The Use and Abuse of Simone de Beauvoir

Re-Evaluating the French Poststructuralist Critique

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Since the recent turn to French philosophy for literary and cultural theorists has been informed by semiotics or poststructuralism, the prior existential humanist generation of Simone de Beauvoir has been for the most part ignored or hastily dismissed.[1] This is true of both the psychoanalytically inclined poststructuralist feminists (Cixous, Grosz, Irigaray and Kristeva) and their Foucauldian counterparts (Braidotti, Hekman, Morris, Scott, Pringle, Watson and Weedon). Frequently Simone de Beauvoir is cited, but her ideas are not rigorously analysed, for they are treated as having been fundamentally transcended by the poststructuralist turn. Some revisiting of de Beauvoir's strategies has occurred among poststructuralist feminists, but often the framing of their interest has meant de Beauvoir's ideas are assumed to be spoken by a universal masculine discourse and thereby fundamentally flawed, or by focusing on de Beauvoir's social location – or de Beauvoir's life as a text – her philosophic ideas are given little attention.[2] Very recently, a collection of appreciative postmodern readings on *The Second Sex* have been published, challenging simplistic representations of de Beauvoir's feminism as a modernist project of feminist liberation, and celebrating it for having anticipated the contemporary philosophic concerns of identity, history, gender and representation (Evans, 1998). Although this book departs from the more popular denunciation of de Beauvoir, its postmodern disposition fails to value the usefulness of de Beauvoir's philosophic

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ideas, and sees her 'existential apparatus as outmoded' (Evans, 1998: 2). Less troubled by a postmodern reading of texts, I think de Beauvoir's ideas are relevant in contemporary feminist debates. Although I do not effect a recuperation of them for feminist purposes here, this article is informed by that end.

My concern in this article is to disrupt the popular poststructuralist image of de Beauvoir's feminism as *passé*. To do so, I return to the 'original exchanges' between de Beauvoir and the French poststructuralist feminists (Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva) or the feminists of difference as they came to be called, where this dismissive attitude began, to determine how adequate or inadequate their criticisms were. Far from having refuted her ideas, they failed to rigorously engage them, preferring instead to assert their theoretical innovativeness and denounce de Beauvoir as an exemplar of 'Enlightenment Humanism' (Kristeva, 1986: 196) – a representative of a bygone feminist generation. Drawing on a careful reading of *The Second Sex*, I confront and defend de Beauvoir from their criticisms of universalism, phallocentrism and being a dupe of Sartre. Far from being theoretically bankrupt, I argue, de Beauvoir's ideas lead to a much more complex understanding of women's 'Otherness' than her opponents; for it is able to accommodate both psychoanalytic and materialist insights without reducing one register of women's reality to the other.

DE BEAUVOIR AS OTHER IN THE FRENCH POSTSTRUCTURAL FEMINIST DISCOURSE

Before I confront the poststructuralist criticisms of de Beauvoir, it is necessary to understand the historical cultural context in which they emerged. The intellectual atmosphere in France in the 1960s was characterized by an assault on humanist philosophy generally and Sartre and de Beauvoir in particular. Althusser and Levi-Strauss inaugurated the structuralist paradigm shift, premised upon its departure from and repudiation of humanism. Relying on semiology and structural understandings of phenomena, they turned against historicism, philosophic anthropology and ontology, all associated with the shortcomings of humanism. Sartre's philosophy was denounced for anthropomorphizing the world and producing Eurocentric ideology rather than science. Although poststructuralists (Foucault, Lacan, Derrida) challenged the structures of their forebearer's analysis, they too reiterated a strong anti-humanist message. The 'death of man' became a well-worn refrain. Just as Althusser, Levi-Strauss, Foucault, Derrida and Lacan denounced Sartre's (socialist) humanism, Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva mounted what has come to be described as a 'crusade against Beauvoir-style feminism' (Braidotti, 1991: 168) and her egalitarian feminism.

Anti-humanism became a mantra within the feminist movement as well. With the rise of feminism in France, in the late 1960s, the feminists of difference allied themselves to *psychanalyse* and *politique*, or the 'Psych and Po' group as it came to be known, comprised of academics informed by a critical reading of Lacanian psychoanalysis. This group, headed by Antoinette Fouque, positioned themselves in opposition to the Questions Feministes Collective (an alliance of socialist and radical feminists adhering to leftist politics led by Simone de Beauvoir and Christine Delphy).[3]

