

The Economic Thought of Simone De Beauvoir in the Second Sex

By RONALD G. BODKIN*

Feminist thinker Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 book is studied, in order to see what insights it may yield and how she may have anticipated modern "feminist economics." Among her contributions is a discussion of the gender wage gap, which is linked to the famous "double shift" (the need for many women to work a full day in the market and then put in nearly as many hours in domestic production). De Beauvoir also appears to have anticipated the modern concept of the "glass ceiling" (an invisible barrier that prevents women from attaining the top position in an organization). De Beauvoir also discusses the marriage "market." In short, it is surprising (at least to this analyst) how much de Beauvoir's discussion anticipates some of the insights of current-day economics of gender.

Keywords: Economic Doctrines, Gender Wage Gap, Glass Ceiling, Simone de Beauvoir

JEL Classification: B31

I. Introduction

Simone de Beauvoir was a French author and intellectual who was very much concerned about the feminine condition. Her philosophical approach to life's deepest questions was existentialism, often embedded in a Marxist framework. Still, when she discussed economic issues, her insights were such that a Main Stream economic thinker would not have difficulties in accepting her conclusions. Consider the concluding section of her major work, *Le deuxième sexe* [*The Second Sex*] (1949), where de Beauvoir states (pp. 650-1, vol. II): "Women must understand that commercial transactions—this is a fundamental law of political economy—are governed by the value that the merchandise offered takes on for the buyer, not the seller: she [the woman offering her full services] has been duped in being persuaded that she is worth an infinite price..."

What struck me in this passage was the familiarity with the Main Stream economic theory of value that Simone de Beauvoir had. Admittedly, the theory employed in the preceding passage is not the only theory of this phenomenon that economists have developed over the years.

*Professor Emeritus of Economics, Department of Economics, University of Ottawa, 55 Laurier Avenue East, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5, Canada. (E-mail: rgbodkin@uottawa.ca), Phone: (613) 726-1057, Fax: (613) 562-5999.

A version of this paper was originally presented (in French) at a colloquium of the Faculty of Social Sciences on a fifty year retrospective on the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe* (1949), October 15, 1999. All translations of direct quotations from this work are those of the author of this paper. The original quotations may be accessed in Bodkin (1999a).

This paper is dedicated to two women: first, to my late colleague Marcelle Genné, who originally was supposed to be a co-author of it. Unfortunately, she died suddenly in March 1999, seven months before the colloquium, still in time to give helpful advice with regard to its organization. It is also dedicated to Shauna Saunders, who agreed to be my co-author, for a revised version of the paper, to be written in late 2004. Unfortunately, she too died before this task could be accomplished. The helpful comments of Gilles Grenier and Luce Laviolette on the French version of the paper are also acknowledged gratefully, as are the comments of three anonymous referees.

Nevertheless, it is a relevant theory and she has applied it correctly. The ideas of Simone de Beauvoir concerning the economic aspect of the feminine condition are therefore worth considering, in my view. Again, let us allow her to speak for herself: "For me, women may be defined as human beings in search of goals, embedded in a goal-seeking world, a world in which it is absolutely imperative to be acquainted with its economic and social structure. We shall study women in the context of their total environment." (De Beauvoir, 1949, vol. I, p. 95.)

In particular, de Beauvoir believed strongly in the equality of the two sexes. In her own language, she believed that woman, formerly an immanent creature (*être immanent*), could become the equal of a man (an *être transcendent*) only by transcending her day-to-day existence. To do this, a woman would have to earn her own living; otherwise, she ran the risk of finding herself in a position of dependence and inferiority with regard to some man (husband, lover, father, brother, or even men in general). To put the matter another way, she believed strongly in women's liberation, of which she said, "This liberation can only be a collective one, and it demands above all that the economic evolution of the feminine condition must be completed." (De Beauvoir, 1949, vol. II, p. 522.)

The next section of this paper presents some rudimentary background to Simone de Beauvoir's ideas on the economics of gender, or the economic relations between the two sexes. Section 3 then develops some aspects of the economics of gender in *The Second Sex*. The final section will present the author's principal conclusions.

