

The Cambridge Companion to
**SIMONE DE
BEAUVOIR**

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9 Beauvoir and feminism:
interview and reflections

INTERVIEW¹

BRISON: Yesterday, you agreed that it's not enough for women to put themselves in exactly the same situation as men in order for them to be liberated. But you didn't say what you think we need to do now. I'd like to ask you the same question that you asked Sartre, a question it seemed to me he avoided: "Should women completely reject the masculine universe or should they find themselves a place in it? Should they steal their tools or change them? I'm thinking of science as well as language, the arts. Every value is marked with the seal of masculinity."²

DE BEAUVOIR: That's a lot of questions in one. I think that feminists, at least those I'm involved with, want to change not only women's situation but also the world. That is, these are women who would like to see a certain dismantling of society and who think that if feminism were victorious, if the oppression of women were completely eliminated, well, society would be shaken to its foundation. This cannot be accomplished without other kinds of action, for example, actions supporting class struggle and immigrants, in other words, all the actions one can imagine in favor of society. They must all be linked. So, it's a matter not of women taking men's place in this world, but of their being emancipated in such a way as to simultaneously change this world. OK, you asked a second question, namely, can certain parts of this world, like science, literature, the arts, which were largely, very largely, developed by men in a masculine world – can we use these, or should we reject them altogether? I think we should use them – I think I said it yesterday, we should

naturally use them with a great deal of precaution, because, for example, we're not going to recreate language from one day to the next on the basis of personal initiative. Language is never created that way, in any country at any time. So of course we must seize upon language, but in doing so we must remain aware that language bears the mark of men. It's universal but also singular. For instance, there are words like "virile" that have a positive meaning for men that women have no reason to accept. You could find a lot of others. Similarly, for science, sure, 2 and 2 is 4 for men as for women. But the orientation given to science is obviously very different according to whether it is men or women who direct the research. Men have never taken much interest in specifically female biology or medicine. If women were to undertake serious research, they could, they should, do it much more in the way of . . . well, to serve their sex as such. Same for language, for science, for art, and for literature. You can, indeed, steal the tools and use them, but you have to use them carefully and, for that matter, nothing prevents you from changing them at the same time.

BRISON: In *The Second Sex* you wrote that the woman who is culturally conditioned into womanhood doesn't know how to make use of the sort of technical training that would allow her to control (material) things. She doesn't find any usefulness in masculine logic. But couldn't that be considered rather as a positive feature in women? The "knowledge of domination" has proven to be so destructive that now it is essential to preserve its contrary, that is, to foster a real desire to interact with the natural world and with others. As Hélène Cixous has written: "It's not a question of appropriating their instruments, their concepts, their places, or their position of mastery . . . Let's leave all that to the anxious ones, to masculine anguish and its obsessional relation to mastery, to domination, to knowing 'how it works' in order to 'make it work.'"³ I think you're in agreement with her.

DE BEAUVOIR: Yes, the point is not for women simply to take power out of men's hands, since that wouldn't change anything about the world. It's a question precisely of destroying that notion of power. That's it. On this I completely agree: women must master many, many things, but not in order to seize power and to dominate others. I'm certain, in fact, that this idea of domination is one of the features

of the masculine universe that must be totally destroyed, that we must look for reciprocity, collaboration, etc.

BRISON: So, some features of the masculine universe must be destroyed. It seems to me that there are also certain traditionally feminine features that ought to be preserved in both men and women, as you yourself say to Sartre: "If we consider ourselves as possessing certain positive qualities, isn't it better to convey them to men rather than suppress them in women?"⁴ I wonder what qualities you had in mind.

DE BEAUVOIR: Precisely because they don't generally have power, women don't have the flaws that are linked to the possession of power. For example, they don't demonstrate the self-importance, the fatuousness, the complacency, the spirit of emulation that you find in men. Women have more irony, more detachment, more simplicity. They play fewer roles, wear fewer masks, and I think the kind of truthfulness you find in many women is there because, in a sense, they have to have it, and that's a quality they should keep and should also transmit to men. There are also qualities of devotion. Devotion is very dangerous because it can become a way of life and can devour people sometimes, but it has its good sides, if it's what we think of as altruism. There is often, in women, a kind of caring for others that is inculcated in them by education, and which should be eliminated when it takes the form of slavery. But caring about others, the ability to give to others, to give of your time, your intelligence – this is something women should keep, and something that men should learn to acquire.

