

**The Winner of the Core Course (Exploring Human Experience) Essay Contest in 2008-09
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Beyond Immanence:

De Beauvoir and Marx on the Loss of Individuality

The master slave complex identified in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Karl Marx's *Selected Writings* presents the juxtaposition of distinct classes in society. Beauvoir critiques the objectification and submission of the female to her male counterpart. Marx explains the alienation and objectification of the labourer to his work. Both woman and the proletarian are entrapped by their duty, their sole purpose; they are confined to their objectification, woman to her sexuality, the proletarian to his labour. Beauvoir calls this loss of identity through objectification "otherness" whereas Marx refers to it as the alienation of the labourer. In either case both woman and the proletarian are reduced to second class citizens. In fact they nearly cease to be recognized as human and exist only as objects, commodities, or a means to an end, whether it be in reproduction or the making of goods. While both attempt to break free from their enslavement, neither succeeds in transcending his or her objectification. Although neither gains this transcendence, the female, as described by De Beauvoir, fares worse in her environment than Marx's proletarian because where woman relinquishes her entire individuality to man, the proletarian sacrifices only his labour-power, maintaining his individuality outside of his work. Woman's submission is a futile attempt at transcendence, whereas proletarian labour is a means for sustaining an autonomous life beyond the workplace.

Woman, Beauvoir claims, is regarded as “a womb, an ovary; she is a female”-- nothing more, nothing less. In this context the term “female” takes on a derogatory meaning, because “it imprisons her in her sex” (3). The declaration of femininity enslaves the subject, whereas that of masculinity liberates. Therefore simply by existing as female, woman ceases to exist in any capacity beyond her sexuality. This paradox of nonexistence keeps the woman subdued in her role, with no avenue for individual expression or fulfillment.

Similarly, Marx’s proletarian “sinks to the level of a commodity, the most miserable commodity” (58). This “diminution of the worker” appears as the “loss of and subservience to the object” (60). The labourer exists solely for the production of the object. It becomes his means of subsistence, his provider. He becomes a slave to the object and in the process loses not only the object itself, but with it his individuality. The worker “puts his life into the object; then it no longer belongs to him but to the object” (Marx 60).

While both Beauvoir and Marx recognize that both woman and the proletarian submit somewhat to their fate of objectification, they do so to varying degrees. Woman, says Beauvoir, “chooses to desire her enslavement” (643). Woman sees no escape from her enslavement to man, and instead decides to embrace it. She “submits to [man] passively” telling herself that she desires his dominance because “there is no other way out for her than to lose herself, body and soul, in him” (Beauvoir 643). This submission however, is nothing more than taking the easy way out. Throughout woman’s entire life, “everything incites her to take the easy slopes” (Beauvoir 645). By submitting to man and accepting her role as a tool, an object to facilitate the continuation of the species, woman faces less hardship, less struggle. This lifestyle is extremely

enticing, but nonetheless enslaving. By accepting it woman loses her individuality, her ability to express herself and pursue careers and other ventures. Marx's proletariat, conversely, never feels the pull of passivity. He never feels the alluring temptation of being provided for. His enslavement exists as an entirely different type in which he sells away his individuality as a means of subsistence. "Labor" explains Marx, "appear[s] to man at first only as a means to satisfy a need, the need to maintain physical existence" (63). The proletariat never chooses to desire his labour; in fact he despises it. The worker "feels at ease only outside work" and conversely "during work he is outside himself".(62). He is enslaved by his labor not because he chooses to be, but because he has no other choice. He refuses to let his work define him, but rather to separate himself from his work. He chooses to become "an appendage of the machine" (Marx 164). This difference in motives between woman and the proletariat provides the means for their divergence from one another in the futile struggle for transcendence.

Both woman and the proletariat unsuccessfully seek transcendence. The woman looks to transcend the confines of her body to become equal to man. She does so by trying to make him love her because "it is in men's eyes that woman believes she has finally found herself" (Beauvoir 646). In searching for man's recognition of her as equal however, she assumes that man's opinion matters the most, thereby conceding her insignificance as a woman. Her efforts to achieve transcendence only affirm her immanence. The proletariat has no chance of transcendence in his current condition. The class movement in capitalist society, explains Marx, always results in "entire sections of the ruling classes, by the advance of industry, precipitated into the proletariat" (167). There is no upward mobility, only downward. Transcendence is

denied the proletarian by the nature of his society. The difference between woman and the proletarian therefore, lies not in their denial of transcendence, but in the extent of their immanence.

Beauvoir's woman loses her entire identity when she submits to man. Through the process of motherhood she renounces her individuality "for the benefit of the species, which demands this abdication" (23). Even the act of reproduction emphasizes woman's immanence. She is passive. On the other hand, man is transcendent in the act of sex. Beauvoir explains that "the sperm, through which the life of the male is transcended into another...so that the male recovers his individuality intact at the moment when he transcends it" (22). Man recovers his individuality because he doesn't bear the burden of motherhood. The woman, upon conception, loses the individuality which the man had recovered. She carries her child, and in doing so "she becomes, in part, another than herself" (Beauvoir 22). Woman becomes entirely devoted to man and to her child while man seeks to invest himself not only in the female, but also in other ventures. Beauvoir says, "Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man" (xxii). Woman's dependence upon man diminishes her into immanence.

Marx's proletarian shares this same immanence with woman, but only to a limited degree. The proletarian becomes an object, a commodity, only within the workplace. This is because the worker alienates part of himself. He alienates his labour-power, his ability to work. Marx states that the proletarian must "constantly treat his labour-power as his own property, his own commodity" (265). He does this by selling it to the consumer, his employer, "for a definite period of time" (265). By both treating his labour-power as his own property and selling it to the

highest paying consumer he “manages both to alienate... and to avoid renouncing his rights of ownership over it”(265). Although the proletarian alienates part of himself, he never relinquishes his authority and in doing so he maintains a certain amount of sovereignty. This sovereignty however, is very limited. The proletarian still must sell his labor-power not because he wants to, but because it is a necessary means of subsistence. His labor fulfills a need, rather than a desire. The true reason, therefore, that the proletarian does not lose his entire individuality to his labor is because the laborer has a life, however sparse, outside of his work. Regarding the proletarian laborer Marx writes, “he is at home when he is not working and when he is working he is not at home” (62). While labor enslaves and alienates the proletarian, it only does so at work. The proletarian still has a home, and in having this he still has his sovereignty, his individuality. The wealth and power he wields with this sovereignty may be meager, but the little he has infinitely outweighs that of the woman who gives up everything to man and to motherhood.

This disparity of autonomy separates the proletarian from woman. The woman renounces her sovereignty while the proletarian fights to keep just a part of it. Neither is able to transcend their current conditions. Both are enslaved and objectified by those who govern them. Each becomes alienated not just to others, but even to themselves. But where the female concedes, where she submits and sacrifices herself for the love of man, and for the benefit of the species, she loses herself. The proletarian never loses himself. Even his labor-power, which he prostitutes off to the highest bidder, remains ultimately his to keep, to maintain. He is forced to work in order to survive, but outside of the workplace he still has sovereignty, he still has

control. That control is the difference between the condition of the proletarian and that of the woman. Although neither achieves transcendence, the proletarian at least keeps his dignity.