II. Some Issues of Philosophical Background

In attempting to build parallels between de Beauvoir's thought and that of a Main-Stream approach, one must recall to the reader (as well as to oneself) the great gulf in the philosophical lenses through which the two parties viewed the world. De Beauvoir may be classified as a Marxist existentialist; two major influences in her thought were the world-views of Karl Marx and her sometime lover, Jean-Paul Sartre. Thus, at the risk of simplifying, her world-view appears to be one in general of a pessimistic outlook; humans are frozen in a hostile world that they never created. However, struggle for a better condition is indeed possible; with the Revolution, society should be improved enormously (or so De Beauvoir believed at the time she wrote *The Second Sex*).

It may be observed that De Beauvoir drew on three sources to develop her ideas on economic phenomena: first, her extensive knowledge of literature, not only that of her native France but also in the English language; second, her knowledge of Western history; and, finally, her analysis of descriptive statistics, which she handled with ease. In particular, I should like to point up two strands that conditioned her economic thinking: the French utopian socialists, Fourier, Saint-Simon, and the Saint-Simonians; and two English female popularizers of Classical economics doctrines, Jane Marcet and Harriet Martineau.

Fourier, Saint-Simon, and Saint Simon's disciples (particularly Olindes Rodrigues and Prosper Enfantin) agreed that the present order contained many evils, including poverty and other signs of economic inefficiency. They agreed that a major reorganization of society could cure many of these social problems. Fourier wished to reorganize society into *phalanstères*, a sort of ideal community, which could permit a natural harmony to evolve and come to the

surface.¹ Saint-Simon, on the other hand, saw the problems of nineteenth century France as due to an undue influence of the politicians in the economic life of the society; he thought that if the direction of economic life could be turned over to the “industrialists,” one could radically improve economic efficiency. The Saint-Simonians pushed these ideas even further, together with a concept of progress that would follow if inheritance were abolished and a new religion (with a female Messiah) established. Needless to say, such ideas soon called forth the critical attention of the authorities, and the movement was dispersed. Still, such ideas (particularly the anti-clericalism) became background for the French left of the twentieth century, including de Beauvoir.²

The contributions of English political economy (particularly the English Classical School) were ably summarized by two women writers, Jane Marcet (1827) and Harriet Martineau (1834). While the contribution of these writers was mainly exegetic, they provided an excellent introduction to the doctrines of the English Classical School. Moreover, in their treatment of women as sentient, capable economic agents, they illustrated an approach to economic livelihoods that de Beauvoir was able to take up in her work, perhaps by absorption.³ Accordingly, although the final aspect of the liberation of women had to be a collective one (as noted above), an important beginning to the Revolution could commence with a woman's finding a suitable job and supporting herself economically.

III. Simone de Beauvoir's Ideas on the Economics of Gender

In my opinion, there is no question that Simone de Beauvoir considered as very important the economic aspects in the explanation of the total circumstances of women (and also of men). Consider the following two passages:

“As long as a perfect economic equality [between women and men] is not achieved in society and as long as the mores authorize a woman to take advantage as a wife or mistress of the privileges possessed by some men, the dream of a passive success will always persist and so will limit women's own accomplishments.” (1949, vol. II, p. 145.)

“Many young couples give the appearance of perfect equality. But so long as the man holds the economic responsibility for the couple, this appearance is only an illusion. It is he who chooses the matrimonial home according to his work needs; she *follows* him from the hinterland [*la province*] to Paris, from Paris to the hinterland, to the colonies, or abroad; their standard of living is established by his earnings: the pulse of their days, their weeks, and their year is governed by his concerns; their social relationships and friendships depend generally on his occupation.” (1949, vol. II, p. 326; the French word for “follow” [*suit*] is emphasized in the original.)

¹ In fact, Fourier was never able during his lifetime to find a sponsor for one of these ideal communities, but Henri Denis (1993) mentions that two of his disciples tried simple production co-operatives, based the master's principles, in the second half of the nineteenth century.