BRISON: If one doesn't want to define woman negatively in relation to man – woman as an inferior man, a failed man – how can one define her positively? As Cixous has written: "They've stuck us between two horrifying myths, between Medusa and the abyss."⁵ It seems to me that Sartre, as well, has identified woman with the "viscous," with what blocks the transcendence of the in-itself . . .

DE BEAUVOIR: Sartre didn't say that; I'm the one who spoke of woman as immanence. But I did so in considering the role she has been made to play. It's not by nature that she is reduced to immanence; she's been reduced to it by men, who prevent her from acting,

creating, transcending herself, as we put it during the era of existentialism, as I would still put it today.

BRISON: I was thinking of somewhat more symbolic things, for example, of the words he chose in describing the female as "slimy" and "viscous."

DE BEAUVOIR: It's possible that he had some "macho" prejudices, as he says in the dialogue with me in *L'Arc*. It's his whole education, his whole past, all of that which gave him at once a lot of sympathy for women and a way of looking at them as different, even better, in his eyes, but indeed, different from men. A positive definition of "woman"? Woman is a human being with a certain physiology, but that physiology in no way makes her inferior, nor does it justify her exploitation.

BRISON: You explained in *The Second Sex* that women grant a great deal of importance to sensual pleasure because of their immanence. Perhaps that's true. But now, is the goal to devalorize sensuality or to rediscover it at the very center of both sexes?

DE BEAUVOIR: Well, the writer of *The Second Sex* says both things. I also said that there are an awful lot of women who were completely frigid. Frigid, in any case, with men. And on the other hand, there are some who, having discovered pleasure, grant it enormous importance. But I think that if they consider the physical to be so important, it's not because of some physiological destiny, but precisely because they are deprived of so many other things in life. They have so little of real interest in their lives that they are led to confer much value to the part, let's say, the sexual, sensual part of their existence. This goes as well for relations with children, with the newborn, etc. They take pleasure in breastfeeding, etc., and all of this is very important for them largely because they have so little else.

BRISON: But even if women could transcend their immanence, they should still preserve their sensual nature.

DE BEAUVOIR: Well yes! Of course, for men and women, sexuality should be something that is really free and fulfilling.

BRISON: You said yesterday that you refuse to accept the notion of a uniquely feminine style of writing, that we have to get rid of "macho" words but that it's not a question of creating a new language.

DE BEAUVOIR: Yes, that's what I was just saying a moment ago, too, because a language is never really created by individual initiative. Language is not voluntaristic. It's something constituted through circulation, in the mass of people, in reciprocity, in all of that, and if you try to create a language artificially you'll never manage to make a real language out of it, and you'll cut off communication with others. I find that many of Cixous's books, for example, are virtually impossible to read because they sever communication with others.

BRISON: But perhaps it's necessary for really innovative writers to be, initially, a bit incomprehensible, like James Joyce in *Finnegan's Wake*.

DE BEAUVOIR: I don't know. They're not always incomprehensible. If they try to be, as James Joyce did in *Finnegan's Wake*, their work becomes very, very hard to read. But, in *Ulysses*, you find a lot that is quite accessible in spite of everything.

BRISON: I agree completely with what you said yesterday about how "every woman has the right to shout, but the cry must be heard and listened to..."

DE BEAUVOIR: Right, that's it.

BRISON: But what do you think of the idea of "women's writing" – "women's" in the sense of "feminist," that is, a writing that rebels in order to lead us toward liberation?

DE BEAUVOIR: Ah, yes! I'm totally in favor of that. I think that women can write, and even should write – perhaps not all women, but still – that they should write feminist books, books that reveal women's condition, that revolt against it and lead others to revolt. I mentioned to you, for example, that I really like Kate Millet's book, *Flying*. I even like it much more than her first book, the theoretical one, because here she really puts her experience as a woman on the table and everybody can read it and see how a woman tries to manage with her sexual tendencies as well as with society, etc. I think that women certainly have new things to say, unique things, and that they must say them. What I don't approve of is the choice of a language that is completely different from common language because I think it cuts off communication. In a feminist book like Kate Millet's, the language is normal, understandable for everyone. To the extent

that there are new things to say, they must be said in a way that's accessible.