'Psych and Po' spent much energy admonishing feminist activism and political engagement as phallogocentric and insufficiently radical. They refused to participate with collective feminist activities – like the campaign for abortion on demand – on the grounds that it was 'a reactionary petit bourgeois affair' (Tristan and de Pisan, 1987: 53). They are remembered for carrying 'Down with Feminism' placards on an International Women's Day march (Duchen, 1986). Their popular journal – *Les Femmes hebo* – scorned de Beauvoir's 'misogyny' and her 'phallic feminism', which, they believed, was oriented to increase women's status within existing male-identified power structures, rather than challenge them. Fouque's animosity towards de Beauvoir and her kind of feminism is well known in France. Attributing de Beauvoir's feminist political engagement to Sartre, Fouque (1991: 9) associates it with 'the guilty conscience of the intellectual' (Fouque, 1991: 6). On the eve of de Beauvoir's death, usually an occasion for conciliatory comments, Fouque reiterates her stock criticisms of de Beauvoir: 'Only a month ago, she [de Beauvoir] was giving interviews in order to assert her universalist, egalitarian, assimilatory and normalizing feminist positions, roundly attacking anybody who did not fall in to line' (Fouque, 1991: 26). Finally, Fouque declares, de Beauvoir's death is progressive for the French feminist movement 'it will perhaps speed up women's entry into the twenty-first century' (Rodgers, 1998a: 70).

In the context of highly charged public rivalry of humanism and poststructuralism, one might have expected heated intellectual debates between the feminists of difference and de Beauvoir. But this did not happen. In fact, there was a marked reluctance on the part of the feminists of difference to mention de Beauvoir's name in their texts, let alone engage her ideas. Instead they pursued a strategy of silence. Kristeva's article 'Women's Time', reputed to be one of the most developed critiques of de Beauvoir, in the English world at least, never identifies her protagonist. In 'Stabat Mater', Kristeva, briefly mentions her disagreement with de Beauvoir's interpretation of the Virgin Mother, as a 'feminine defeat because the mother kneeled before her barely born son' (Kristeva, 1986: 171), however Kristeva does not further develop their theoretical differences.

Both Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray fail to mention de Beauvoir's

name[4] in their texts prior to her death. This is particularly odd, given that Cixous' article the 'Laugh of the Medusa' (1981), (where she outlines *l'écriture féminine*) was first published in a special edition of *L'Arc* (1975) devoted to Simone de Beauvoir. Equally surprising is Irigaray's failure to mention de Beauvoir in her philosophic text on philosophy and femininity (*Speculum of the Other Woman*; Irigaray, 1985a) presumably an obvious candidate for consideration.

After de Beauvoir's death there are belated testimonies to de Beauvoir's contribution to the women's movement. When interviewed following the publication of *Les Samourais* (1990), modelled on de Beauvoir's *Les Mandarins,* Kristeva spoke of her admiration for de Beauvoir and her belief that they suffered the same fate as intellectual women in France.

Irigaray's *je, tu, nous* opens with a recognition of de Beauvoir's role in inspiring women's struggles for social justice in France and abroad (Irigaray, 1993: 10). Yet Irigaray's praise all too quickly turns to accusation: she blames de Beauvoir for failing to respond to an autographed copy of *Speculum de l'autre femme*; for not assisting her in struggles with her male colleagues; for using her psychoanalytic insights in spite of her public disdain for psychoanalysis (Irigaray, 1993: 10–11). These acts, for Irigaray, are symptomatic of de Beauvoir's universalist style of feminism. Irigaray decries de Beauvoir's 'wish to get rid of sexual difference, as a call for a genocide more radical than any form of destruction there ever has been in human history' (Irigaray, 1993: 12). Even in acknowledging her accomplishments, Irigaray uses this as an occasion to malign her.

More recently, Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous were interviewed on the significance of *The Second Sex* for French feminism – their interventions are worth exploring. Irigaray repeats her criticism of de Beauvoir's egalitarianism: rejecting her claims for equality because 'equality signifies becoming totally like men' and refusing 'to be a human being because the so called universal discourse . . . is sexualized mainly in a masculine way' (Rodgers, 1998a: 75). Renouncing difference or 'partaking of it only in a masculine universe' as de Beauvoir does, Irigaray asserts 'is feminism's most obvious dead end' (Rodgers, 1998a: 75). Kristeva reiterates her interest in '[de Beauvoir's] comportment, in her social and political life' (Rodgers, 1998b: 197), however she reaffirms her belief that de Beauvoir's works are of dubious philosophical value: 'her concepts didn't interest me . . . many passages were either not pertinent and/or exaggerated' (Rodgers, 1998b: 197) and 'her analysis of maternity as a masochistic obligation imposed on women . . . appears to me from another epoque' (Rodgers, 1998b: 198). Cixous summarizes her feelings towards de Beauvoir rather dramatically – 'Beauvoir is not an enemy, she is no-thing' (Rodgers, 1998a: 70). Cixous insists that 'Beauvoir invents nothing, she copies, she reproduces Sartre and society's cliches – there is no ''ecriture''-writing in *The Second Sex* . . . there was no progress, no

opening out, no invention, only tremendous repression' (Rodgers, 1998a: 70).