² On Fourier, see Denis (1993), pp. 346-351, while Saint-Simon and the Saint-Simonians are discussed by the same author on pp. 357-366.

³ A further discussion of the views of Jane Marcet and Harriet Martineau may be found in Bodkin (1999b). Particularly important is the fact that Marcet and Martineau conceived of women as intelligent, rational beings, able to make sensible decisions in their own interests. Bodkin (1999b) argues that this point of view was quite antithetical to that of most of the (overwhelmingly male) economists of the English Classical School.

Thus the importance of the economic aspect of life in the thought of Simone de Beauvoir is apparent. In this section, we shall examine five major topics developed by de Beauvoir in her discussion of what we should call "gender economics": (1) salary inequality between men and women, or the gender wage gap; (2) a related concept, the glass ceiling, or the assertion that there are senior positions in the economy which are simply not open to women; (3) the segregation, partial or total, of women into certain occupations considered particularly suitable for them, such as nursing, secretarial services, etc.; (4) marriage viewed as an economic market, where women sell particular services (sexual and other sorts) in a long term contract; and finally (5) children as economic goods. We have indicated in the previous section, in broad outline, the origin of these ideas. Although time and space do not permit a detailed documentation of the propositions that she set forth, one can say that these propositions are in general the fruit of a detailed study of one or more of the sources discussed previously.

Let us begin with the famous inequality of mean salaries paid to the two genders, the so-called "*gender wage gap*" First, de Beauvoir simply documents this phenomenon: "In France, according to a survey made in 1889-1893 [some researchers took their time in those days], for a day's work equal in length to that of a man, the female worker received on average only half of the male's pay." (De Beauvoir, 1949, vol. I, p. 200.) In the same paragraph, she relates that similar circumstances prevailed in the United States in 1918, while in German mines at the turn of the twentieth century (c. 1900), women miners received *for the same quantity of coal extracted* roughly 25 per cent less pay than their masculine colleagues. Accordingly, one can consider that this generalization has been established and indeed has persisted to the present time.

But how might we explain such wage inequalities? De Beauvoir briefly considers an explanation current at the time, namely "that the needs of women are less than those of men in general" (1949, Vol. I, p. 199), perhaps because women have less financial responsibilities for dependents, before unequivocally rejecting such an explanation. The simplest explanation, in her view, is that there has been (and continues to be) discrimination, pure and simple, against women workers; this economic discrimination is part of the social structure, where in general men possess more economic power than women. De Beauvoir certainly seems to favor such an explanation when she presents detailed statistics (1949, Vol. I, p. 198) on the low rate of unionization among female workers, in comparison to the male workers.

However, in the second volume of this master work, we find a more subtle explanation of the gender wage gap. On page 618 of this second volume, we may read: "There is a feminine function which it is currently impossible to take on and to retain one's freedom, namely maternity; in England, in America women can at least reject it, if they wish, thanks to the practice of 'birth control' [the quoted English expression is used in the original French]; we have seen that the French woman often has only the alternative of a costly and painful abortion; in consequence, she may find herself saddled with an unwanted child *who destroys her professional life.*" [Emphasis added.]

In other words, the presence of children may explain some of the gender wage (or salary) gap, because a mother must divide her time between her children and her career.⁴ But there is more. Because maternity and being a housewife are honorable outlets for an adolescent girl who is planning her "career," such a young woman may well be tempted by this possibility, especially when she observes wage inequality and other forms of economic discrimination in the workplace. Thus a vicious circle exists and continually renews itself; women are poorly paid

⁴ This point of view has been developed and advocated by Victor R. Fuchs (1988), almost forty years after de Beauvoir's discussion.

because they are little interested in the world of careers, and they are little interested in the world of careers because they are poorly paid (and poorly treated)! As Simone de Beauvoir herself expressed the matter: "... often she [the adult woman as a wife] commits herself to furnish a certain amount of domestic work; she maintains the house and raises the children. In any case, she has the right to be supported and even conventional morality exhorts her to do so. It is understandable that a woman might be tempted by this prospect, *especially since female occupations are often disagreeable and poorly paid.*" [1949, Vol. II, p. 228; emphasis has been added.]

