



SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

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Driving Impulses

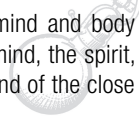
Simone de Beauvoir presents a considerable challenge to anyone attempting to identify the crucial influences in her life and work since in a very important sense they can be summarised by naming Jean-Paul Sartre. This is not, as it might first appear, the suggestion that this brilliant (and productive) woman writer only achieved prominence because of a relationship with a man. This was far from the case (and there is some evidence to lead us to speculate on what de Beauvoir gave to Sartre rather than the reverse) but what we have to acknowledge is the close association (both social and intellectual) between these two figures and the dialogue between them that was so crucial to both. In biographical terms, there is little doubt that Sartre led de Beauvoir away from idealist philosophy and towards existentialism; at the same time de Beauvoir's work was organised around (and here the idea of dialogue is central) the working out, in both fiction and non-fiction, of Sartre's ideas on morality and the limits of personal responsibility. Both individuals, it must be emphasised, have to be located firmly within European modernism. In terms of both philosophy, and politics, de Beauvoir and Sartre entirely endorsed, for most of their adult and working lives, the Enlightenment's expectations of the rule, indeed the possibilities, of the rational. In de Beauvoir's case this discourse made her profoundly sceptical of all religions and of psychoanalysis: the world, as far as she was concerned, could be rationally understood and rationally organised. That emotional life did not always lend itself to such rational principles was a constant theme of de Beauvoir's fiction: from her first published novel *She Came to Stay* she was preoccupied with the problems of subjectivity and the irrational.¹

For de Beauvoir, these problems were, implicitly, gendered. Thus a consistent theme of her fiction was women's emotional dependence on men, a theme to which she constantly returned and one which she attempted to resolve in terms of the infamous conclusion to *The Second Sex*. In this conclusion de Beauvoir calls on women to adopt male patterns of behaviour and assumptions – an invocation which is, of course, deeply contradictory for a woman who is identified as the most significant feminist figure of the twentieth century. Yet that view of de Beauvoir (while rightly acknowledging her intellectual presence) also fails to see that de Beauvoir was discovered by feminism rather than de Beauvoir initiating feminism. In the final years of her life,

de Beauvoir came to acknowledge the difficulties of assuming universal, and universalistic, truths. Just as Sartre (at about the same time) was discovering the limitations of literature, so de Beauvoir was discovering that the Enlightenment project of reason and understanding was problematic in terms of both its implicit **Cartesian dualism** and its refusal of the social implications of sexual difference. Nevertheless, it is apparent that de Beauvoir – to the end of her life – resisted the possibilities of the pluralities and diversities of post-modernism. For her, there was a truth and it was identifiable. The emphasis in de Beauvoir’s work on specific themes changed throughout her lifetime (women, old age, colonialism were all subjects with which she engaged in her non-fiction), but all of them were approached in terms of the ways in which they could be better understood through de Beauvoir’s very precise form of empirical investigation and existential ethics.

CARTESIAN DUALISM

The philosophical idea, deriving from the French philosopher Descartes, that mind and body are separate. Critics feel that such a dualism leads to an overemphasis on the mind, the spirit, ideas, and so on, at the expense of the body and the material world in general, and of the close relationship between the two.



In maintaining this position, de Beauvoir put herself in a strikingly different situation from that of her contemporaries in French intellectual life. Just as Jacques Lacan was constructing his theory of sexuality and **Michel Foucault** was contesting the idea of progress and single sources of knowledge and power, de Beauvoir was adamantly refusing the unconscious and maintaining a commitment to hierarchies of knowledge. A later generation of French women writers (among them – Kristeva, Irigaray, Cixous and Wittig) who developed enormously influential ideas about both sexual difference *per se* and sexual difference in language were largely distant, in both political and intellectual terms, from de Beauvoir. De Beauvoir never accepted, for example, the idea that women and men use, and learn, different languages. Yet for all her rejection of the work of these writers de Beauvoir occupied, somewhat paradoxically, a position which was more postmodern than she might have acknowledged. Her most famous work, *The Second Sex*, does argue for the difference (in both social and biological terms) between women and men. Although what de Beauvoir does with this is to suggest (as pointed out above) that women should internalise and assimilate male practices and assumptions, she nevertheless provided a crucial intervention in twentieth-century culture in her identification of the causes and consequences of sexual difference. In that, she can be seen to have provided a starting point for the rereading and reinterpretation of the history of gender relations.