The most detailed critique of humanist feminism is found in Kristeva's 'Women's Time'. Given this particular article has played such a formative role in moulding English-speaking feminists' understanding of French feminism, a careful scrutiny of it is in order.[5] It exemplifies the poststructuralist attitude towards humanist feminism generally and de Beauvoir in particular; both function within Kristeva's text as the 'Other', an embodiment of all that was wrong with earlier forms of feminism that has been surpassed and corrected by recent generations of feminists.

In 'Women's Time' Julia Kristeva heuristically divides French feminism into three waves: the first humanist wave committed to egalitarian principles, relying on the state to include women in existing institutions and driven by a linear notion of 'time as history', as project and progress (Kristeva, 1986: 193); the second, poststructuralist generation, turning away from socioeconomic equality, to focus on sexual difference (Kristeva, 1986: 194); and the third movement, that she identifies as just beginning to appear, signalled an 'indifference' to sexual difference (Kristeva, 1986: 209–10). These last two waves reject politics as the site of intervention, for language and culture are the primary sources of women's inferiority. They have jettisoned the state and the logic of linear time as patriarchal, believing that cyclical and monumental time have more affinity to feminine subjectivity, and will inspire new socio-symbolics and new relations between the sexes.

Kristeva refers to existential feminists, but does not name an opponent; however, her reference to one who believes 'in the . . . necessary identification between the sexes as the only and unique means for liberating the ''second sex'' ' (Kristeva, 1986: 195) is telling. De Beauvoir, author of *The Second Sex*, is the obvious target. Nor does Kristeva explicitly identify representatives of the second wave, but her references to *l'écriture féminine* and the male imaginary implicate Cixous and Irigaray. This strategy allows Kristeva to make very broad and vague statements about the first and second wave feminists and their socio-symbolics, without critically engaging their ideas. Had Kristeva actually mentioned authors she would have had to address the complexity of their theoretical positions and their feminist practices, a much more difficult task.

In this rhetorical move Julia Kristeva reaffirms a dramatic paradigm shift from humanist feminism, and acknowledges her qualified differences with those who celebrate the 'feminine'. Whereas de Beauvoir stands as 'the Other'; the second generation stand as immature versions of herself. She affiliates herself with these 'difference theorists', yet also describes herself as having transcended them. In contrast to de Beauvoir, Kristeva sees herself as part of the younger generation who came to feminism after May 1968 and who share 'this exacerbated distrust for the

entire political dimension' (Kristeva, 1986: 194). Their feminism in part reflects an antipathy to politics, particularly in its institutionalized forms, but more positively their intellectual interests lay in aesthetics and psychoanalysis (Kristeva, 1986: 194). Kristeva identifies these women as seeking 'to give language to the intersubjective and corporeal experiences left mute by culture in the past' hence struggling for 'the socio-cultural recognition of women' (Kristeva, 1986: 194). Legal, economic and political reforms are not only insufficient but misdirected, for these psychoanalytically inclined feminists believe the social, economic and political world is subtended by the male imaginary. Hence de Beauvoir's reforms will not liberate women from their oppression, it is much deeper; it is psychosexual in origin. De Beauvoir's 'superficial' struggles for change, they claim, are ill-advised and bound to be ineffective.

Kristeva's characterization of de Beauvoir and first wave feminism as being concerned with socioeconomic equality rather than sexual difference is simplistic. De Beauvoir recognizes the importance of the socioeconomic and the political milieu in constituting women's situation and as a terrain of struggle for women's liberation, but she thinks existing forms of historical materialism are inadequate, for sexuality cannot be explained in terms of productive models of social relations. She warns of the untenable reduction of antagonism of the sexes to class antagonism. For women are not simply workers involved in productive processes but reproducers of the species, their sexual relation to men and their intimate relationship with their children and their maternity cannot simply be subsumed under an economic relation as Engels does (de Beauvoir, 1974: 66).

For de Beauvoir, the liberation of women is not about the insertion of women in existing social and political institutions, as Kristeva (1986: 194) suggests. Kristeva's characterization of de Beauvoir's concern with equality as 'the identification of women with the logical and ontological values of a rationality dominant in the nation state' (Kristeva, 1986: 194) is wrongheaded. As a democratic socialist, de Beauvoir believes in radically transforming institutions and relations, to allow women to be active agents and treated as reciprocal subjects. This entails structural changes, but also psychological ones. Women must transform their intimate relations to others and overcome their complicity with the forces of their objectification. De Beauvoir was critical of contemporary psychoanalysis for being masculinist and for overdetermining the psychosexual dimension of women's existence, thereby failing to understand women's ontological aspirations towards agency and the effects active participation in the public sphere would have on the female psyche.