BRISON: Many critics have asked why you haven't portrayed truly liberated women in your novels. The stress is placed on your female characters' love lives. Even a character as liberated as Anne in *The Mandarins* is depicted primarily through her love life rather than through her interest in her work or in political life. Yet your portraits of male characters don't seem to follow this pattern. Does this mean that there is no point in portraying liberated women and ideal relationships? Does it mean that, in a society where women are still conditioned to assume the traditionally feminine attributes of submission and self-effacement, it's not useful to portray liberated women and ideal relationships?

DE BEAUVOIR: I wanted to describe women such as they are, and not as they should be. Actually, there are very, very few truly liberated women. I don't know if there's a single one. I don't know if there are even any men who are really completely liberated. Everybody is alienated in some way or other. But, anyway, I wanted to take typical women, like the ones I know, as they are, and not an ideal woman. In other words, what you suggest goes in the direction of socialist realism, where there must always be positive heroes. I didn't want to have positive heroines. That genre of writing – too moralizing, too didactic – irritates me. I've been much more interested in women who are much more divided, that is, more in conformity with the way women generally are. I didn't want to portray really exceptional women.

BRISON: Among the many reasons that you have given for writing, is that you have felt the need "to conserve, to save the past," "to recuperate" your life, as well as to communicate your experience. But was it also your intention to establish a new way of living, if only through its absence, as in, for example, your most recent novels, in which you describe an intolerable society and destructive, traditional relationships?

DE BEAUVOIR: You know, I've looked for different things in writing. After all, my books are spread out over a lot of years. There are, of course, books in which I seek to recount the past: for example, my memoirs and also to some extent *The Mandarins*, in which I tried

to capture a period I'd lived in, and also somewhat in *She Came to Stay*. There are autobiographical elements everywhere. But I've also tried to describe the society around me – outside of me – to describe how things are in the present. For example, in *Les Belles images* I tried to describe society or, in any case, to make its way of speaking heard, as I said somewhere. I tried to show society such as it unfortunately is today. And then, in *The Woman Destroyed*, I told the story of a woman very different from myself. In the monolog and in my depiction of the "broken woman" I was actually inspired by women I'd known, whom I'd met, whose plight I have seen up close, for example, in the drama of breaking up. But at that point I was no longer engaged in autobiography, in remembering the past. I also try to describe, to grasp, the world as I see it, as I sense it.

BRISON: But do you envision a new way of living?

DE BEAUVOIR: Perhaps, if you wish. But *Les Belles images* is a denunciation, as it were: a denunciation of that society, a certain consumer society, snobism, false relationships, etc. Certainly.

BRISON: Is it desirable to assume a political position in writing novels? Or is there a risk of literature becoming propaganda?

DE BEAUVOIR: I think that you write with everything you are, including political opinions, including your situation as a woman. You write on the basis of your situation, even if you don't talk about it. Obviously, in *Les Belles images* there is never really any explicit position on politics, but one could say all the same when reading the book that there is a whole bourgeois world that I find horrible and want nothing to do with. So, negatively, it can make you think of another, more fraternal, truer world. But there's no propaganda side to my novels.

BRISON: More generally, in your opinion, is the goal of art to show things as they are or to "make possible" a new world?

DE BEAUVOIR: Sartre has spoken of this very well in his articles on literature, when he showed how revealing things through words is already to act on things. When you give a name to oppression, to stupidity, to justice, you've already made them felt and that leads to a desire for change. It's certainly not a question of simply showing things in an entirely external manner, as in the new novel, for example;

it's not at all that, our notion. The idea of committed literature is perhaps the notion of literature not only as a commitment, but as an act, a certain act, without of course exaggerating the possibilities of literary action. One shouldn't exaggerate the political effect of writing. Take, for example, *The Second Sex*. I know that it's widely read today in America and in France because, twenty years after its publication, feminist movements emerged. So, these movements find in *The Second Sex* a theoretical confirmation of their spirit. But at the time of its publication, *The Second Sex* reached a number of women individually without creating a feminist movement. It's once the movement exists that the book assumes a certain value.

BRISON: One of the greatest problems for contemporary feminists is that expressed by Sartre: "They have no base in the masses and the task now, it seems to me, is to achieve it."⁶ But how?