Key Issues

Summary of Key Issues

- (i) Women's Agency
- (ii) Gender Difference
- (iii) The Relationship of Women to Knowledge
- (iv) Commitment to Social Change and Social Transformation

To identify particular issues in the case of the work of Simone de Beauvoir involves a certain degree of repetition on a theme. The central theme of de Beauvoir's work was that of agency and the discussion of how women could act, in the context of a culture (that of western Europe) which was definitively misogynist. Thus action and agency, in a world which did not expect women to exhibit either of these competencies, are key organising themes for de Beauvoir. At the same time, she was also deeply concerned with the nature and meaning of gender divisions. Her famous remark that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' has passed into western culture and is always cited as *the* summary of the social constructionist view of gender difference.² De Beauvoir does not allow any doubt in her account of what makes a woman, 'it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine'.³

Thus action and agency, and the nature of gender difference are the first two themes for which the work of de Beauvoir is known. At the same time, throughout de Beauvoir's work three other concerns can be located: her discussion of the relationship of women to knowledge (and the accompanying account of western patriarchal culture), the concept of life as a project, and last, but by no means least, a commitment to social change and social transformation which can best be described as rigidly organised around state politics.

Reason, Modernism, Jean-Paul Sartre

What has to be said of all these themes, and indeed of the work of de Beauvoir as a whole, is that she saw the world, and theorised about it, in the light of a belief in reason that was never shattered by events in either her personal or public life. De Beauvoir lived from 1908 to 1986, and as such she remembered (albeit vaguely) the First World War and the humiliation of France at the hands of the Germans. A student and a teacher during the 1920s and 1930s, she formed the crucial relationship of her life with Jean-Paul Sartre while both were at the Sorbonne. This couple formed a long and often problematic relationship which lasted until the death of Sartre in 1980.⁴ But in the course of that relationship they formed an alliance against the world which was often formidable, in terms of both their ability to exclude other people from their lives and – on a more public and explicit level – to establish political and philosophical positions. They both came late to formal politics:

in early maturity their politics had taken the form of resistance to bourgeois convention through their personal behaviour and the development of existential philosophy. But when they did discover the possibilities of national and international politics (a discovery which was largely the result of the Second World War and the occupation of France by the Germans) both became active participants in organised left-wing politics.

These brief remarks can do only brief justice to the lives of two people who have a central place in European culture. Yet what is important about de Beauvoir has to be seen in the context of that culture, and of the changes which were taking place in the twentieth century. De Beauvoir, despite her birth (and education) in the twentieth century remained in many ways a creature of the late nineteenth century and early modernism: her rejection of psychoanalysis, her belief in the individual project of reason and above all her refusal to recognise the often ambiguous boundaries between objectivity and subjectivity all place her in the world - view of early modernism.

Men as the Focus of Attack and the Standard of Achievement

We can see too that the first theme named here as central to de Beauvoir's work (that of women and agency) was understood by de Beauvoir in terms of a society and culture which largely denied the public agency of women. The formal emancipation of women in France occurred later than in Anglo-Saxon countries and de Beauvoir (somewhat inevitably) had few contacts with anything approaching feminism for the greater part of her life. Indeed, to read the first volume of de Beauvoir's autobiography (*Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*) is to read of a society which was decidedly non-modern in its attitude to women.⁵ De Beauvoir took her inspiration for her future self from British and North American writers: George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver and Louisa Alcott's Jo March were her heroines.