CONFRONTING THE CHARGE OF DE BEAUVOIR'S UNIVERSALISM

Let us look carefully at Kristeva's critique of humanism (i.e. de Beauvoir) as producing a form of abstract universalism that is 'indifferent to difference'. According to Kristeva, 'the specific character of woman could only appear as nonessential or even nonexistent to the totalizing and even totalitarian spirit of [enlightenment humanist] ideology' (Kristeva, 1986: 196). She claims that 'humanism's emancipatory political project, (whether it be liberal democratic or socialist makes little difference) equally imposes a totalitarian ''masculine'' vision of equal society upon women, thereby losing the distinctive ''feminine'' ' (Kristeva, 1986: 196). Although economic, political and professional equality has been achieved, Kristeva says, sexual freedom has not been and cannot be within this framework, for it requires attention to specificity and the symbolic question. Irigaray makes a similar point, de Beauvoir's egalitarian strategy 'papers over, ignores, cancels out differences between the sexes' (Irigaray, 1985b: 166). These claims are not substantiated but simply follow from their representation of humanist feminism as deploying a universalizing and hence phallocentric discourse.

In demanding universal equal treatment did first wave feminists/humanist feminists want women to be like men, and were they denying differences between different constituencies of women? Were their theories and egalitarian practices universalizing and masculinizing? To answer these questions one must look at different feminist political movements and their strategies. However convincing Kristeva's claims sound, they cannot simply be assumed to follow from her claim that there is a privileging of the masculine symbolic and the muteness of the feminine imaginary (semiotic).

Not only is Kristeva's characterization of enlightenment humanism abstract and formulaic, so too is her treatment of de Beauvoir. As I show de Beauvoir's feminist struggles towards equality were neither masculinist nor homogenizing. De Beauvoir sought to improve the living conditions of women, to empower women and to develop their capacities not so that women could become men or compete in a man's world, but so that they could actively participate in the public space outside the home, a world from which women, for the most part, had been excluded. To formulate the public space and socioeconomic life as masculine as Kristeva does, is to prioritize sexual difference. For de Beauvoir this space is intersected by class and racial privilege as well as gender. Not only were women excluded from civic life but so too were most working-class and non-European men. Unlike her critics, de Beauvoir showed some concern for acknowledging the salience of political differences in class, race and ethnicity and not simply gender.

De Beauvoir applies a phenomenological approach to the complexity and diversity of women's lives, hence gender is not a structure or essential experience. De Beauvoir's universalist philosophy, I believe, allows the articulation of various social and political differences that her opponents, for the most part, disregard.

De Beauvoir's use of the master/slave relation to characterize women's oppression allows for the inferior status of slave to be equally applicable to non-white or working-class men. De Beauvoir wished to liberate not only women from their constraining and unfulfilling lives, but many groups of minority men, who were constituted as Other and denied agency. Even as early as the late 1940s de Beauvoir was aware of the black struggles for liberation, the oppressiveness of colonial relations which later informed her support of Algerian independence.

As I have shown, contrary to her critics' claims, de Beauvoir's humanism is not a form of abstract universalism. She attends to sexual difference and her campaigns for abortion rights and contraception attest to that. In the 1970s, de Beauvoir admitted the importance of specifically women's struggles: she was a prime mover in gaining signatures for the manifesto of 343, a campaign for the decriminalization of abortion, that began a five-year struggle for the legalization of abortion in France. She was president of Choisir, and involved in the Droit de Femme. Furthermore, both her philosophic formulations and her political practice accommodated differences other than sexual ones. She publicly supported Algerian independence, a very dangerous position, and was instrumental in the release of Djamila Boupacha, a young Algerian woman who had been tortured by the French police to extract a false confession.

INTERROGATING DE BEAUVOIR'S MISOGYNY

There are many passages in *The Second Sex* where de Beauvoir denigrates female sexuality, pregnancy and childrearing, and these are cited as examples of de Beauvoir's misogyny and the basis for claiming that de Beauvoir believes liberated women should emulate men. De Beauvoir's actual statements regarding sexuality are not explored, instead Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous echo popular denunciations of de Beauvoir's 'phallic' feminism. Had they scrutinized her text, they would find that de Beauvoir does not celebrate the disembodied transcendent male subject as the goal for women, nor does she simply denigrate the female body and its passive reproductive functions, the usual parodied reading. De Beauvoir calls for surpassing the present gendered duality of transcendence and immanence, for both ought to be integrated into a single existence. She is all too aware of how transcendence has historically been designated as a male domain and women have been relegated to the sphere of immanence and

how marriage has sustained this. But she does not call for women to embody existing forms of transcendence. She says:

> The fact is that every human existence involves transcendence and immanence at the same time; to go forward, each existence must be maintained, for it to expand toward the future it must integrate the past, and while intercommunicating with others it should find self-confirmation. (de Beauvoir, 1974: 480)

This has not as yet been achieved and it surely will not be in its present masculine form.