DE BEAUVOIR: It's very difficult, but there are certain things that affect all women. Take, for example, our success in the area of abortion rights. Every woman is affected by that – a rich woman (a bit less so, because she is rich and can go to Switzerland or elsewhere, but after all that's not very pleasant) as well as her housemaid. There are things we're trying to do in France right now – I'm not sure about America – but we're trying to focus on things that interest more or less all women. For example, the anti-rape movement is of concern to the working woman down at the corner no less than to woman in the factory or to the girl still living at home, who can get raped like any other. So actions against rape can interest a whole lot of women. It's the same thing with protests against domestic violence – this is also very important to all women because there are victims of such abuse in all the social classes, including the middle class. One mustn't think that a lawyer or a doctor doesn't beat his wife just like a farmer or a worker does. I even think that the farmer is the one who does it less because his wife works, she is useful, he doesn't want to break her arm or leg. So, we have to find issues all women can be interested in and, on that basis, make them understand that their problems are experienced by all women, not only them, and give them a sense of solidarity. This is what we managed to do with abortion, by receiving women in abortion centers before the law was passed: when they had abortions, we explained why we were doing this and they realized they weren't alone in the world, that

there were problems. They saw other women and sometimes they joined the movement and helped out. But for now it's certain that in France – I think it's the same thing in America – the big problem is that we don't reach women who are exploited in additional ways, whether directly, in the factory, or else because they're the wives of workers and exploited as such. The choice of action depends on the circumstances. In the examples I just mentioned, rape and domestic abuse, the movements against these happened because there were trials going on, inquiries, polls, and so women began to speak out a bit, they were encouraged to speak out, and the more they spoke the more it became clear what a crime sexual violence is – a very, very common crime that really concerns all social classes. So we need to find the points where the interests of women of all classes intersect. That, I think, is what feminists should be seeking.

BRISON: A somewhat more personal question: what are your current projects?

DE BEAUVOIR: Right now, I'm primarily working on some projects in film. They're making a film of *The Woman Destroyed*. That's for television, Channel 3. And then I have a really big project, making a film based on *The Second Sex* with a Swedish director named Mai Zetterling, who's done some excellent feminist films. She did a film called "The Girls." You haven't seen it? Well, it's really beautiful. So, we're going to take two years to do it and try to look at different aspects of the condition of woman. I'm really interested in it. We're going to collaborate on it and I'm really looking forward to it, since film, if it's done well, has a very strong impact on people. It can make women aware of a lot of things, more than books can, and it can easily reach workers' wives, wives of employees, since everybody has TV nowadays. It's a way of speaking to all women; one can do this more effectively through film or television than one can do in a book that they're not going to read. Reaching them through books is a bit too difficult. I'll be busy with this during the coming year, maybe even two years because it will take a long time to make, since *The Second Sex* covers the entire condition of women.

BRISON: And what are Sartre's projects right now?

DE BEAUVOIR: You know, Sartre can't see very well anymore. At least he can't read or write. He's working with a secretary who is also

a friend and they're trying to write a book together, a book on the question of "power and freedom." The problem of power seems to interest everyone right now and so they're tackling it; his friend reads to him, they have conversations, his friend takes notes, etc. They're studying the huge subject of power and freedom: what exactly is power? And how can you reconcile a certain kind of power with freedom? Or must all power be completely suppressed? For example, in French feminist movements – the same problem comes up in America – feminists refuse all hierarchy, all bureaucracy, practically any organization whatsoever. Well, everything's disorganized and, for that reason, it turns back on itself, it's not a real democracy, because those who speak loudest, or with the greatest ease, talk all the time, and the others can't make themselves heard. That's pretty horrible, too, and it creates a lot of difficulty for the feminist movement. It's hard because it ends up being always the same ones who are the leaders, almost in spite of themselves. But they are still the leaders and have a certain power. Some are very happy with that; some, however, don't like it because it's draining, it requires too much responsibility, and then of course it reproduces masculine patterns to the very extent that they have tried to avoid them. Very difficult, this question of power. Yes.

REFLECTIONS: THEORY AND PRACTICE IN BEAUVOIR'S LATER FEMINISM

Although *The Second Sex*, first published in 1949, had inspired women around the world to rethink their situations and change their lives, it was ignored or disparaged by a surprising number of feminists during the so-called "second wave" of the women's movement in the 1970s, especially in France. Simone de Beauvoir was not even mentioned in the early feminist writings of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva.⁷ Suzanne Lilar declared, in a book published in France in 1970, "it is high time to lose respect for Simone de Beauvoir, it is high time to desecrate [*profaner*] *The Second Sex*,"⁸ and Jean Leighton, in a book published in the United States in 1975, accused Beauvoir of "misogyny"⁹ and of writing "a diatribe against the female sex."¹⁰ According to Leighton, "*The Second Sex* staunchly insists that transcendence, action, creativity, and power are the masculine virtues par excellence, and these are what determine human

value... Action and transcendence are male and good; being and immanence are feminine and bad. Unless women renounce 'femininity' and equal men on their own terms, they will continue to be inferior."¹¹