It is true to say of de Beauvoir that although she read the works of women writers such as Eliot and Alcott – who absolutely recognised the extent of patriarchal control in western society – what she did not do was to assume any sense of identity with women in general. Thus what we can observe about de Beauvoir's work is that she was discovered by second-wave feminism rather than having played any key part in its development. *The Second Sex* (which was published in 1949) was a bestseller throughout the West, but de Beauvoir did not then become a spokeswoman for a specifically feminist cause. Indeed, the conclusion to *The Second Sex*, which identifies female agency as only possible through the replication of male patterns of behaviour, was a message of dubious value to feminist concerns. Nevertheless, what de Beauvoir had done was put on (or put back on) the western intellectual and political agenda the question of women, and in particular women's second-class status. For de Beauvoir, the way forward for women is in integration into the public world and the assumption of rigorously independent behaviour. For sociologists, it is essential to point out that de Beauvoir's reference group of men and masculinity was always that of white, middle-class, educated men. She had little to say about the world outside the society where she spent her life. That life was lived, from beginning to end, in Paris and although de Beauvoir travelled extensively (and wrote extensively about her

travels) 'the others' – if the rest of the world might be described in this way – did not significantly intrude on her consciousness.

Thus in identifying women as 'the other' in western agency, the defining party in this relationship – men – were both de Beauvoir's focus for attack and her standard of achievement. It is apparent from her account of her own life that she identified closely with her father – and in particular with his anticlericalism and his very publicly lived life. Her mother's pious domesticity held no appeal for de Beauvoir, even though every reader of de Beauvoir's autobiography has encountered de Beauvoir's fierce grief on the death of her mother and her virtual absence of interest in the death of her father. What de Beauvoir loved, and admired, was a certain condition, and a certain set of possibilities of urban masculinity. In this, she internalised many of the characteristics of what Walter Benjamin (and others) have described as the *flâneur*, the person who has the freedom to move about the modern city.⁶ But, as Janet Woolf has pointed out, that figure is always male and although modernity and femininity might be closely linked, the public person of the modern city was, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, male.⁷ Virginia Woolf, in the essays collected as *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*, wrote of her love of London and the charm of a city that is built not to last, but to pass.⁸ In the same way de Beauvoir was fascinated by the life on the Parisian streets and demanded what was forbidden – access to the streets by a middle-class woman.

Women's Agency and Independence versus Misogyny and the Refusal of Public Space

Through her spectacular and considerable achievements in higher education, de Beauvoir was able to gain for herself the coveted access to the world of the city. She acquired that crucial currency of twentieth-century life – an independent income – and through her efforts was able to live as a formally free person of the urban world. Yet despite these triumphs, what de Beauvoir could not change by her own efforts was the culture in which she lived. That culture still accorded to women not just second-class status but an entirely different status (de Beauvoir, like other adult Frenchwomen could not vote, for example, until after the Second World War). Thus in *The Second Sex* two themes in de Beauvoir's experience came together; the theme of the misogyny of French bourgeois culture and the refusal of this culture of public agency for women. De Beauvoir's first published novel, *She Came to Stay*, concludes with an act of fierce, indeed aggressive, agency; namely, the murder of a female rival by a jealous woman. It is impossible not to notice that two central female characters are fighting over a man and at the same time doing their best to deny their affections for each other. But what is gained in the conclusion is the possibility that women can act, and clearly for de Beauvoir the murderous action was one which made emotional, if not moral, sense.

So when women are given, in an imaginative and fictional sense, the right to act, what is signalled is a way out of the culture which assumes women to be passive. *The Second Sex* cites extraordinary passages of biological essentialism (most notably the descriptions of the 'active' sperm and the 'passive' egg) and with this essentialist account goes

a two-pronged attack on its consequences. Her first argument is that women have no history – an idea which would be regarded in many contemporary circles as ludicrous. But at the same time de Beauvoir analyses the consequences of the absence of female power and presence and finds in it much that accounts for what she regards as the foolish femininity of womanhood. Disunited by powerlessness, women have to resort to petty deceit and pretence in order to achieve their ends. Only in this way can some attempt be made to find agency in a society and a culture which is essentially anti-feminine. It is at this point that de Beauvoir introduces her powerful – and influential – attack on western culture. By discussing Montherlant, D.H. Lawrence, Claudel, Breton and Stendhal, de Beauvoir is able to argue that western fiction is – with the exception of Stendhal – deeply anti-woman. This analysis, replicated very effectively by Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics*, remains a passionately argued case, and turns upon the way in which these authors do not and cannot see women as independent beings.⁹