De Beauvoir's second proposition that we identified above was the inaccessibility of women to positions of major responsibility, the so-called "glass ceiling." This concept is implicit in much of her discussion of the gender wage gap (see, for example, the preceding quotation), but I have even found an explicit formulation of this notion: "It is there that it [the experience of 'otherness' or, indeed of being the second sex] happens to the little girl learning the ways of the world that she will inhabit as a woman. The sphere to which she belongs is everywhere enclosed, limited, and dominated by the male universe; however high she may climb, however far she may wander, there will always be *a ceiling above her head*, walls that shut in her road." [De Beauvoir, vol. II, p. 52; emphasis added.]. With this passage, we are entitled to claim Simone de Beauvoir as a pioneer in the development of this important concept.

Let us now consider the third concept laid out above, namely the occupational segregation of women, which may be either partial or total. We have just seen that de Beauvoir spoke of female occupations as "disagreeable and poorly paid." At the turn of the current (21st) century in North America, we speak of "pink collar occupations," and many examples readily come to mind: secretaries, nurses, elementary school teachers, child-care workers, and attendants at homes for the aged, among others. Moreover, even though occupational segregation may not be absolutely necessary to maintain a gender wage gap, it is clear that such a separation of occupations allows the establishment of two salary scales, one for women and one for men, without charges of gender discrimination in salaries, since, after all, who would expect that two different professions should pay exactly the same salaries?⁵ Two additional quotations will round out our picture of de Beauvoir's views on this subject: "It is both criminal and paradoxical to refuse to women all public activity, to close to her *all masculine careers*, to proclaim her incompetence in all areas, and, at the same time, to confide to her the most delicate task (and also the most important in existence), namely the formation of a human being [child-care and upbringing]." [1949, Vol. II, p. 387; emphasis added.]. "Women are shut up in the kitchen or in the boudoir, and men are astonished that her horizon is limited; her wings are clipped, and then they deplore her inability to fly." [1949, Vol. II, p. 493.]

Let us now consider the fourth concept of the economics of the feminine condition developed by Simone de Beauvoir, namely, marriage as a market where the wife sells marital services on a long-term basis. De Beauvoir states, "Marriage is the destiny that society proposes traditionally to women. Even today, most women are married, have been married, prepare themselves to be married, or suffer from not being married." (1949, Vol. II, p.221.)

"In any case, the gains that they [the wives] can draw from the gift of their bodies are strictly limited by competition: the husband knows that could always find himself another wife.

⁵ This is partially Barbara Bergmann's view (1989); still, she (Bergmann) sees an important role for simple discrimination to play in the explanation of gender wage gaps.

The performance of 'conjugal duties' is not a gift, but rather the execution of a contract." (1949, Vol. II, p. 430).⁶

Hence, for Simone de Beauvoir, there is a marriage market, where men and women can find a mate for a long term relationship. (Not necessarily for life, but the economic analysis of divorce is another subject.) In this regard, she appears to have anticipated Gary Becker (1973, 1991) and the "New Home Economics," for whom the economic analysis of the household follows from the principles of neoclassical economics.

Parenthetically, one might be permitted to remark that it is ironic that there should be such a complete accord on this point between Simone de Beauvoir and a representative of the Chicago School, as their philosophical backgrounds are poles apart. In any case, the marriage market functions more or less in the following manner: each economic agent (female or male) seeks to optimize her/his objectives in finding himself/herself the best partner who will accept him/her. As part of the process of negotiation, the potential partners discuss between themselves the sharing of household tasks, the number of children (if any) to be anticipated, the quantity of work that each partner will offer in the job market, and of course the sharing of monetary and non-monetary gains between husband and wife. As it is typically assumed that the marriage market clears, at least systematically, the Chicago School can claim that the outcomes are (more or less) socially optimal.

