Notes on Emma Goldman & Simone de Beauvoir

1. Contextualizing Emma Goldman
    a. A figure like Emma Goldman (d. 1940) allows us to connect the innovative political thought of nineteenth-century Europe to a somewhat more familiar American context. Born in what is now Lithuania but what was then under the control of the Russian Tsar, Goldman immigrated to the United States as a teenager. There she became active in radical political movements centering mostly on the question of workers' rights.
    b. Goldman was no Marxist, however. Calling herself an anarchist, she rejected the idea that a strong, centralized state could wield its power to benefit the proletariat and abolish the suffering of class-based society. Instead, she favored the dissolution of the state and the rise of self-organizing forms of human society, which would allow for individual expression and a deeper kind of 'human emancipation,' as Marx might have called it.
    c. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a number of flare-ups between the working classes and their industrial bosses across the United States. These could often turn violent, which made for sensational headlines that might grip the attention of any number of readers around the country. These clashes seem to have played a meaningful role in progressively radicalizing Goldman.
    d. One such event was Chicago's own Haymarket Affair, which Goldman saw as a key moment in the laborers' struggle. On May 4, 1886, a peaceful protest in favor of an eight-hour workday and against police brutality turned violent. A makeshift bomb was hurled at police amassed near the rally, which led to a gun battle. Seven policemen were killed, along with a small number of civilians. Four workers were eventually hanged in response, while the event would go on to be commemorated as part of the observance of May Day around the world.
    e. Goldman herself would go on to be seen as a major figure—heroic to some, notorious to others—in the labor movement, both in America and in Europe. Early on, she was often associated with the use of violence, through her role in an assassination attempt on a prominent industrialist and her refusal to denounce the killing of President McKinley by an apparent anarchist in 1901. Ultimately, however, she was more well known for her use of speeches to encourage protest and reform on behalf of the working classes.
2. *The Tragedy of Woman's Emancipation* (1906)
    a. In addition to travelling the country delivering her speeches, Goldman published her views through organs like the journal *Mother Earth*. That is where this essay first appeared. Its aim is to briefly criticize the superficial forms of political emancipation that, in Goldman's eyes, fell far short of the truly free expression of women as full human beings.
    b. The problem, as Goldman sees it, is that we have so far failed to define what it is we want when we demand emancipation. Is it simply political equality? A broader kind of egalitarianism? Equality, then, of what? Of conditions? Of opportunities? Of outcomes?
    c. This line of questioning misses the mark. What's at stake in the question of emancipation is not the destruction of differences, but the celebration of whatever it is that makes us distinct, makes us who we are. Writes Goldman: "The problem that confronts us today, and which the nearest future is to solve, is how to be onselsef

and yet in oneness with others, to feel deeply with all human beings and still retain one's own innate qualities. This seems to me the basis upon which the mass and the individual, the true democrat and the true individuality, man and woman can meet without antagonism and opposition. The motto should not be: forgive one another; it should be: understand one another." (178)

d. Goldman refrains from emphasizing forgiveness because that would seem to place the forgiver on a higher moral plane than the forgivee. But the point is not to establish moral hierarchies, but to understand the distinctive qualities of our fellow human beings. Recognizing others as different might just be the first step toward recognizing them as the 'same' as us—that is, as fully human.
e. Woman's emancipation, then, must be approached on these terms. It should lead to an affirmation of woman's full humanity. Says Goldman: "Emanciaption should make it possible for her to be human in the truest sense. Everything within her that craves assertion and activity should reach its fullest expression; and all artificial barriers should be broken and the road towards greater freedom cleared of every trace of centuries of submission and slavery." (178)
    i. Here we might be reminded of Wollstonecraft. But is Goldman really after the same sort of thing as Wollstonecraft was? How do Goldman's post-Marxist, anarchist principles change the contours of her call for emancipation?
f. So what is it that went so wrong with emancipation? Why is woman now "confronted with the necessity of emancipating herself from emancipation?" (180) It is because her liberation has been too superficial, too external. Political emancipation has changed little for women, though it remains a form of progress in itself. But politics is not much more than a mechanism powered by economic avarice and vice. Involving women in that is a far cry from redeeming it. Adds Goldman: "There is no hope that even woman, with her right to vote, will ever purify politics." (180)
g. In addition to political emancipation, though, there is also economic emancipation. Even in Goldman's own time, women were entering the workforce in increasing numbers, often in occupations long exclusive to men. But this, too, fails to alter the fundamental character of capitalist society, which—to Goldman—stands in opposition to true freedom at every turn. Being free to work in an office might be better than being barred from the office, but it still falls short of freedom proper: "how much independence is gained if the narrowness and lack of freedom of the home is exchanged for the narrowness and lack of freedom of the factory, sweatshop, department store, or office?" (180)
h. Drafting women into the body politic and the labor force does not mean setting them free. It means coopting them into fundamentally unfree forms of social organization, which Goldman sees as inhibiting the natural capacities of women: "A so-called independence which leads only to earning the merest subsistence is not so enticing, not so ideal that one can expect woman to sacrifice everything for it. Our highly praised independence is, after all, but a slow process of dulling and stifling woman's nature, her love instinct and her mother instinct." (181)
    i. Here Goldman's view of nature again seems surprisingly 'traditional,' although it's not clear she'd have seen in that way. How are we to take her seemingly immediate linking of woman's human nature to her abilities to love and give birth?