Tensions between de Beauvoir's Enlightenment Modernism and the Perspectives of Feminists and Intellectuals at the End of the Twentieth Century

These remarks have emphasised the importance which de Beauvoir gives to the ideas of autonomy and independence in human existence. They are values which place de Beauvoir within a western tradition of civil emancipation and universal citizenship: the tradition, essentially, of western post-Enlightenment democracies. That de Beauvoir is a child of this tradition is immediately apparent from all her writing: she never wavers in her belief in absolute, universal rights and her travel writing (and some aspects of her political engagement) all demonstrate a consistent belief in the possibility of social engineering. Indeed, if anything these values intensified as de Beauvoir's life went on. In her early maturity she had little interest in formal politics but in her later life she had become an avid interventionist in such areas as the organisation of the family, education and women's rights. But what this shift does is to emphasise some of the disjunction between de Beauvoir and twentieth-century intellectual life in general. For example, while de Beauvoir remained forever a believer in the values of autonomy and independence, second-wave feminism (and to a certain extent environmentally aware communitarian politics) was emphasising the impossibility of organising either personal or social life in this way. Hence one reading of de Beauvoir could be that she was endorsing precisely that ethic of individualism which many social commentators argue is detrimental to the stability of social life. Equally – and this is particularly important in the context of de Beauvoir's association with, and legacy to, feminism – de Beauvoir validated a form of experience, masculinity, which has been deconstructed in the most critical sense by generations of feminist writers. Again, the contrast between Virginia Woolf and de Beauvoir is interesting in that although Woolf belonged to a slightly older generation than de Beauvoir she saw masculinity not as a viable and enviable model but one that ranged from the deeply comic to the positively dangerous.

But what de Beauvoir did give to the twentieth century was a sense of gender as a basic form of social differentiation. This, then, as well as de Beauvoir's arguments about female

agency and misogyny, has to be included in any list of other achievements. *The Second Sex*, and much of de Beauvoir's fiction, is organised around the premise that women and men occupy different social and emotional worlds. We have seen that what de Beauvoir wants to achieve is the greater coincidence of female behaviour with male, but however misguided this may be deemed to be, there is no doubt that de Beauvoir's essential premise in emphasising gender difference was emancipatory in terms of its implications for both sexes. De Beauvoir saw, with a perception sharpened both by her experiences as a child and as an adult, the dynamic of mutually destructive dependence in relationships between women and men. Her fiction recorded the jealous women and the hounded men, just as in her own life there was the endless denial of jealousy and grief in her relations with Sartre. But these experiences, both of de Beauvoir herself and other associates, gave to her work on gender difference a passion and an engagement which is seldom matched in more coolly analytical accounts of female subordination or patriarchal discourse. It was well known in Parisian intellectual circles that Michel Foucault could barely tolerate de Beauvoir and her ideas, and this animosity gives some indication of the real difference between de Beauvoir and other, late twentieth century, ideas on gender.¹⁰

These differences do not originate in diverse accounts of the impact of biology on gender – those 'physical consequences of anatomy' which **Freud** identified. There is a general consensus that gender is learned and constructed in all societies and that the variety of its forms is manifest. It is over the issues of the organisation of sexuality, and particularly of desire, that the problems arise. And it is in this that de Beauvoir's account of sexuality becomes – for some critics – problematic, since what she appears to do is both validate heterosexuality as the definitive form of sexual practice while at the same time constructing male and female within a norm of masculinity. Thus what she does in a sense is offend both feminist (or woman-centred) accounts of sexuality and those of gay men. To de Beauvoir, the work of the 'new' French feminists (Irigaray, Cixous and Wittig in particular) was anathema, since it seemed to challenge one of de Beauvoir's most deeply held (and long argued) positions, namely that women could achieve a condition of existence akin to that of masculinity.¹¹ To Foucault, the work of de Beauvoir was doubly problematic in that not only did it involve an implicitly emancipatory model of sexuality (which Foucault denied) but it gave a normative priority to heterosexuality. The treatment of lesbians in *The Second Sex* is hardly sympathetic and the fictional presentation of male homosexuality is equally unenthusiastic.