Again, to fully understand de Beauvoir's position on female sexuality, one cannot simply read her pejorative comments on maternity, menopause and menstruation or her descriptions of female sexual anatomy as mollusc-like (de Beauvoir, 1974: 406–7), as anti-women. For that would treat their meaning as essential and fixed rather than socially and historically constructed. De Beauvoir recognizes bodily and sexual differences, however she immediately adds that these facts have no significance in themselves, they 'take on different values according to the economic and social context' (de Beauvoir, 1974: 59). She remarks, 'the burdens of maternity can be crushing if women are obliged to undergo frequent pregnancies and if she is compelled to nurse and raise children without assistance; but if she procreates voluntarily and if society comes to her aid' they are lightened (de Beauvoir, 1974: 59). The meaning of pregnancy varies from one society to another. Only if one interprets de Beauvoir as producing universal and timeless truths about maternity and women, can she be read as misogynist. This is precisely what the French poststructuralist feminists have done.

De Beauvoir was not inattentive to sexual difference. In *The Second Sex*; she is acutely aware that feminine sexuality is predominantly male defined at the time she was writing. She describes the debilitating effects of contemporary femininity where women are defined as objects of male desire and are compelled to produce the progeny of their husbands. However, de Beauvoir's negative statements regarding 'feminine' sexual experiences must been seen as symptoms of a patriarchal society in which women's experiences are masculinized rather than universal statements about women.

If one accepts Kristeva's phallogocentric thesis, which sees philosophic work governed by principles of non-contradiction, coherence and linear thinking, therefore defined by the male imaginary, then de Beauvoir's discourse is a masculinized one. But there are various shortcomings of this thesis. First, it denies the possibility of a coherent feminist philosophy or general feminist theorizing. Second, it has a restrictive theory of the subject that problematizes women's agency. Since the 'feminine' is constituted within a repressive economy of phallic discourse (language and

culture are defined by the male imaginary and thereby appropriated by the masculine), the prospects for women transforming themselves outside the masculine is limited. Hence the problem of female agency arises. The prominence of the psychosexual and linguistic tends to subordinate social/political/economic relations to the psychic register producing a theory that gives too much rein to sexuality in determining subjecthood. Finally, since discourse is constitutive of social relations, this is a very limited approach to understanding the complexity of the world. Political reality is read off phallogocentric discourse, hence there is a failure to look at the specific historical situation and the forces that produce and sustain these discourses. The weakness of this approach is evidenced in the treatment of de Beauvoir by the feminists of difference: phallogocentrism is deduced from her universal humanism and all her feminist strategies are inscribed in the male imaginary. This does not do justice to the complexity of de Beauvoir's thought, nor does it understand the specific historical context in which their feminist meaning emerges.

The Second Sex was written in France in the late 1940s; women had just been given the vote and were denied most educational and employment opportunities afforded men. For de Beauvoir it was necessary to oppose those who identified women as biologically or psychologically suited to mothering, for it was precisely these sorts of arguments that plagued women who were striving to participate in public/political life. De Beauvoir challenged the notion of 'anatomy as destiny' and the idea of the eternal 'feminine', and the notion of a distinctively female libidinal economy. When de Beauvoir (1974: 301) says that 'One is not born, but, rather becomes a woman' she stresses that woman is a historical-cultural product, rather than determined or a natural species. De Beauvoir believes that gender is socially and culturally acquired, part of one's present social identity, which could be otherwise. In the postwar period, when women were assumed to be psychologically different from men, and these differences justified their exclusion from the public realm, de Beauvoir's strategy of arguing that those differences are socially and culturally constructed is hardly a masculinist strategy, but in fact a progressive feminist one.

De Beauvoir's critique of mothering and maternity must be understood in the context where abortion and birth control were criminalized; maternity was not a choice but culturally and socially required. Given this situation, it was hardly liberating for women to celebrate maternity, for it is precisely the naturalization of mothering and the romanticism around mother and child relations that preserved traditional gender roles and the sexual division of labour and kept women out of the public domain. Similarly, drawing attention to women's experiences of pain, emotional stress and morbidity accompanying female puberty, pregnancy and menopause does not enslave women to her body, nor does it denigrate

the female body and celebrate the male body, for again that would be to treat these experiences as universal or essential, whereas they are not. De Beauvoir's strategy of 'making visible' painful experiences, most often ignored, counters the romanticism that traditionally accompanies experiences of femininity and maternity. This strategy is neither phallocentric or misogynist but is required to challenge patterns that inhibit women's agency, hence feminist.