Beauvoir was attacked by feminists not only in academic texts, but also in activist circles. Anne Tristan and Annie de Pisan describe a meeting (in Paris in 1970) of the nascent French women's liberation movement (the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes, or MLF) at which the announcement that Simone de Beauvoir had agreed to sign a manifesto calling for legalized abortion was met with the response: "'What's that got to do with anything? We don't want any of that kind of feminism here. *The Second Sex* is old hat.'"¹²

The main arguments being raised at the time against *The Second Sex*, and against Beauvoir herself, who was assumed to hold the same views roughly twenty-five years later, were that Beauvoir valorized "masculine" values and disparaged "feminine" ones and that she held that women needed simply to achieve the positions of power currently held by men in order to be truly liberated. Beauvoir did little to counter these charges. On the contrary, she reinforced these views, primarily by refusing to reply to critics, but also by suggesting, in interviews and publications, that her views *hadn't* changed since publishing *The Second Sex*. In 1972 she wrote that "As far as theory is concerned my opinions are still the same; but from the point of view of practice and tactics my position has changed."¹³

One might fault her for allowing these misperceptions to proliferate. Alternatively, one might give her credit for remaining above the fray in French feminist politics – a rather nasty one and soon to become worse. One of the first feminist groups in Paris, "Psych-analyse et Politique" (or "Psych et Po"), led by Antoinette Fouque, a psychoanalyst, dedicated itself to the celebration of feminine difference and disparaged Beauvoir as a reactionary masculinist. They founded the press *Des Femmes* and succeeded in legally registering the labels "Mouvement de Libération des Femmes" and "MLF" as commercial trademarks, in effect prohibiting anyone who was not part of their organization from calling herself a member of the women's liberation movement. The animosity of *Psych et Po* to Beauvoir's brand of feminism never abated. When Beauvoir died, in 1986, Antoinette Fouque wrote a piece in *Libération*, ascribing to

Beauvoir an "intolerant, assimilating, sterilizing universalism, full of hatred and reductive of otherness."¹⁴

Although there were deep ideological disagreements between Psych et Po and Beauvoir, the charge of intolerance was unfounded (not to mention ironic, given Psych et Po's trademarking of the very name of the women's liberation movement). In the mid-1970s Beauvoir's comments about feminism indicated precisely the opposite: an openness to the unexpected and exciting directions the movement would take. Her preface to the early collection of feminist essays, *Les Femmes s'entêtent*¹⁵ (*Women Protest*, also a pun meaning women without a head) begins with the exhortation "perturbation, ma soeur" ("disruption, my sister"), signaling her nearly anarchic rejection of hierarchies, her refusal to be the leader of this movement without leaders. When *L'Arc* (a journal that devoted each issue to the work of a famous intellectual figure) decided to do a special issue about her in 1975, Beauvoir insisted that it be entitled *Simone de Beauvoir et la lutte des femmes* (*Simone de Beauvoir and Women's Struggle*), that other women appear on the cover with her, and that it consist of essays (not about Beauvoir) by a range of feminist theorists. It was in this volume that Hélène Cixous' essay "The Laugh of Medusa," praising "écriture féminine" ("feminine writing") first appeared. The editors of the volume write in their introduction that they wanted to convey Simone de Beauvoir's "inimitable way of being open to others."¹⁶

In the spring of 1976 I wrote to Simone de Beauvoir asking if I could meet with her. It seemed to me that the charges against her being made by a considerable number of French feminists were unfounded, and I wanted to know how she would reply to them. I would have been surprised to learn that her views about feminism had not evolved at all since 1949 (when she did not describe herself as a feminist). She had, in a 1966 interview with Francis Jeanson, called herself a "radical feminist" and discussed a wide range of ways of being a radical feminist. And when Beauvoir wrote, in 1972, that she stood by her argument in *The Second Sex* ("that all male ideologies are directed at justifying the oppression of women, and that women are so conditioned by society that they consent to this oppression"), she added that her view that "'You are not born a woman; you become one' . . . only require[d] completing with the statement 'You are not born a male; you become one.' For masculinity is not given at

the beginning, either."¹⁷ It seemed unlikely to me that she (still) advocated (if she ever did) that women simply become more like men. I told her that I wanted to ask her about, among other things, her current relationship to the women's movement in France and elsewhere and the ways in which her views might have changed since the publication of *The Second Sex*. I wanted to know what kinds of political actions she thought offered the greatest chance of radically transforming society. I had been reading Cixous¹⁸ on *l'écriture féminine* and I wanted to ask her about her views on the revolutionary potential of writing – in particular of women's writing. And, with the adolescent audacity of a 21-year-old, I offered to tell her about my experiences with feminism in the United States, suggesting to her that certain generalizations she had made regarding the combativeness (*vis-à-vis* men) of *la femme américaine* (American women) were not, in fact, justified.¹⁹