In all, throughout de Beauvoir's account of gender there was a deep ambivalence and a deep paradox. On the one hand, she is the first writer of the twentieth century to confront systematically the issue of the subordination of women. On the other, the rigid dichotomies (indeed the binary oppositions) which she conceptualises between women and men are such as to stand against the main direction of post-Freudian discussions of gender – namely that being male or female is a complex negotiation in which it is impossible to identify any absolute states. Indeed, as Freud was at pains to point out, the belief that we could ever become 'just' men or women was a fiction and a dangerous fantasy. Thus in de Beauvoir's version of masculinity we can read a consistent projection about the immanence, and the transcendence, of masculinity which is never achieved in reality. To put it

in terms of de Beauvoir's biography, it is the difference between *assuming* that Sartre did explain the world and *thinking* that Sartre attempted to explain the world. We know, from the careful research which has now been published about the Sartre/de Beauvoir relationship, that de Beauvoir played a formative part in Sartre's account of existentialism.¹² But what we also know from this same material is that both shared a belief in the same project of explanation: an essentially modern project which took for granted its own range and universality.

Women, Knowledge and Life as a Particular Kind of Project

In terms of de Beauvoir's work as a whole there are numerous debates and discussions still to be held. The range of issues and ideas which de Beauvoir covered was considerable and there remains, despite the extensive secondary material already published, some scope for reinterpretation and re-evaluation. In this context, where constraints of space make impossible a full review of de Beauvoir's work, two issues – in addition to those outlined above – justify attention, since they are closely linked to de Beauvoir's relationship to feminism and to her place within twentieth-century intellectual history. The first of these is de Beauvoir's account of knowledge, and in particular her view of the relationship of women to it. The second is de Beauvoir's assumption of life-as-project: an organising discourse which is profoundly western, and for all of de Beauvoir's rejection of explicitly religious beliefs, equally deeply embedded in the Protestant attitudes and values of northern Europe.

The issue of de Beauvoir and knowledge – or more precisely de Beauvoir *as* woman and knowledge – is one of those questions about de Beauvoir which the woman herself could not have asked, let alone answered. To de Beauvoir, attending school and university in the 1920s and 1930s, there were few questions to be asked about the status, let alone the origin, of knowledge. 'Knowledge' – in the sense of critical, informed inquiry and a body of assessed and agreed understanding about the world – was to be gained and assessed. De Beauvoir, like Sartre, was always critical of much that she was taught, but what was consistent about her attitude to the process of learning was that she did not attempt to theorise from the position which has become known as 'standpoint theory'. This set of ideas – associated with such major figures in the history of science as Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway – argues that any theory must be grounded in the experiences and attitudes of the people producing it.¹³ It is an argument which emphasises the different experiences of women and men, just as Patricia Hill Collins has argued that the lived experience of black women leads to a qualitatively different set of ideas, and theorisations, from those of white women.¹⁴ These points are important in the context of that gendering of knowledge which has occurred in the last twenty years but they are not dissimilar to the thesis put forward by Marx in the nineteenth century about the limitations, and the biases, of bourgeois thought.

Harding and Haraway wrote some years after de Beauvoir produced most of her major work but clearly the ideas of Marx were available to de Beauvoir, even if only partially. Nevertheless, what de Beauvoir remained consistently committed to was the view that it was possible to achieve not the plural knowledge of the late twentieth century, but

the absolute certainty of early twentieth-century singular knowledge. While authors such as Virginia Woolf acknowledged, and understood, the idea of fundamental differences between masculine and feminine thinking (even while acknowledging that these categories did not necessarily coincide with actually male and female people) de Beauvoir assumed, and went on assuming, that the mind was a gender-free zone. Contemporary scholarship on de Beauvoir has pointed out that her interventions immensely assisted Sartre's discussion of existentialism, in that she persuaded him to locate his theory in reality, but what that scholarship cannot do is associate that intervention with a specifically feminist, or woman-centred, analysis. Despite the fact that de Beauvoir was much concerned to 'test' Sartre's theories in terms of individual experience (*She Came to Stay*, *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* and *The Blood of Others* remain testaments to this project) she nevertheless did not relate this difference in emphasis to differences related to gender.¹⁵ This refusal (or denial if we risk to take the thesis further) was perhaps inevitable, given that de Beauvoir rejected all psychoanalytic interpretations of experience and was never prepared to entertain the possibility that biological difference had an impact on the organisation of an individual's symbolic and emotional world.