Another target of de Beauvoir's poststructuralist critics is the significance she attributes to women's rational capacity, for, they argue, this reveals her commitment to the masculinized modernist value of rationality and perpetuates the effacement of the body (Kristeva, 1986: 194). Again, this sort of judgement is deductive and fails to understand the theoretical and historical context in which de Beauvoir was writing. Further, as I show in the next section, it fails to understand de Beauvoir's body – subject. It is precisely in their rational choices that postwar women challenged the idea of motherhood as a natural fact of 'feminine life', far from espousing 'the rationality of the nation state' as Kristeva (1986: 194) claimed, de Beauvoir provides a way of transgressing sociopolitical norms. As rational human beings, de Beauvoir insists, women intervene in their reproductive function; they choose to have abortions and choose to use birth control, and thus have assumed control over their bodies. Postwar French society tried to deny women's reproductive freedom by criminalizing abortion, by making birth control difficult to obtain and by romanticizing motherhood, nonetheless women still made these choices. In fact, for de Beauvoir, it is precisely in the act of choosing, given the parameters of the situation, that women acted as free and responsible subjects, subverting their status as Object/Other and challenging the expectations of the nation-state. In spite of the fact that maternity was 'enforced' in France at the time, de Beauvoir claims many women took the dangerous and illegal option to have abortions. In fact, she reports relatively high levels of abortion – about 1 million per year. De Beauvoir's feminist strategy was to draw attention to women's reflective capacities, their ability to choose not to fulfil social expectations. Further, by pointing to the horrors of pregnancy and labour, the difficulties of childcare, she hoped to disrupt the presumed naturalness and romanticism of the mother–child relationship.

It was not until the late 1960s that contraception was legally introduced into France and abortion decriminalized. It was only then that maternity could be reconceived of as an expression of 'feminine' desire, as freely chosen and not as contributing to women's oppression. It is very difficult to see how the celebration of pregnancy and the mother–child relationship (presumed to be women's natural role in life) could have been liberating in postwar France, when these activities were such a major impediment to women's participation in public life. Not surprisingly, the

French poststructuralists came on the scene when reproduction and sexual expression could be separated, when maternity was no longer legally and socially imposed, but could be freely chosen and in fact 'desired'. Commending motherhood as liberating and fulfilling for women presupposed legal reform and social and policy changes and was hardly conceivable in their absence.

As I have shown, for de Beauvoir, femininity is not biologically or psychologically determined – as a constructivist, her scathing attack on the maternal body cannot be universalized. On the contrary, it must be seen as a specific historical intervention to disrupt traditional feminine roles, not to disparage femininity per se, but only particular forms that facilitate the objectification of women in postwar France.

DE BEAUVOIR, THE DUPE OF SARTRE?

All too readily de Beauvoir's philosophy has been dismissed as phallocentric or masculinized because she employs universal philosophic categories derived from Sartre. Both Cixous and Kristeva refuse to credit de Beauvoir with insight into women's condition, for her philosophic categories are deemed 'uninteresting' (see Kristeva, 1998) for she simply 'copies, reproduces Sartre' (Rodgers, 1998a: 70). Although de Beauvoir uses Sartrean categories, the way she employs these categories calls for a rethinking of this universal/humanist/masculine identity and the Sartrean label.[6]

De Beauvoir uses Sartre' s ontological categories of the 'for-itself' and 'in-itself' – the former referring to the human capacity of transcendence, the realm of consciousness or free will; the latter designating the realm of immanence, the body, the world. De Beauvoir decentres the rational conscious subject by recognizing it is of and situated in the world, a comingling of the 'in-itself' and 'for-itself' – a body subject. There is some synthesis of the 'for-itself' and 'in-itself', which for Sartre is not possible.

