

# The folly of vengeance: Thinking through the Paris attacks with Simone de Beauvoir

by Nayeli Urquiza Haas | 20 Nov 2015



‘...we said ourselves in an outburst of anger “They will pay”. And our anger seemed to promise a joy so heavy that we could scarcely believe ourselves able to bear it. They have paid. They are going to pay. They pay each day. And the joy has not risen up in our hearts’.<sup>1</sup>

In the wake of the Paris attacks on November 13, international media highlighted how it was the **deadliest attack since the Second World War**, which was quickly rebutted when it was pointed out that up to **200 Algerians had been massacred in Paris in 1961** after protesting the colonial war in Algeria. Even if we believed every life mattered, the unequal mourning shown after the bombing in Beirut at day before the multiple attacks in Paris show how

lives which are lost to violence appear or dis-appear in the public realm.

While there has been [criticism in the media and elsewhere](#) about the history and politics that frames how lives matter and how all should matter (for instance Judith Butler's *Precarious Life*) and how the law plays a key role by creating distinctions between worthy and unworthy lives to mourned (victim/criminal, combatant/civilian, terrorist/freedom fighter), the absence of Simone de Beauvoir's voice in France's contemporary challenges should not be a reason to forget her invitation to think critically about how we react when we are injured.

As a prolific feminist author whose influence is well recognized, Beauvoir would seem for many to be an unlikely interlocutor to think through the current military response to the attacks: bombing Raqqa to the ground and the militaristic policing in Paris this week. However, it might be worth recalling that Beauvoir was a critic of the torture methods used by the French government in the French-Algerian war 1954–1962.[2. Melissa M. Ptacek, “Simone de Beauvoir’s Algerian War: Torture and the Rejection of Ethics,” *Theory and Society*, November 4 (2015): 1-37.] Her approach to historical events and philosophy is grounded through phenomenology. Beauvoir states that her intention is ‘to merely translate [...] a situation that is showing itself to be historical precisely in that it is in the process of changing’ without colonizing the experience of marginalized others.<sup>2</sup>

The leitmotif of ambiguity, which traverses most of her body of work, provides the gravitas shaping, problematizing and marking the limits of her thoughts and judgements on the political transformations she faced with others: WWII, the war in Algeria, women's oppression, etc. More importantly, her critique of post-war punishment and liberal moral

philosophy is a helpful guide to resisting the impulse of revenge.

## Ambiguity

Recent engagements with Beauvoir's work on ambiguity demonstrate the breadth of her method, encompassing themes that are not limited to gender and sexuality studies but also extend to questions of politics, moral philosophy, and ethics.[4. See: Anne Morgan, "Simone de Beauvoir's Ethics of Freedom and Absolute Evil," *Hypatia* 23, no. 4 (2008): 75–89.] For Beauvoir, the human condition is marked by the 'tragedy of ambiguity,' because it is an isolated subjective experience that nevertheless coexists 'at the heart of the world with other men'.[5. Simone de Beauvoir, "Eye for an Eye," 258] Ambiguity is the frame that helps her understand the tensions arising from our relationship with others and the desire for freedom. Ambiguity evinces an impossible struggle between ethics and politics, where Beauvoir's political subject moves through the world to impose a meaning while the ethical 'acknowledges the mark of the other'. [6. Debra Bergoffen, "Between the Ethical and the Political: The Difference of Ambiguity," In *The Existential Phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir*, edited by Wendy O'Brien and Lester Embree (Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business Media, 2001), 188.]

One of the most interesting implications of her emphasis on ambiguity is how it unsettles the values ascribed to the theory and practice of punishment. Crime and punishment as much as war and peace, delineate the borders of this intersubjective dilemma. They represent ways in which the intersubjective world is denied by imposing one meaning over another. In the essay 'Eye for an Eye' (1946), Beauvoir seeks to make sense of the trial and execution of Robert Brasillach – a French intellectual who collaborated with the Germans by publishing a fascist newspaper. More than just an occasion

piece, this essay is a pillar in Beauvoir's work as she alludes to ambiguity for the first time. [7. Kristiana Arp, "Eye for an Eye: Introduction by Kristiana Arp," In Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings, edited by Margaret Simmons, Marybeth Timmerman, and Mary Beth Mader (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 237 –260.]

## **Embracing revenge and resisting revenge: Two different Parises**

The State's penal machinery set in motion after the Paris attacks bears all the characteristics of revenge, pure and simple. By November 18, [France struck back with airstrikes in Raqqa](#), ISIL's de facto base. A week before, the city had been also pounded by Russian bombs which destroyed the national hospital.

Revenge, whilst denounced as barbaric—as something that criminal courts and scholarship in post-Enlightenment Europe abandoned through its sublimation into 'retributive justice'—it reserves a strong place in the philosophical imaginary of criminal legal doctrine and in international law. Even though retributive justice holds on to the belief that proportionality delivers a relative equivalence, Beauvoir shows how punishment is always asymmetrical because it is justified on something other than the crime itself.