i. Our sense of emancipation has therefore been too narrow. It doesn't let women be fully human, but simply positions them as automata in a larger social machine. Women are not set free; they are drained of life. Argues Goldman: "The narrowness of the existing conception of woman's independence and emancipation; the dread of love for a man who is not her social equal; the fear that love will rob her of her freedom and independence; the horror that love or the joy of motherhood will only hinder her in the full exercise of her profession—all these together make of the emancipated modern woman a compulsory vestal, before whom life, with its great clarifying sorrows and its deep, entrancing joys, rolls on without touching or gripping her soul." (181)

j. Faced with the accusation that emancipation breeds wanton vice, women have been too quick to over-correct and fall into a kind of modern-day asceticism. In order to be free, they have to give up the joys of life and become colorless drones. But this makes a joke of liberty, which should allow for the widest range of free expression. (182)

k. Women, then, have been emancipated from many external hindrances, but internal constraints still persist for them: social and ethical conventions most especially, which continue to destroy women's attempts to live full and well-rounded lives. Goldman writes that most women "never truly understood the meaning of emancipation. They thought that all that was needed was independence from external tyrannies; the internal tyrants, far more harmful to life and growth, such as ethical and social conventions, were left to take care of themselves; and they have taken care of themselves." (183)

l. But truly free women must learn to overcome these "moral detectives," so as to more freely embrace life, love, and birth. As it stands, however, modern love is little more than a prim, cold transaction. Passion has been supplanted by exchange and the balance-sheet. (184)

m. True emancipation, finally, will have to come from within—from the "soul." It must first and foremost recognize itself as the freedom to love. Political and economic realities will then have to come to complement that foundation. Concludes Goldman: "The right to vote, equal civil rights, are all very good demands, but true emancipation begins neither at the polls nor in the courts. It begins in woman's soul. History tells us that every oppressed class gained its true liberation from its masters through its own efforts. It is necessary that woman learn that lesson, that she realize that her freedom will reach as far as her power to achieve her freedom reaches. It is therefore far more important for her to begin with her inner regeneration, to cut loose from the weight of prejudices, traditions, and customs. The demand for various equal rights in every vocation in life is just and fair, but, after all, the most vital right is the right to love and be loved." (185)
    i. Cf. here Marx's call for a deeper human emancipation that would outstrip even the most progressive of political emancipations. But what is the sense of the human that lies beneath these calls for true freedom? What is the human for Marx? For Goldman? (And again—for Wollstonecraft? And to what extent will this change with Simone de Beauvoir?)
    ii. …
    iii. …
    iv. …
    v. …