Sartrean freedom is understood as a consciousness fleeing determination, as being dragged down by the body or the situation – the realm of the 'in-itself'. For de Beauvoir liberty emerges from within the situation and is oriented towards others and the world. Sartre's strict duality between ontological and political freedom is countered by de Beauvoir's recognition that freedom is always of the world. By recognizing that sedimented patterns of relations within the situation/field affect one's ontological freedom, de Beauvoir begins to contest Sartre's understanding of ontological freedom of choice as constitutive of the situation, thereby avoiding its rationalist and subjectivist implications.[7]

The conventional poststructuralist interpretation of de Beauvoir as a Sartrean denies the complexity of her thinking on freedom and the

subject. For de Beauvoir, 'the existent is a body . . . that confronts other bodies' (de Beauvoir, 1974: 67), that is striving to engage with others and the world, it is an embodied subject in process. Further, since the situation provides the material possibilities of its transformation – it is a material relational body subject. Hardly the transparent, self-identical source of human history that the poststructuralists attribute to humanism. Nor is it the disembodied, wilful consciousness, the stereotypical male subject, that one finds in *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 1978).

Although de Beauvoir uses Sartre's general ontological categories to refer to human activity, she does so transgressively. Further, de Beauvoir departs from Sartre's universalizing/normalizing tendencies and serves to historicize and particularize the subject. Far from neutralizing differences between men and women, or between women, de Beauvoir draws attention to the complexity of women's situations. There are no universal pronouncements about women, for example all French women are denied their reproductive freedom. Rather de Beauvoir makes contextually nuanced statements; recognizing how women are variously affected by the criminalization of abortion. Although abortion was illegal in France in the late 1940s, de Beauvoir notes that this did not stop wealthy French women from seeking the services of Swiss clinics. Working-class women's reproductive freedom was far more limited than their middle-class counterparts, since they lacked the mobility, resources and information necessary to take advantage of existing contraception and abortion practices.

De Beauvoir challenges Sartre's strict dichotomy of ontological and political freedom, for women are not free irrespective of circumstance, rather the possibilities of freedom are delimited by their situation. In that women are not subjects but constituted as objects, they are circumscribed by relations and social structures that offer them possibilities for realizing themselves, which they do not consciously chose. De Beauvoir qualifies Sartre's free chooser, but recognizes some degree of choice is always possible within one's situation: some women are complicit with their object-status, while others struggle to transcend the 'compulsions of the situation' (de Beauvoir, 1974: xxxiv).

De Beauvoir is attuned to variations in and the complexity of power relations within the social world. Women are never simply victims of patriarchal power. Nor do they individually constitute their situation as Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* implies. Although 'Otherness' defines their condition, it is variously experienced given their differences in class, race and culture. De Beauvoir lauds the economic independence of a floorsweeper and acknowledges the emotional dependence afflicting middle-class housewives who are financially cared for. Unlike her opponents, who tend to see the world in terms of sex/gender and submit all other relations of power to this primary binary, de Beauvoir recognizes

different constituencies of women, who have very different experiences of work, childcare and sexuality. To malign her as an abstract universalist is to disregard her attention to women's differing historical situations.

For de Beauvoir, this 'Otherness' functions to oppress women and excludes feminine agency, but no historical situation, however restrictive, prescribes or eliminates freedom or their ontological aspirations altogether. Through persistent effort and commitment, individually and collectively women can transform their situation. De Beauvoir is not a voluntarist, believing in the ability of the human will to triumph over circumstances, for freedom arises within a situation. Further, she departs from the logic of *Being and Nothingness*, where the meaning of the situation is constituted by individual choice. She says historical materialism is indispensable to understand the material possibilities – the concrete form of one's projects. Hence women who live in a harem are more restricted than are most French working-class women. Since women are isolated in private households, have no common history or collective struggles, the prospects of political mobilization are more limited than for black men or Jews, for example, who have a collective identity (de Beauvoir, 1974: xxii). De Beauvoir identifies the importance of symbolic/representational issues; as women struggle to become public figures, historical actors and writers, this will gradually erode how women are positioned and live as 'Other' (de Beauvoir, 1974: 296). Her theory of agency is fruitful, for it steers a course between voluntarism and determinism, recognizing historical/material and psychological limitations on women's freedom without denying women's liberty.

As I have shown, de Beauvoir has been used and abused by her French poststructuralist critics, she is neither culpable of abstract universalism and phallocentrism, nor is she a dupe of Sartre. In fact, her philosophy is able to accommodate both psychological and material registers of women's reality. It is a corrective to those who believe the psychosocial sphere is a determinant of female subjecthood and those who see women primarily determined by capitalist social relations. Her philosophy is less disabled by restrictive theory of the feminine subject, which sees 'feminine' agency in terms of sexuality, or those who deny the specificity of sexuality. De Beauvoir does not see the psyche simply as an effect of the outside social world, but nor is the psychic the primary site for determining subjectivity. With increasing egalitarian relations in the socioeconomic world, more opportunities for women to actively participate in their political future, phallocentrism will likely be dislodged. De Beauvoir recognizes the complexity of and the structured nature of the forces that militate against transforming women's situation and the need for collective political struggles to ensure that women become mutually respected agents.