I also wrote (with a now quite embarrassing forthrightness) that I was perplexed by her concepts of "essential" and "contingent love." If, as Sartre had written, there was no such thing as love apart from the deeds of love,²⁰ how could a so-called "essential love" that supposedly became an ineradicable part of one's self-definition be anything other than an illusory act of faith? Even in love, I wrote, every individual remains radically free to choose new projects, new futures, and every relation constantly evolves, sometimes in unpredictable ways. So how is a love that is both "essential" (necessary, permanent, and unchangeable) and authentic possible? What I didn't write was that I was also concerned, from a moral standpoint, about the position of those who were relegated, by both Beauvoir and Sartre, to the status of contingent loves. I had recently read Nelson Algren's review of Beauvoir's memoir *Force of Circumstance* (in which she had recounted her "contingent" affair with Algren) as well as some painfully caustic interviews with him on the subject of his relationship with Beauvoir. "Anybody who can experience love contingently has a mind that has recently snapped," he wrote. "How can love be *contingent*? Contingent upon *what*?"²¹

Beauvoir agreed to meet with me. I got a fellowship to spend the summer of 1976 in Paris researching recent trends in French feminism. In September I met Beauvoir in Rome at the Albergo Nazionale, where she and Sartre had spent the latter part of the summer for many years.

She greeted me cordially, and I was struck (as other young feminists were at the time) by her very proper, indeed feminine, demeanor – and her bright red nail polish. She asked me if I would like a scotch (“un whisky”). I’ll never know whether this was because her time with Algren in Chicago had convinced her that all Americans liked scotch or because I seemed really nervous. In any case, I had my first taste of whisky, and I started asking her questions.

It quickly became clear that she had, indeed, revised her views about feminism since writing *The Second Sex*. She didn’t think that the point of women’s liberation was for women to become more like men or to assume their positions of power in a capitalist society. Nor did she think that the advent of a socialist society would automatically ensure equality for women. She thought that writing could help to change the world, but she completely rejected the idea of a *l’écriture féminine* that was premised on distinctively, essentially, feminine values.

We talked about the political potential of *la littérature engagé* (committed literature) and about the limits of writing as a catalyst for social transformation. I asked her about the philosophical and personal difficulties of having “contingent” love relationships while sustaining an “essential” one and she replied, tersely, “yes, it’s difficult,” or something to that effect, so I dropped the subject. After a couple of hours, I asked if I could do a more formal, tape-recorded interview with her the following day. That she was willing to spend another afternoon talking with a young student who was simply interested in her work was a sign of her extraordinary generosity.

In the interview that followed, Beauvoir replied to those who said that she was urging women to become more like men: “it’s a matter not of women taking men’s place in this world, but of their being emancipated in such a way as simultaneously to change this world.” Far from advocating that women assume men’s positions of power, she asserted that “the point is not for women simply to take power out of men’s hands since that wouldn’t change anything about the world. It’s a question precisely of destroying that notion of power.”

She acknowledged that, precisely because of the ways women have been oppressed, they “don’t have the flaws that are linked to the possession of power.” And yet she rejected the notion that women have some positive, essentially feminine, traits worth promoting: “A positive definition of ‘woman’? Woman is a human being with a

certain physiology, but that physiology in no way makes her inferior, nor does it justify her exploitation.”

This is far from the valorization of feminine difference found in other French feminist writers of the time. Although she acknowledged that the physical, the sensual, should be a source of pleasure for women as well as for men, she also asserted that if women

consider the physical to be so important, it’s not because of some physiological destiny, but precisely because they are deprived of so many other things in life. They have so little of real interest in their lives that they are led to confer much value to the part, let’s say, the sexual, sensual part of their existence. This goes as well for relations with children, with the newborn, etc. They take pleasure in breastfeeding, etc., and all of this is very important for them largely because they have so little else.

