



Editorial

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A plea for Beauvoir's timeliness today has to assert itself in a field that has become confusing, both in terms of gender relations in Western societies and in the face of the diversity of feminisms. With regard to the real role of women, among many people there is an apologetic understanding that gender equality may not have been achieved but 'is well on its way' or 'improvements have been made.' Aggressive demonstrations against male supremacy, still remembered by some from the 1960s, have become rather rare in present Western societies and limited to single countries with regressive political tendencies (reversal of *Roe* in the USA, abortion ban by the Pis party in Poland). In contrast to the vaguely floating impression of growing equality, the trend in professions and family has already come to a stop some time ago. Correspondingly, on the level of cultural discourses, 'neoliberal feminism' and 'postfeminism' arose to point loudly towards achieved equality and freedom for women. Neoliberal feminists, like Cheryl Sandberg, emphasize women's increased opportunities under liberal capitalism, while postfeminists celebrate the women's male-like freedoms in gender relations or demonstrate it offensively ('female chauvinist pigs'). Postfeminists also defend commercial and amateur pornography as a liberating medium for women, clearly and shockingly a red rag for earlier feminists.

Before trying to comment on the role Beauvoir may play, or has played, in different waves of feminism, a word on the usual distinctions is in order. The widespread historical classification of the different phases of feminism is primarily sociological. The so-called second wave of feminism from 1960 to 1980 centred on the political attempt of women to fight for equal legal and socioeconomic rights within bourgeois institutions in Western societies. The so-called third wave in the 1990s, in contrast, besides its emphasis on intersectionality, e.g. by Black feminists, was primarily devoted to a change in lifestyles, i.e. was private in addition to the publically political aims claimed earlier. The period since 2012, now called the fourth wave, clearly shows that it is contemporary challenges whose character undergirds the profile of the ever-changing feminism and determines its content. For, in accordance with the heterogeneous present, it is ubiquitous topics that are prominent in the fourth wave: The fight against sexual harassment, the inclusion of transgender groups, transnationalisation and the critique of postfeminism. The goals of the earlier waves, not surprisingly, have not been fulfilled, and so many of the earlier goals, adapted to changed circumstances, are still negotiable.

In contrast to these sociological phases, the different feminist ‘philosophical’ agendas are less clearly separable, although there are shifts of emphasis in them too. (We bracket here the doubt whether ‘feminist’ and ‘philosophical’ do cohere to begin with.) Many of the arguments on equal women’s rights in the second wave are also to be found in the writings of Harriet Taylor Mill and John Stuart Mill’s in the 19th century, which call for the realization of the moral principles of liberal democracy. In contrast, the postmodern or poststructural feminism of the 1990s meets the cultural political feminism, insofar as it radicalizes the view on power structures and shifts the interest from equal civil, political and economic rights to gender differences, consciousness raising, liberty in gender construction, diversification of gender, etc.

Judith Butler, besides bell hooks, is perhaps the most important intellectual representing and highlighting the third wave, who provided its political movement with the postmodern radicalization of gender. So far as there is one single trademark of her postmodernism, it is her claim towards a total flexibilization of sex and gender reality. In her theory there are meant to be no essences, neither biological nor cultural in men and women. But such radical attitudes are not without their problems. For example, should there be no longer a movement of political feminism that devotes itself to the aims of equality specifically—or should we say ‘essentially’?—for women?

In so far as philosophy has a well-known tendency to spin off endless in-house disputes of ever more inclusive quality, it is not surprising that the so-called fourth wave of feminism has no similarly guiding philosophical voice, as was the case in the earlier social phases. Similar to the political feminism the philosophical feminism has only become more diversified, not necessarily more original. And so a current priority on the philosophical side is to understand the contours and puzzles of the postmodern phase for its practical consequences. The most actual political issues, on the other hand, are not unheard-of philosophical challenges but rather age-old social ones, such as sexual harassment, body-shaming or unequal pay.