In this sense then, de Beauvoir remained (and remains) a figure somewhat at odds with the general shift of contemporary discourses. Woman is for her both a curiously fixed category, and yet at the same time a category of person whose difference from men is best confronted by minimising that difference. Nor for de Beauvoir the woman-centred power or knowledge of such figures as Adrienne Rich, Toni Morrison or Luce Irigaray. De Beauvoir encourages, indeed endorses, the living of life by women on the same lines as men. The project of women must be, for de Beauvoir, the achievement of transcendence, of individuality and of absolute knowledge. Indeed, for both sexes the ideal life is one which is lived in terms of the pursuit of some version of absolute knowledge.

But for all that commitment, one which offered to women the possibility of real intellectual emancipation from the mundane and the parochial, de Beauvoir's thought remained fixed in the oppositions and the rigid dichotomies of the early twentieth century. What is strikingly absent from her non-fiction (and much of her fiction) is a toleration of ambiguity. Even though de Beauvoir wrote a philosophical essay entitled 'Pour Une Morale de l'Ambiguïté'² the actual possibilities of this state were ones she endlessly resisted.¹⁶ The strength which this gave her work on women was enormous, since for de Beauvoir an absolute category was established and allowed progress to be made in terms of debates on the impact of gender on experience. Yet at the same time the rigidity of the category and the acceptance of woman's experience as inevitably inferior to that of men remains an impossible stumbling block in the reading of de Beauvoir as a guide to a project which is genuinely emancipatory, rather than narrowly located within the confines of the conventional social order of masculinity.

Seeing Things Differently

To a generation of western women, Simone de Beauvoir provided a model of how to live, and how to live differently from many of the expectations of the first half of the twentieth century about women. But in saying this, there is a danger of tacitly accepting and

endorsing the idea that there was always one dominant, and enforceable, mode of behaviour for women. There were (and are) clearly normative assumptions about how women should behave, but much of the evidence of feminist history suggests that the history of women is not one of universal, or uniform, powerlessness and oppression. Thus to construct and present de Beauvoir as some kind of torch-bearer for the hitherto unknown emancipation of women is to diminish the work of other women and at the same time to define de Beauvoir in ways that do scant justice to her complexity and contradictions.

I would argue that what de Beauvoir gave to women was far less theoretical and far more symbolic than is generally allowed, or aspired to by de Beauvoir herself. De Beauvoir quite clearly wanted to provide a thesis about the position of women in the world, and set out to demonstrate this in *The Second Sex* through the conventional natural science model of statement, the collection of evidence and conclusion. In doing this, and adopting so closely the model of natural science, de Beauvoir demonstrated many of the disadvantages of that method, not least that the collection of evidence could be closely related to the desired conclusion. In an age which is more sceptical about the method, and the assumptions, of natural science than at the time when de Beauvoir was writing, it is possible to suggest that the actual conclusions of *The Second Sex* (and indeed of de Beauvoir's work as a whole) are less important than the meaning of the project in our understanding about the possibilities, both intellectual and otherwise, of the world. My thesis about de Beauvoir is therefore that she helped to contribute to women's sense of agency in the public world. I would contend that she did so in ways which were deeply traditional (one of de Beauvoir's more problematic statements about the public world and politics was that because her views were so close to those of Sartre she felt no need to express them herself) but nevertheless offered a very powerful opposition to the expectations of womanhood in Europe at the end of the Second World War. These expectations were not, as numerous writers have pointed out, organised around the assumption of sexual equality, least of all in political and intellectual contexts. As Sylvia Plath so verily demonstrated in *The Bell Jar*, the western post-war world was one which wanted its women in the home and sexual difference firmly established.¹⁷ We can now demonstrate that the realities of the post-war world were much more complex than this ideological position suggested, but the point is that there were few generally available critiques of this position in the 1950s: in the homogeneous sexual discourse of the Eisenhower years, *The Second Sex* stands out as a voice of dissent.