It is not hard to see why she did not agree with Cixous that women should be encouraged to write in a distinctively feminine voice, “in white ink,” with their mothers’ milk.

And yet Beauvoir was “totally in favor” of feminist writings – “books that reveal women’s condition, that revolt against it and lead others to revolt” – provided that they were written in accessible language. “To the extent that there are new things to say,” she maintained, “they must be said in a way that’s accessible.” For Beauvoir, writing is a kind of political action, a way of changing the world by revealing it. As Sartre writes, “The ‘committed’ writer knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change.”²² Language is not, for Beauvoir, a mere expression of thought. Nor does it merely reflect some preexisting reality. “No work that has reference to the world can be a mere transcription, since the world has not the power of speech,” she writes. “Facts do not determine their own expression; they dictate nothing. The person who recounts them finds out what he has to say about them through the act of saying it.”

Although Beauvoir thought writing had political potential, she also warned against overestimating the power of literary action. From the early 1970s on she was concerned with direct action, with legislative reform, with the actual, everyday problems of real women. This was in contrast with the agenda of Psych et Po, whose “primary battle,” according to Claire Duchon, “was against the masculinity in women’s heads; not against the material conditions of women’s

lives, or against discrimination that can be changed through legislation, but, as feminist Nadja Ringert says... against the 'phallus in our heads.'"²³ In an article written in 1972, the Psych et Po collective distinguished masculine and feminine power in the following way:

Women's power isn't legal, patriarchal, sadistic, pederastic, it isn't concerned with representation, with leadership, with names, with rape, repression, hatred, avarice, knowledge, order, individualism, with abstractions.

It's a non-power of the matrix, of birthings, givings, chaos, differences, of collective freedoms, of openings, of bodies, of recognitions, of lifting censorship, of pleasure, outside the law, it's a power-to, act-think-do, by/for all women, all.²⁴

Beauvoir had little use for the sort of revolution from within being proposed by the adherents of feminine difference. After all, it's what people *do* that counts. In her interview with John Gerassi, on "*The Second Sex: Twenty Five Years Later*," published in early 1976, after describing how she realized, after 1968, that the class struggle did not eliminate the need for the sex struggle, Beauvoir acknowledges that, increasingly, leftist groups "feel compelled to keep their macho male leaders in check. That's progress. Here in our newspaper, *Libération*, the male-oriented majority felt obliged to let a woman become its director. That's progress. Leftist men are beginning to watch their language, are...," at which point Gerassi interrupts to ask: "But is it real? I mean, I've learned, for example, never to use the word 'chick,' to pay attention to women in any group discussion, to wash dishes, clean the house, do the shopping. But am I any less sexist in my thoughts? Have I rejected the male values?" To which Beauvoir replies: "You mean inside you? To be blunt, who cares? Think for a minute. You know a racist Southerner. You know he's racist because you've known him all his life. But now he never says 'nigger.' He listens to all black men's complaints and tries to do his best to deal with them. He goes out of his way to put down other racists. He insists that black children be given a better-than-average education to offset the years of no education. He gives references for black men's loan applications. He backs the black candidates in his district both with money and with his vote. Do you think the blacks give a damn that he's just as much a racist now as before 'in his soul'?" She goes on to add: "A couple of generations feeling that they have to appear nonracist at all times, and the third generation

will grow up nonracist in fact. So play at being nonsexist, and keep playing."²⁵

Beauvoir valued clarity, precision, accessible language, and action; a politically engaged intellectual, she was aware of the limits of the life of the mind – and of the power of the pen. When I met her, she was attending demonstrations, going to meetings of groups fighting against rape and domestic violence, and lobbying for legislative change. She had largely stopped writing and was devoting herself to film and television projects that would reach a wider audience of women. For the last decade of her life, the most influential French feminist theorist of the twentieth century dedicated herself to political practice.

I have sorely missed her brand of feminist activism when it has seemed to me that feminist theorists have tended to give abstract theory priority over the actual experiences of real women, to the detriment of both their scholarship and their political agenda. I came across a startling example of this in the spring of 1992, when I was in France doing legal research to prepare for the trial of the man who had raped and nearly murdered me in the south of France in 1990. I went to what is still the largest feminist bookstore in Paris, the *Librairie des femmes* (founded by Psych et Po). While there was an entire bookcase (with several shelves) devoted to *Etudes lacaniennes*, I found only two books in the store by French authors on violence against women (and one was a reprint of a 1978 transcript of a well-known French rape trial).