NOTES

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1. The notable exceptions are Ruth Evans (1998), *Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex,* and Toril Moi (1994), *Simone de Beauvoir – The Making of an Intellectual Woman*. The former is an array of appreciative interdisciplinary articles on *The Second Sex*, representing it as an untimely text that continues to 'haunt' feminism (Evans, 1998: 23). While *The Second Sex* may appear to be out of date, written in 1949, and offering a modernist narrative of women's liberation, Evans writes, it is postmodern and timely 'in the sense it continually opens up to a series of problems present to modernity: identity, history gender and representation' (Evans, 1998: 23), that preoccupy feminism today. The various essays in this collection echo these sentiments, seeing *The Second Sex* as both fruitful and timely. Moi's book explores both the historical context of de Beauvoir's work and her complex and often contradictory subject positions as a middle-class woman and a French feminist philosopher. Both of these books are important to acknowledging the hostile reception of *The Second Sex* when it was first published and during the French feminist struggles in the 1970s and 1980s. In particular, Catherine Rodger's article in the Evans collection, 'The Influence of The Second Sex on the French Feminist scene', corrects the picture that Anglo-Americans have of the text as a 'theoretical dinosaur' (Rodgers, 1998a: 59). By interviewing feminists closer to de Beauvoir's egalitarian sentiments and decentring the significance of the French differentialist feminists, it provides a more balanced representation of the French feminist scene. However, neither of these works on de Beauvoir are concerned with the theoretical usefulness of de Beauvoir's philosophical problematic, or the relevance of *The Second Sex*, a shortcoming related to their postmodern attitude towards texts and their disciplinary predisposition as literary and cultural critics. As a social and political theorist, I believe de Beauvoir's ideas can be used for contemporary feminist purposes, although I do not effect a recuperation of them here; nonetheless this article is informed by that larger project.
2. Two exceptions are Linda Zerilli and Judith Butler. The former cleverly employs a postmodern textual strategy to recuperate de Beauvoir from her postmodern and poststructuralist critics who assume de Beauvoir denigrates maternity, childrearing and female sexuality as 'alienating and reactionary activities' (Zerilli, 1992: 114). Zerilli argues that in disparaging the maternal de Beauvoir does not rearticulate the subject of modernity, for 'it is a sophisticated and under appreciated feminist discursive strategy of defamiliarization' (Zerilli, 1992: 112). 'In Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*', Judith Butler has retrieved de Beauvoir's theory of the body subject to correct poststructuralist inadequacies. De Beauvoir's account of becoming a gender, she argues, is fruitful for it is able to reconcile the inadequate opposition of gender as free choice volitional project and gender as passively received cultural construction (Butler, 1986: 37). However, Butler's use of de Beauvoir is eclectic, citing de Beauvoir to support her own culturist interpretation of the body, and in doing so, misinterprets the meaning of de Beauvoir's statements and does injustice to the theoretical position of de Beauvoir.
3. Very recently in Paris (19–23 January 1999) a conference was held in

commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the publication of *The Second Sex*, bringing together a wealth of contemporary work on de Beauvoir, from philosophers, sociologists and literary critics from 36 different countries. In discussions over the contemporary reception of de Beauvoir, Christine Delphy expressed her concern that Anglo-American and Australian versions of French feminism had marginalized de Beauvoir's activity in the French feminist movement in the 1970s and this was regrettable.

4. Recently, Luce Irigaray, in *je, tu, nous*, has written how she could have, or rather should have, worked with de Beauvoir, had de Beauvoir not remained distant and threatened by her psychoanalytic position. Irigaray recalls her personal disappointment with de Beauvoir's failure to respond to her autographed copy of *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Irigaray, 1985a) and her lack of sympathy with her expulsion from L'Ecole Freudienne. Irigaray seems to be conveniently disregarding her own dismissal or veiled hostility towards de Beauvoir's ideas, which would have made collaboration hardly conceivable. De Beauvoir did collaborate with feminists who shared her historical and political theoretical orientation.
5. See Toril Moi's (1985) *Sexual/Textual Politics*.
6. I have developed de Beauvoir's transgressive use of Sartre's philosophic categories more systematically in 'Transcending Sartrean Freedom and Disembodied Subjects: The Second Sex's Contemporary Contribution to Feminist Debates around Agency' (delivered at the 50th Anniversary of *The Second Sex* Conference, Paris, January 1999).
7. Elsewhere I have addressed the general philosophical problems raised by contemporary Anglo-American poststructural feminists who see de Beauvoir simply as a Sartrean embracing an autonomous, sovereign, stereotypical masculine subject of modernity as the goal for liberated women. With few exceptions, most of these critics have produced parodied versions of *The Second Sex*.

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