3. Contextualizing Simone de Beauvoir
    a. Simone de Beauvoir (d. 1986) was one of the most prominent French intellectuals of the twentieth century. Coming up as part of a generation including Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Albert Camus, she is most closely associated with the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre.
    b. De Beauvoir could move nimbly between the heights of philosophy and the grounded struggles of women and other oppressed communities around the world. Because of that, she can serve as a guide for us as we try to bring the history of political theory to bear upon concrete questions of emancipation.
    c. One of the first women to graduate from Paris' prestigious Sorbonne, De Beauvoir would press on into the upper reaches of higher education. At the same time, however, her life became caught up in the wider historical struggles of her time. Thirty-one years old when World War II broke out, De Beauvoir would show some interest in the French resistance while still being able to publish under Vichy rule. After the war, her interest in politics would grow. In general, her criticisms of capitalism intensified as her support for Marxist regimes increased. She was especially vocal about the first stirrings of Communist rule in China and Vietnam.
    d. After some early novels and philosophical essays, she turned her attention more fully toward the place of women in history and society. Her research ultimately produced *The Second Sex* in 1949, a work which was anticipated many later developments in feminist thought and political theory. Though she is often identified with Marxist political movements, de Beauvoir's take on sexuality does not necessarily follow lines of thought we might extrapolate from Marx's sense of human emancipation or Goldman's anarchic feminism.
4. *The Second Sex* (1949)
    a. The Eternal Feminine
        i. "Are there women, really?" (xix) This is a bold statement to make at the beginning of a treatise on women's emancipation! But De Beauvoir isn't really interested in joining an overly traditional conversation about women. She wants to conduct the debate on other terms.
        ii. Most of all, she is skeptical about the way the idea of women's 'nature' or what she calls the "eternal feminine" has insinuated itself at the heart of the question of emancipation. Discussions of liberating women all too often depend on some prior idea of what a 'woman' is or should be. But do we really have a surefire way of defining woman, womanhood, or woman-ness? De Beauvoir is skeptical. At the very least, she wants us to ask questions like: Must women's emancipation continue to be discussed in terms of a 'loss' and 'recovery' of woman's nature? Is it about restored woman to some status? Or is it about freeing them to be something else?
        iii. De Beauvoir is certainly not satisfied with the following statement: 'woman is a human female.' The way we talk about women and womanhood is more meaning-laden than that. So what, then, is woman, at least rhetorically speaking? Is woman a womb? (Recall Goldman on the maternal here…) Is femininity an essence? Science, at least, has done much in the way of dispelling our preconceptions about categories like sex, race, and so on.
            1. Here we might say that de Beauvoir is taking some first tentative steps in the opening-up of a concept of gender that would no longer be reducible to traditional sexual hierarchies or biological distinctions.

b. The Relative Being
    i. And yet—do we lose something by throwing out the category of 'woman' altogether? Is something lost when we turn solely to the language of 'human beings,' regardless of sexual distinctions? Perhaps surprisingly, de Beauvoir says yes. We do risk losing ground by ceasing to talk of woman altogether.
    ii. She writes: "The fact is that every concrete human being is always a singular, separate individual. To decline to accept such notions as the eternal feminine, the black soul, the Jewish character, is not to deny that Jews, Negroes, women exist today—this denial does not represent a liberation for those concerned, but rather a flight from reality." (xx)
    iii. And so: "In truth, to go for a walk with one's eyes open is enough to demonstrate that humanity is divided into two classes of individuals whose clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, gaits, interests, and occupations are manifestly different. Perhaps these differences are superficial, perhaps they are destined to disappear. What is certain is that right now they do most obviously exist." (xxi)
    iv. Even if we don't have a rigorous definition of what woman is or has to be, that doesn't mean we can't talk about women's liberation. There are indeed people who are coded as women in society and face social limitations accordingly. The conceptual source of these limitations is the idea that 'man'—the male—is the paradigm of humankind. To be human, absolutely and without qualification, is to be a man: "A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man." (xxi)
    v. Women, then, suffer from the start, simply because they are humans only in a qualified sense. They aren't full humans or humans in the absolute sense. And so they are held to account for falling short of this paradigm. That is the situation that must be alleviated.
    vi. In the current situation, woman is understood as the sexed or sexual being, which ultimately means the relative or supplementary being. She is conceived as a complement to man (as simply human). Writes de Beauvoir: "Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being." (xxii)
    vii. But must women always think of themselves in relation to men? The masculine-feminine binary seems to structure Western culture—and other cultures, too—but that doesn't mean the binary can't be critique or even inverted. Perhaps there might be a way for women to think of themselves without the mediation of the masculine. (xxiii-xxiv)
        1. The current situation is what Marx might call one of alienation. Instead of thinking of themselves on their own terms, instead of seizing hold of their own subjectivity, women are forced to consider the male gaze when they reflect on their own position. (Cf. the critique of religion, where humankind sees itself from God's point of view; or the critique of capitalism, where humankind sees itself from the perspective of capital…)
        2. …
        3. …
        4. …