A libertarian colleague of mine defines "freedom" as lawlessness. When I think of lawlessness, I think of being trapped in a ravine by a man trying to kill me who looks like he's going to get away with it. Freedom is something else altogether. Current debates within US feminism about freedom and the power of the state remind me of the conflict in the 1970s between Beauvoir and the feminists who located women's emancipatory potential outside the laws of the state, beyond the male-dominated systems of discourse and knowledge, in "the non-power of the matrix... of lifting censorship, of pleasure, outside the law."

Beauvoir refused this version of a feminist utopia; she rejected the dichotomies presupposed by those who asked: should women use or reject masculine "tools" – language, science, art, law – for understanding and controlling the world? Her response to this question is

a call to action that breaks through the kind of aporia induced, at times, by relentless theorizing: "You can, indeed, steal the tools and use them," she replied, "but you have to use them carefully and for that matter," she added, "nothing prevents you from changing them at the same time."

NOTES

- 1 This interview of Beauvoir by Susan J. Brison took place in Rome on 7 September 1976. It was translated by Thomas Trezise and Susan J. Brison in July/August 2001. This chapter was written by Susan J. Brison in 2001.
- 2 "Simone de Beauvoir interroge Jean-Paul Sartre," in *Simone de Beauvoir et la lutte des femmes*, *L'Arc*, 61 (1975): 3-12, 11.
- 3 Hélène Cixous, "Le rire de la Méduse," in *Simone de Beauvoir et la lutte des femmes*, *L'Arc*, 61 (1975): 39-54.
- 4 "Simone de Beauvoir interroge Jean-Paul Sartre," 12.
- 5 "Le rire de la Méduse," 47.
- 6 "Simone de Beauvoir interroge Jean-Paul Sartre," 12.
- 7 See Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 182-83 and Elaine Marks, *Critical Essays on Simone de Beauvoir* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987), pp. 1-5.
- 8 Suzanne Lilar, *Le Malentendu du deuxième sexe* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970), p. 14 (my translation).
- 9 Jean Leighton, *Simone de Beauvoir on Woman* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1975), p. 221. Both Leighton and Lilar identified themselves as feminists.
- 10 *ibid.*, p. 118.
- 11 *ibid.*, p. 213.
- 12 Anne Tristan and Annie de Pisan, "From Beauvoir to the Women's Movement," in Toril Moi, ed., *French Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. 48.
- 13 Simone de Beauvoir, *All Said and Done* (New York: Warner Books, 1975), p. 462.
- 14 Quoted in Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 182.
- 15 Simone de Beauvoir, preface to *Les Femmes s'entêtent* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), pp. 11-13.
- 16 The expression they used was "poreuse aux autres" (porous to others), which suggests an even greater degree of relationality, indeed intermingling, with others. *L'Arc*, 61 (1975): 2.

- 17 *All Said and Done*, pp. 462-63.
- 18 Cixous, "Le rire de la Méduse."
- 19 For example, in an interview with Francis Jeanson in 1966, Beauvoir described the feminist stance of treating men as adversaries as "très 'femme américaine'" (very "American woman") and "extrêmement irritant." Francis Jeanson, *Simone de Beauvoir ou l'entreprise de vivre* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966), p. 264.
- 20 Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Humanism of Existentialism," in *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, ed. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1965), p. 48.
- 21 Nelson Algren, "The Question of Simone de Beauvoir," review of *Force of Circumstance*, *Harper's Magazine* (May 1965): 136. For recent discussions of the problematic nature of Beauvoir and Sartre's distinction between essential and contingent love, see Melanie C. Hawthorne, ed., *Contingent Loves: Simone de Beauvoir and Sexuality* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000) and Bianca Lamblin, *A Disgraceful Affair* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996).
- 22 Jean-Paul Sartre, "What is Literature?" and *Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 37. In the above interview, Beauvoir cites, with approval, Sartre's discussion of committed literature.
- 23 Claire Duchon, *French Connections: Voices from the Women's Movement in France* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), p. 48.
- 24 From *Le Torchon brûle*, 3 (1972), quoted in Claire Duchon, *Feminism in France: From May '68 to Mitterrand* (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), p. 36.
- 25 John Gerassi, "Simone de Beauvoir: *The Second Sex* 25 Years After," *Society*, 13, 2 (Jan./Feb. 1976): 81-82.