

Cinquantenaire du *Deuxième Sexe*, Paris, 19–23 January 1999

In celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Second Sex*, feminists from all continents gathered in Paris in January to hear a selection of historical, political and philosophical papers and testimonials to the continuing influence and relevance of Simone de Beauvoir's *magnum opus*. The large number of scheduled speakers (well over a hundred) ensured a diversity of intellectual and national perspectives, grouped in thematic panels. The only drawback to such comprehensive and generous time-abling was that non-plenary speakers were given just ten minutes each to speak, hardly time to develop an argument, thus whetting, rather than satisfying, intellectual appetites.

Oddly enough, given de Beauvoir's interdisciplinarity and immense international reputation, she is not, it would appear, particularly appreciated in her home country. One goal of the conference, according to organizers Christine Delphy and Sylvie Chaperon, was a call for greater domestic recognition of de Beauvoir as a French intellectual. At the same time, the aim was to show the world that there is feminism in France other than that which has become known worldwide as 'French feminism', *la pensée de la différence* associated with Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous. As Claire Moses argued in the closing plenary, 'French feminism' is an American colonization of certain French schools which were presented in the 1980s as French feminism *tout court*. This American–French feminism has become disseminated as a theory without intellectual and social history, detached from any social and political practice.

It is part and parcel of this historical forgetfulness that the *radicalism* of *The Second Sex* is still often overlooked. Françoise d'Eaubonne pointed out that de Beauvoir's demand for access to contraception and abortion, as well as work and economic independence, hardly chimed with the conservative atmosphere in France in the late 1940s, where one was either Catholic or communist, both sides promoting a family politics aimed at increased birth rates. The idealization of the family, and in particular the mother, was the cultural context into which de Beauvoir stormed, aiming to crush the mythology of motherhood in a chapter introduced with a fifteen-page speech in defence of free abortion. The idea that women could have a sexuality beyond reproduction was utterly provocative: 'Now I know everything about your boss's vagina', wrote François Mauriac in *Le Figaro*, addressing the authors from *Les Temps modernes*, graphically indicating the derision and dismissal that de Beauvoir was to encounter (if only Mauriac had written anything half so important and interesting...).

The Second Sex has been largely responsible for the emergence of the issues of gender and/or sexual difference as *philosophical* questions. Of course, no one would be so indiscreet as Mauriac these days, but the continued tendency of mainstream philosophy to particularize discussions of gender as a 'women's issue' perhaps betrays the same fear. It is time, then, for non-feminist philosophers to read de Beauvoir too; fifty years is a long time, but it is not too late for them to catch up.

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