c. The Limits of Emancipation
    i. Like Goldman, de Beauvoir sees the movement toward woman's emancipation as painfully incomplete. (That's not to say, of course, that the gains thus far are insubstantial or 'bad.') Even when they are advocating for—and receiving—greater political and economic agency, women still tend to think of themselves in terms given to them by men. But that is what has to change.
    ii. Luckily, this is something that can be changed through free human activity: "In truth, however, the nature of things is no more immutably given, once for all, than is historical reality. If woman seems to be the inessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change." (xxv)
    iii. But seizing on this opportunity for change would require solidarity among women. They'd need to band together to create new terms in which to think of and realize their own freedom. But unlike other oppressed groups—such as religious or ethnic minorities—women lack most of the conditions for creating solidarity. Instead of being herded into cramped quarters, they are spread out among the male populace. They identify with their male oppressors—fathers, brothers, husbands—rather than with other women: "if they belong to the bourgeoisie, they feel solidarity with men of that class, not with proletarian women; if they are white, their allegiance is to white men, not to Negro women. … The bond that unites her to her oppressors is not comparable to any other." (xxv)
    iv. For proper emancipation to occur, solidarity among women must rise to a place equal with that of class or race solidarity. As it stands, though, the fact of male domination has transformed into the imagined 'right' of male sovereignty. (This is akin to Mill's critique of the law of force hiding behind apparent senses of legal right.) Truly democratic voices concerning women's liberation have been held back by the whole legislative and religious apparatus of human society. Even economic revolutions have failed to produce women's solidarity, as the entry of women into the workplace gets subsumed under broader tensions between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. (xxviii-xxix)

d. Freedom From the Eternal Feminine
    i. Pseudo-essential categories like the "eternal feminine" and the "black soul" are, in de Beauvoir's view, in fact historically constituted images that hold back the free development of women, blacks, and other marginalized groups. The question, though, is not what the status quo for women is now, but what it should become. It's not about getting right on what women 'are;' it's about what women can be—given the freedom to explore their own possibilities. (xxx)
    ii. As usual, however, social factors continue to masquerade as natural qualities. (Recall Mill again, with his historicizing of the natural and his call for experimental lifestyles!) Men, for their part, have begun to say that they believe in equality for women, while at the same time maintaining social relations rooted in inequality.
    iii. She writes: "So it is that many men will affirm as if in good faith that women are the equals of man and that they have nothing to clamor for, while at the

same time they will say that women can never be the equals of man and that their demands are in vain. It is, in point of fact, a difficult matter for man to realize the extreme importance of social discriminations which seem outwardly insignificant but which produce in woman moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to spring from her original nature. The most sympathetic of men never fully comprehend woman's concrete situation." (xxxii)

iv. The way forward, then, lies less in the demand for more rights—since rights only get you so far—and more in a call for greater understanding of women's experience. (Cf. Goldman's call for understanding over forgiveness…) Writes de Beauvoir: "It is significant that books by women on women are in general animated in our day less by a wish to demand our rights than by an effort toward clarity and understanding." (xxxiv)

v. This call for understanding women's experience is rooted in de Beauvoir's existentialist commitments to freedom and individuality. Vague ideas of the public good and social stability mean little when stacked up to the ideals of free human activity: "If we survey some of the works on woman, we note that one of the points of view most frequently adopted is that of the public good, the general interest; and one always means by this the benefit of society as one wishes it to be maintained or established. For our part, we hold that the only public good is that which assures the private good of the citizens; we shall pass judgment on institutions according to their effectiveness in giving concrete opportunities to individuals. But we do not confuse the idea of private interest with that of happiness, although that is another common point of view." (xxxiv)

vi. True women's emancipation might then have to look a lot like existentialist emancipation. The individual must not be forced to stagnate in contentment, but must rather transcend herself and expand out into the world via free projects.

vii. As de Beauvoir envisions it: "Now, what peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to stabilize her as object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another ego (*conscience*) which is essential and sovereign. The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (*ego*)—who always regards the self as the essential—and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential. How can a human being in woman's situation attain fulfillment?" (xxxv)

viii. And put even more simply: "I am interested in the fortunes of the individual as defined not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty." (xxxv)

ix. The problem, restated finally, is this: woman is inherently free and autonomous, yet she has her status in life given to her by men—by other free actors whose freedom overrides her own. So the solution would have to involve letting woman exercise the sovereign freedom that she already has, so as to realize her own full existence as human.