In 'Eye for an Eye,' she argues that revenge appeals since it is something that 'retains a whiff of magic' that 'strives to satisfy some unknown dark god of symmetry'. [8. Simone de Beauvoir, "Eye for an Eye," 247.] But revenge cannot bring the satisfaction one would hope for, even in the case of the most horrible crimes where perpetrators objectify others by reducing them into 'mere panting flesh'. [9. De Beauvoir reflected on this through the experience of the rape of

Djamila Boupacha in the Algerian War. See: Sonia Kruks, *Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 162.] ‘True’ revenge emerges spontaneously. It is a ‘metaphysical’ demand which has ‘no goal outside of itself’. [10. Simone de Beauvoir, “Eye for an Eye,” 248.] For example, where a victim can reverse the master-bondsman relationship.[11. Sonia Kruks, *Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).] But even there, revenge could devolve into torture since punishment can never restore what was lost. Revenge achieves only a temporal reversal by forcing others to see their own tragic ambiguity, rather than appealing to their freedom. Beauvoir does not suggest punishment can be avoided, especially if the offender threatens to cause more harm in a community. The problem with revenge is that it is deeply contradictory, pursuing an impossible equation that can only be satisfied in fiction books. The failure of punishment is best exemplified by the ‘elaborate forms’ created by society to envelope the spontaneity required for revenge, including the law and criminal justice institutions.

Legal punishment retains the ‘whiff of magic’ of revenge because it is a metaphysical aspiration that always aims at something beyond itself, such as the abstract morality of a formalistic law or the political ends that characterize utilitarianism. As such, it is bound to fail. For example, she likens criminal courts to vigilantes avenging an injury of an anonymous universal ‘other’, while at the same time acting like a sovereign consciousness with the authority to make others pay for a crime. When the offenders appears in court, they are no longer the sovereign consciousness that acted regardless of the harm to others. Instead, they are fragile individuals whose punishment is justified through something other than the crime itself. Punishment devolves into the state’s will to punish while the offender’s subjectivity becomes an ‘abstract symbol’ of the values rejected by society. Since

the spontaneity of revenge faded down, trials legitimize the authority of the law through ‘a comedy of words’ whereby the whole process is ‘designed to endow the sentence with the greatest expressive power possible’.[12. Simone de Beauvoir, “Eye for an Eye,” 252.] In other words, criminal justice is an empty performance lacking a body and cut off from the brief temporality of the offence. To understand her critique, we need to situate her analysis of revenge within the framework of embodiment. Embodiment is situated in an ever-changing temporality, which in the case of crime, essentially creates a distance between the offender and the offence. Punishment can only grasp a ‘mirage of exteriority’.[13. Ibid., 255.] What is left is an abstract justice haunted by failure because it ceased to link the crime to the punishment.

This failure is not due to a lack of ideas. The failure is not realizing how the justification of punishment through a perfect equivalence has been always impossible. Yet, the ambiguity of punishment is masked in order to legitimize it. The ethical and political struggle is a constant. Beauvoir’s lesson is in her method of critique: By staging the impossibility of equivalence at every stage of the analysis, she is also *resisting* the compelling passion of revenge and the alluring purity of abstract legal processes. Her reading compels us to abandon and constantly question facile equivalences in penal discourses that offer the ‘serene recovery of a reasonable and just order’.[14. Ibid., 259.]

The penal equation cannot achieve that goal, as the Paris attacks and the responses to attacks themselves demonstrate: Mosques vandalized in Canada and the US, multinational war coalitions bombing Iraq and Syria, and President Hollande’s vow to ‘destroy’ IS, and ISIL’s equal vow to [terrorize France and everyone else](#).

While the political protagonists (ISIL and elected leaders) get absorbed in the old-age cycle of revenge, allegedly cleansed by

metaphysical reasons (the aspiration for something beyond the crime itself), [people in 11th arrondissement](#) and even those directly affected seem to understand better the core of Beauvoir's reflection about post-war Paris. That is, their interdependence and the need to undercut and deflate what Judith Butler calls '[the terrible satisfactions of war](#)', best represented by a statement which is going viral in social media made by a man whose wife was killed at the Bataclan: 'Vous n'aurez pas ma haine' ('I will not grant you the gift of my hatred'). Perhaps even stronger than the metaphysical need for revenge, there is a more earthly concern at play. Echoing the tragic ambiguity of co-existence in Beauvoir's essay on punishment, Judith Butler articulates more clearly what is at stake. Drawing on Melanie Klein, Butler argues that if 'individuation is never complete, and dependency never really overcome, a broader ethical dilemma emerges: how not to destroy the other or others whom I need in order to live'.<sup>[15. Judith Butler, "'The Death Penalty' by Jacques Derrida, Translated by Peggy Kamuf," *London Review of Books*, Vol. 36 No. 14 · 17 July 2014, 32. Accessible also at <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n14/judith-butler/on-cruelty>.]</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, "Eye for an Eye: Introduction by Kristiana Arp," in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, edited by Margaret Simmons, Marybeth Timmerman, and Mary Beth Mader (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 246.

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<sup>2</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. Edited by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London and New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011), 750.