Thus after the publication of *The Second Sex* women could look at the history of post-Enlightenment thought about women and identify more than the previous landmarks of *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *The Subjection of Women*.¹⁸ Feminism, until de Beauvoir, had been largely an Anglo-American phenomenon, and so in addition to providing a further 'great book' for feminism, *The Second Sex* gave feminism a dimension which placed it outside the determining concerns of Anglo-American feminism, which were largely those of citizenship and legal emancipation. It is quite clear from *The Second Sex* that de Beauvoir had little or no interest in these issues and her contempt for conventional politics would have made such concerns as an interest in the representation of women in elected assemblies impossible. But this lack of interest was precisely one of the long-term strengths of *The Second Sex*, that it placed the debate about sexual difference

on a different level from that of concern about empirical – and ever-changing – reality. Not until the end of her life did de Beauvoir become interested in pragmatic political issues, and even then it was apparent that her interest was fleeting.

De Beauvoir, in summary, gave women an articulate sense of possibility and agency in both intellectual and political life. She was far from the first to claim a space in the public world, and, as I have argued, did so in a way which inherently validated masculine over feminine experience. But she demanded a place for women in post-Enlightenment discourses of power and sexuality and raised, in both her fiction and her non-fiction, issues about the relationship between abstract morality and specific social action which still have to be resolved. Indeed, much of the ground covered by Carol Gilligan in *In a Different Voice* is similar to the debates raised by de Beauvoir – debates about the viability of a morality appropriate for all situations.¹⁹ De Beauvoir belonged to a tradition which maintained that such a morality was possible; a view which few feminists would accept today. Yet even with this variation in position as regards the possibilities for a non-contextual morality, what we cannot ignore, after de Beauvoir and *The Second Sex*, is recognition of the differences between women and men: it was the articulation of the social and symbolic *meaning* of those differences which de Beauvoir provided as her most lasting contribution.

Legacies and Unfinished Business

Any account of feminism includes the work of Simone de Beauvoir. Increasingly, as feminism has an impact on other disciplines and traditions, her work is also included in contexts other than those of feminism. Ironically, as the work of her companion Jean-Paul Sartre appears to belong more and more to the history of philosophy, de Beauvoir's writing appears as central to the ideas and debates of the late twentieth century. Again, there is a paradox here, in that it took some time for de Beauvoir to identify herself as a woman, with women, but in doing so she was able to locate herself within the late twentieth-century shift towards a plurality and diversity of values which gives her work a continuing resonance.

The crucial intellectual legacy of de Beauvoir (rather than her legacy in personal and political terms) is that she opened up the debate on the possibilities of the absolute difference between women and men. De Beauvoir – as already discussed here – took the view that women should seek to become more like men, but this conclusion is, in terms of an intellectual legacy, less significant than the argument about difference. De Beauvoir allowed women to see themselves as different from men, not just different in certain respects or different in certain contexts, but wholly and definitively different. It was (and is) an idea which is enormously radical in its implications, since it makes differences between women and men into the major form of social difference, and places gender difference in a far more significant position than differences of class or race. It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that after de Beauvoir it became extremely difficult for thinking about gender difference to return to its previous position of an explicit bias towards masculinity accompanied by vaguely liberal expectations of equality.

Just what can be done with a position which does robustly assert gender difference has been demonstrated (although far from finally) by feminist writers such as Kate Millett, Adrienne Rich, and – in a later generation and from a different position – Judith Butler.²⁰ Also de Beauvoir's refusal of motherhood was taken up by Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex* (which is dedicated to Simone de Beauvoir who 'kept her integrity') and de Beauvoir appears as a presence in numerous feminist works.²¹ (We might also note here that it is for her contribution to feminism that de Beauvoir has so far been recognised; relatively few accounts discuss her contribution to sociology, philosophy or politics.) But the problem, the crucial problem perhaps, with de Beauvoir is precisely the way in which her work has been, at time, uncritically integrated into contemporary feminism and uncritically discussed in terms of its values and assumptions.