To sum up: Feminism proceeds on different levels, and the usual fourth generation view covers social and political aspects, but much less so new philosophical issues (perhaps with the exception of Sally Haslanger’s work on social ontology, however). That also shrinks the potential force of philosophical theories for politics to a more humble size, and the changes come less from ideas than from the relevant material circumstances. The importance of a theory of gender need not be underestimated, but its ideas inform at best the already existing thrust of the feminist movement, not pushing it forward. Being radical in the sense of taking arguments to the extreme is a typical philosophical virtue, but less so a political one. In the face of political counterforces, the richness in reflective and critical thought becomes more important than radicalization. And it is indeed this quality for which

Beauvoir can be of help for the present feminism, whether sociological, political or philosophical.

In the late 1940s there was no feminism to speak of, and at that time Beauvoir did not consider herself as a spokeswoman of a movement. But nevertheless, her book *The Second Sex* helped to prepare mentally for the second wave of feminism: it offers a rich reservoir of arguments, distinctions, observations and hopes, which can be drawn upon in order to sort out the intellectual puzzles of the later feminist theories. Even if not making use of the concept of gender, her famous adage in the book, 'one is not born but becomes a woman,' is a catchphrase to the present day, and, based on ample analyses, it shook up thinking on many different levels.

Beauvoir's groundbreaking work enabled institution-reforming feminists of the second wave to fend off traditional biological arguments in favour of male hegemony. According to these arguments, women's disadvantages are simply a consequence of their nature and not of one-sided conditions of society. In contrast, Beauvoir revealed the extent to which women were 'enslaved by the species.' With this rebuttal Beauvoir paved the way to the creation of political motives and energies to not only analyze but also change the suppressive part of women's existence.

However, having introduced the sex/gender distinction—if not in terminology, but in content—Beauvoir also became an interlocutor for all the topics introduced by the cultural, postmodern feminism. For those who were not convinced by Butler's dissolving of the distinction by way of bringing the biological body to full extent under the regime of symbols, language and the unconscious, Beauvoir opens up an avenue on to how to take care of women's biology, her biological differences, and her psychological facts. By covering the body as well as patriarchal traditions and norms under her philosophical concept of the 'situation,' which she describes as a set of forces against which autonomy has to be worked out, she opened up a field of empirical study of practically relevant living conditions. In contrast to the 'Foucauldian Left' (Rorty), *The Second Sex* included phenomenological studies reaching down to the level of the everyday woman and her life of external and internal suppression.

At its publication in 1949 Beauvoir's book was completely original and widely ahead of its time, especially regarding women's own ideas of their situation, which were often similar to those of men. In Germany, Alice Schwarzer was a political ambassador of Beauvoir, without being able to cover her oeuvre in its full breadth and originality. The main reason for this was that Beauvoir's basic ideas originated in her philosophical convictions, which also found expression in her novels in addition to her academic books. While the novels are heavily milieu-centred and largely forgotten today, Beauvoir's portrayal of the condition of women continues having a large continuing importance. While *The Second Sex* needs some revision from the present in its empirical parts, its philosophical framework, its methodology and its

inherent hope are still important—and that is amazing for a politically intended book that is now 75 years old.

The Second Sex was originally published in two volumes (and it is still sold as two volumes in France). The first volume deals with ‘facts and myths’ and covers science, history and ideology, thus being largely ‘objective’ and unpersonal. The second volume deals with the personal perspective of women in different historical and social circumstances. While Beauvoir implements her own existentialist perspective in these descriptions and recollections, the methodology of the second volume is also often called ‘phenomenological.’ At the outset of both wide-ranging tours through science, history and life experience of women Beauvoir places her up to then not often voiced question: ‘What is a woman?’