One needs not be surprised that Simone de Beauvoir would not be in agreement with this final conclusion. According to her, what is the problem with a freely contracted marriage? Well, first of all, the tasks of a housewife are boring (in the extreme): "But the thing that renders the fate of the wife-house-servant sterile and unrewarding is that division of labor which assigns her entirely to the general and the unessential: household and food are of course useful to living but they do not confer on it any greater meaning. The immediate goals of the housewife are only means, not true ends, and in themselves only constitute anonymous projects." (1949, Vol. II, p. 275.)

"Worse still, husbands only rarely do their half of the domestic chores, and so wives are already handicapped in their search for real economic equality: during her studies or during the first years of her career, which are so critical, it is rare that a woman has free rein for her opportunities; many women will be handicapped in their careers by a poor start. In effect, it is between eighteen and thirty years of age that the conflicts about which I have spoken reach their maximum intensity, and this is the time when one's professional future is decided. *Whether a woman lives in her birth family or is married*, her fellow family members rarely respect her professional efforts as one would those of a man; services are requested of her, and with heavy tasks, her freedom is encumbered. ... The typical woman reconciles poorly the influence of past cultural patterns with her future interests." [De Beauvoir, Vol. II, p. 620; emphasis added.]

A little before this passage (1949, Vol. II, p. 603), de Beauvoir speaks of the double duties ("the double shift," we sometimes say) to which career women are subjected: even if a woman earns a respectable income in her profession, she must often accomplish the great majority of household tasks, particularly if she is married. Thus it is not surprising if her career lags somewhat in comparison to that of her husband, and here we have a supplementary explanation of the gender wage gap.

⁶ This passage comes from a chapter entitled, "Prostitutes and Courtesans" ["*hétaire*"], which may well explain the emphasis on sexual services furnished by wives to their husbands. Elsewhere (e.g., in the quotation from page 228 of Volume II, given above), it is clear that the services of the housewife include many other domestic services, such as cooking, child-care, ordinary housework, etc.

So it is easy to understand why de Beauvoir did not end up a strong supporter of the institution of marriage. "The story of marriage is not that it does not guarantee women the happiness which she is promised—no one can guarantee happiness; rather, it [marriage] tears down the typical woman, reducing her to repetition and routine." (1949, Vol. II, p. 323.) "How many women swallowed up in marriage have been, as Stendhal put it, 'lost to humanity'! It is said that marriage diminishes a man, which is often true, but almost always it annihilates a woman." (1949, Vol. II, p. 321.)

Finally, one may consider children as an economic good to be consumed by their parents, generally in the context of a marriage.⁷ In general, this point is implicit in de Beauvoir's discussion of the socialization of the young girl, so that she may play the part of an adult woman. Certainly, one role recognized for a woman is that of a mother, and we may suppose that this role is (at least in anticipation) a source of joy or at least of comfort for the potential mother. De Beauvoir expresses this point of view clearly in discussing a potential rivalry between a female adolescent and her mother: "However, the more the adolescent girl matures, the more the maternal authority weighs heavy on her. If she [the adolescent] is following a domestic role in the family home, she suffers from being only an assistant. She would like to consecrate her work to her own home and to her own children. Often the competition with her mother exasperates her; in particular, an elder daughter may become annoyed if she sees born more younger brothers or sisters; she considers that her mother 'has had her day' and that now it's her [the daughter's] turn to bring forth children and have her own little domain." (1949, Vol. II, p. 142.)

Thus it seems clear that, according to Simone de Beauvoir, children are a definite benefit to be desired, at least in anticipation. In this regard, as already suggested, de Beauvoir's thought resembles that of Becker (1991) and his disciples, who consider children as an economic good that their parents can consume, exactly as one consumes higher education or cultural experiences.

IV. Conclusions

The world has greatly changed since mid-century. For some, the speed of these changes has been frighteningly rapid, while for others, this change (generally regarded as progress) has been slow and frustrating. In any case, change has also characterized the social and economic relationships between the two genders.