The problem of this legacy – of what de Beauvoir valued and her model of society – is particularly well illustrated in the discussion at the conclusion of *The Dialectic of Sex*. In this conclusion Firestone proposes 'the total integration of women and children into the larger society'; a view entirely similar to de Beauvoir's at the end of *The Second Sex*. But, and it seems to me a very substantial qualification, the nature of that society is left entirely open. Thus what we are left with is a view which is entirely similar to the 'emancipation-through-paid-work' argument of Engels. Women would thus play an enlarged role in a society that would remain essentially the same. This emphasis necessarily detracts attention from the many unsatisfactory dimensions of how women are currently 'integrated' into society. A feminism located in masculine assumptions will by definition be unable to detect many dimensions of women's difference and subordination. Unresolved, in de Beauvoir and in those writers where her influence was strongest, is an understanding of the nature of society, and the values which women are being asked to endorse as an explicit part of membership of this apparent community.

It was a woman (Margaret Thatcher) who denied the existence of society. From the point of view of women (which was hardly that of Mrs Thatcher) this view nevertheless has a certain logic: women in the West have played a relatively limited part in the construction of society if we define it in terms of either its social institutions or its laws. Thus her limited and limiting conception of integration into society remains, I would suggest, crucially important for any reading of de Beauvoir. She allowed women to gain a sense of the historical project of femininity, yet at the same time could not allow that this project had to include an understanding of the way in which women – and feminism – were also part of the historical projects of individualism and personal autonomy that themselves were limiting and shot through with masculine assumptions. Her definition of the boundaries between women and men made possible crucial intellectual advances, yet the failure to name the absence of boundaries between women and hegemonic masculine social values makes it difficult, at times, to distinguish de Beauvoir's work from its context.

Further Reading

Simone de Beauvoir wrote extensively about her own life (the four volumes of her autobiography are: *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, *The Prime of Life*, *Force of Circumstance* and *All Said and Done*) as well as writing novels (the best known are *She Came to Stay* and *The Mandarins*) and extensive non-fiction (*The Second Sex* and *Old Age* in particular). There is now a considerable secondary literature, including a helpful biography by Deidre Bair *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography* (London: Cape, 1990).

Other reading includes:

Mary Evans, *Simone de Beauvoir* (London: Sage, 1996).

Jane Heath, *Simone de Beauvoir* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989).

Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

Judith Okley, *Simon de Beauvoir* (London: Virago, 1986).

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Notes

1. *She Came to Stay* was first published in 1943 as *L'Invitée* (Paris: Gallimard).
2. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1964) p. 249.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
4. De Beauvoir and Sartre had an extensive correspondence, some of which is published. See Simone de Beauvoir, *Letters to Sartre* (New York: Arcade, 1991) and Jean-Paul Sartre, *Witness to My Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992).
5. Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983).
6. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1973).
7. Janet Woolf, 'The Invisible Flaneuse', in Janet Woolf, *Feminine Sentences* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990) pp. 34–50.
8. Virginia Woolf, *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life* (London: Penguin, 1993).
9. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago, 1977).
10. This relationship is discussed by David Macey in *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (London: Vintage, 1994), pp. 413–14.
11. The 'new' French feminism (which is of course now well established) is well presented in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (eds), *New French Feminisms* (Brighton: Harvester, 1981).
12. This account of the relationship between the work of Sartre and that of de Beauvoir is best represented in: Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) and Kate Fullbrook and Edward Fullbrook, *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre: The Remaking of a Twentieth Century Legend* (London: Wheatsheaf/Harvester, 1993).
13. For Donna Haraway, see *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989) and Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).
14. See Patricia Hill Collins, 'The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought', *Signs* **14**(4) (1989), 745–73.

15. *Purrrhus and Cinéas* was first published in 1944 (Paris, Gallimard) and *The Blood of Others* in 1945, as *Le Sang des Autres* (Paris, Gallimard).
16. Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987).
17. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber, 1963).
18. John Stuart Mill, *On the Subjection of Women* (London: Dent, 1970) and Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Dent, 1970).
19. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
20. Adrienne Rich, *Of Women Born* (London: Virago).
21. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970).