In a way, remembering Kant’s ‘What is the human being?’ this question is typically philosophical in its generality. But Beauvoir makes clear that her interest is not one of looking for comparably general answers, save the one by Kant or Kantians. With this radical and, at her time, unusual question, Beauvoir puts forth question marks breaking up the usual platitudes at the outset and instead provides critical research. Her answers are less to be found in the biological, psychoanalytic and historical-materialist perspectives on women but simply in the reconstruction of women’s own perspectives.

This again is guided by another deep-reaching question: Why do women not defend themselves against their suppression? Why do women submit to men’s myths when these myths primarily serve only male interests? It is not only the three sciences mentioned that do not suffice for the answer sought, even if they name important dimensions of the female perspective. The interior views of women are spread out across the second volume and, in contrast to the objectifying ones, primarily focus on psychological aspects of phases of socialization (childhood, girl, woman, mother, old age) and of social roles (prostitute, hetaera). They try to summarize, and make explanatory thereby, a full account of ‘femininity,’ the receptacle of individual and social characteristics of women’s culture.

Beauvoir’s goal is not to declare female abilities to be equal to those of men, in complete contrast to, say, a neoliberal feminist. The extent to which she sees women as endowed with all conceivable negative qualities of submissiveness and deceitfulness, is explained by the extremely rigid gender relations that were common in bourgeois cultures of Western societies around the middle of the 20th century. The descriptions on both levels, objective and subjective, are not erased by the gains made in gender justice since then. Beauvoir’s observations are too detailed, rich, and profound for that to be the case.

And for that, in real society, the effective gains for women are primarily those of social rights. Besides, more generally, women often do not enjoy equally the fair value of rights. Importantly, however, the gains of greater freedom that women have

achieved in relation to ‘femininity’ are relatively small. This is so as Beauvoir made us see that ‘femininity’ includes female characteristics which work to the disadvantage of women, and thereby explain why women do not oppose gender inequality, or indeed actively (if unconsciously) support it.

Philosophically, Beauvoir is situated both in proximity as well as in distance to Butler’s theory. Distance arises in that she considers the male/female sex difference to be insoluble, as she refers to the biological conditions as ultimately insurmountable. On the other hand she thinks gender to be shaped psychosocially, if not too easily—both belongs to the ‘situation.’ Here again there is a proximity with Butler, because there are no universally valid norms which one could apply to this ‘situation,’ and in this sense there is also no truth of gender.

However, Beauvoir could not be won over to a total dissolution of truth and knowledge, as has become fashionable after Foucault. Even if she sees femininity as a historical expression of the inferior role in power relations, power is not simply a boundless willpower, but it is bound to biological conditions such as the different needs of biological bodies. Epistemically, biology also sets limits to a cultural relativism. And finally, Beauvoir shares with Arendt and Habermas, and presumably against Butler or Foucault, the confidence of being able to achieve practical effects in public discourse, yet without presupposing that one could reconstruct an orientation towards consensus in such discourse. Trained along with Kojève and Sartre on Hegel’s master/slave dialectic, she sees social development in terms of a conflict theory rather than one of deliberation—so she would not be an intellectual ally of the deliberative democrats.

Even if the theoretical provocation and innovation in the many partial analyses in *The Second Sex* can hardly be overestimated, the book’s intellectual challenge arises foremost out of its concept of ‘femininity.’ This concept initiates questions of its gestation, its role in the attempt to achieve autonomy, or its importance for deconstructing male autonomy and conceiving it in female terms. This Beauvoirian agenda has also gained additional significance through its use in today’s transgender movement, a development Beauvoir did not foresee herself. The transgender movement raises, subjectively and in legal matters, the difficulty of making an autonomous decision about gender under the condition of a gender identity that is at the same time constantly developing. Beauvoir can be of help in these questions, because she sees the body not as a given biological fate but as a situation to be worked upon, and also because she has provided an unsurpassed number of descriptions of what a woman ‘is’. Only that which one truly knows about can enable one to act on.

The Editors