. I believe that these dimensions could be most fully developed as a result of a creative dialogue between post-structuralist feminism and eco-feminism, the most widely emancipatory feminist tendency today. The far-reaching implications of eco-feminism are beyond the scope of the present discussion. See, for example, Ynestra King, "The Eco-

feminist Imperative" in Leonie Caldecott and Stephanie Leland, *Reclaim the Earth: Women Speak Out For Life On Earth* (London: The Women's Press, 1983), pp. 12-16.