Moreover, these changes have been more than quantitative. In the 1940s, current practice was to pay women much less than men *for exactly the same jobs*, and to justify such a practice in arguing that men had, as a general rule, many more family responsibilities. Today, no one would dare speak in such a way, if only because such a practice is blatantly illegal, in most jurisdictions of the developed world. I should not deny that economic discrimination still exists; nonetheless, at present discrimination is subtle and hidden rather than overt.⁸

Similarly, let us consider the phenomenon of "marriage bars." During most of the nineteenth century and a good proportion of the first half of the twentieth century, there were

⁷ In this context, it has been argued that marriage is a stable institution in which one can more easily bring up children. According to Gary Becker, children are the principal benefit that people (men and women) obtain from marriage. According to him, all the other benefits (domestic services, company, friendship, sexual services) can be obtained outside of marriage in ordinary markets or quasi-markets. I leave my readers the question of deciding whether this assertion reflects a masculine bias.

⁸ This isn't always a good thing; often hidden discrimination is much more difficult to deal with, because even the diagnosis could constitute a problem.

professions (often also female-dominated, such as primary school teachers) where women were required to resign following a marriage. For example, this practice was followed in the airline industry for many years, where female flight attendants (or "stewardesses," as they were called at the time) had to resign when they married. Obviously, this was a case where society imposed its norms on the individual, quite independently of the wishes or merits of such individuals. Such practices, which de Beauvoir no doubt would have regarded as barbaric, no longer exist (except for mandatory retirement in some jurisdictions) and hence one more obstacle to women's economic liberation (and thus to her total liberation) has been eliminated.

To conclude, one can read these divergent tendencies in two ways; there is much to encourage the optimists, and there is also much that would feed the pessimists. In any case, I have found it instructive and even amazing to note how many of the points of current discussion of the economics of gender have been anticipated by de Beauvoir's prescient analyses. By way of qualification, as noted above, I should not claim that this paper is intended to be an analysis of all of de Beauvoir's views on society or even the economy. Still, I find the links with Main Stream economic analysis fascinating and worthy of comment.

Some might argue that one cannot take the Marxist thought of Simone de Beauvoir and analyze only the strictly economic aspects of it, because in doing so one runs the risk of making this profound scholar an ersatz Neoclassical economist. However, I should reply with implicit reference to another great economist, namely Adam Smith. Early in his monumental work, *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith sets forth in great detail the advantages of specialization and the division of labor in an irrefutable manner. Surely such arguments apply with equal force to intellectual discourse. Hence, in my view, studying the economic thoughts of a profound thinker is always a worthy task, particularly when she appears to have anticipated so many of the points of view of modern feminist economic analysis.

References

- Becker, G. S.** 1973. "A Theory of Marriage: Part I." *Journal of Political Economy*, 81(4), July/August: 813-846.
- Becker, G. S.** 1991. *A Treatise on the Family*, Enlarged Edition. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Bergmann, B. S.** 1989. "Does the Market for Women's Labor Need Fixing?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 3(1), Winter: 43-60.
- Bodkin, R. G.** 1999a. "La travailleuse: perspective du *Deuxième Sexe* et questions d'actualité économique pour les femmes," Cahier de recherche Working Paper 9907E. Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ottawa, December.
- Bodkin, R. G.** 1999b. "The Issue of Female Agency in Classical Economic Thought: Jane Marcet, Harriet Martineau, and the Men." *Gender Issues*, 17(4), Fall: 62-73.
- De Beauvoir, S.** 1949. *Le deuxième sexe [The Second Sex]*. Vols. I and II. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.
- Denis, H.** 1993. *Histoire de la pensée économique [History of Economic Thought]*. 10th ed. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France.
- Fuchs, V. R.** 1988. *Women's Quest for Economic Equality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Marcet, J. H.** 1827. *Conversations on Political Economy in Which Elements of that Science are Familiarly Explained*, Sixth ed., revised and enlarged. London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown and Longman.
- Martineau, H.** 1834. *Illustrations of Political Economy*, 9 Vols. London: Charles Fox.