SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR AND THE NEW FRENCH FEMINISMS

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Dans cet article, l'auteur étudie en profondeur la diversité de l'idéologie féministe contemporaine et la perspective de ce courant en France. Elle situe l'oeuvre de Simone de Beauvoir – auteur du Deuxième Sexe *(1949), ouvrage pionnier en la matière, – dans le contexte des nouveaux féminismes français. On oppose les croyances des "réformistes" de l'école beauvoirienne à celles du groupe "politique et psychanalyse" plus radical, dont font partie Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig et Annie Leclerc. Le pragmatisme et l'activisme marxistes de S. de Beauvoir contrastent fortement avec le travail théorique sur le discours de celles qui prônent la différence.*

(Somer Brodribb's review of *New French Feminisms*, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, which appears in the 'Book Review' section of this issue, provides a valuable complement to Irène Pagès' article).

As Isabelle de Courtivron and Elaine Marks pointed out in their excellent anthology *New French Feminisms*,[1] there is no such thing as a homogeneous liberation movement in France. Instead there are various tendencies which can be grouped under the name "new feminisms." Roughly their two opposite poles are represented by the followers of de Beauvoir, on the one hand, whom their opponents scornfully call "reformists" and, on the other, by the supporters of *la différence* and the group called "politique et psychanalyse,"[2] whose revolutionary views are shared by such diverse writers as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, Claudine Herrmann, Catherine Clément, Annie Leclerc, and many others. Whereas de Beauvoirians call for equal rights for women in the existing patriarchal order with, of course, the purpose of transforming it, the advocates of *la différence* call for more radical measures: having reached the conclusion that "women is absent," that "only man has been represented," and that "the projection of male libidinal economy in all patriarchal systems – language, capitalism, socialism, monotheism – has been total," they advocate the dismantling of phallocentric order.[3]

Contemporary French thought presents a variety of theories dealing mostly with *le discours*. These are more or less linked with Lacanian psychoanalysis, with Derridean *déconstructionisme*, or with Lyotard's theory of "libidinal economy." They derive from structuralist and semiological trends (Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Barthes) which contributed to the systematic questioning of the fundamental "structures" that make up our cultures and, in particular, the questioning of what anthropologists call "the symbolic order," of which language is a part. They incidentally expose the fact that the "symbolic order" represents exclusively the *Law of the Father*, a patriarchal ideology.

One can see the benefit contemporary feminists could draw from such theories. Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and others who have learned the strategies of "deconstructionism" from Lacan or Derrida himself, have taken the opportunity to use precisely such theoretical discourse in order to discredit the *Law of the Father* and the symbolic order it generates. "Let the priests tremble, we are going to show them our *sexts*!", threatens Hélène Cixous. By the same token, they strive to define a specifically feminine order. They stress the importance of rediscovering, rehabilitating, or inventing a language particular to "feminity"[5] free of all phallocentric patterns. They also are the most theoretical writers among the feminists. Each, in her own style, attacks phallocentrism at its very roots, the conceptual, the philosophical, the psychoanalytical. From Lacan to Plato, they "deconstruct" the logos of Humanism, sever psychoanalysis from its Freudian roots, "displace" the normative, "demystify" masculine models of moral and aesthetic heritage.

De Beauvoir, on the other hand, does not believe in a total rejection of the current order just for practical reasons: as long as men retain economic power, they will be the makers of order and all systems

Simone de Beauvoir
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derived from it, language included. In her eyes there is no such thing as "feminine writing" or "feminine language," no more than there is a feminine essence. Even if women were to forge their own language – which is hardly conceivable – it would not survive better than a dialect, as long as it would represent the language of an economic minority. Liberation, says de Beauvoir, can only occur when *women gain economic parity with men*, the only way to obliterate the subject/object, possessor/possessed pattern which has determined woman's oppression. In de Beauvoir's opinion it would be enough that women steal men's tools and use them in their best interests to achieve their liberation.[6] In this, of course, de Beauvoir radically opposes the new feminists who refuse to see integration of women in phallocentric systems as "liberation." In *All Said and Done* (1972), she had written "to refuse masculine models is nonsense." A few years later, she conceded:

> . . . *the recent evolution of feminism makes us understand that, in this world, ours is a* particular situation (une situation singulière) *and that far from denying such* particularity (singularité) *we should lay claim to it* (la revendiquer). *But does that mean that in order to write, we should invent a language of our own? Some of us think so. I don't. One cannot artificially create a language. I do know that current language is full of traps for us women. And although it pretends to be universal, it is marked by men who invent it. It reflects their values, their pretenses, their prejudices.* One must use it with caution.[7]

Her language is a rational language which will never allow itself to transgress logic or wallow in "the pulsional deliverance of the self" advocated by Cixous, for example. But whereas de Beauvoir uses current language as an unequivocal system referring to reality, the new generation of feminists, used to the structuralist approach, question the validity of language as a guaranteed referential tool, play with it, handle puns, and look for the unconscious in these puns. Moreover they are accustomed to re-evaluate "sign" in terms of its relationship to "signifier" and "signified" in all systems and economies (libidinal among others). As psychoanalysts (Luce Irigaray is a dissident Lacanian) or linguists (Kristeva is the author of the prestigious *sémiotiké*) they are well aware of the primordial role of the subconscious in the shaping of the symbolic.

The psychoanalytic perspective is somewhat lacking in de Beauvoir's writings. Nevertheless, it is thanks to her that feminism has evolved the way it has in France. The new trends in feminism we are talking about are much indebted to her ideas, whether or not they diverge from them. *The Second Sex* (1949) still represents the only exhaustive fundamental analysis of the subject. We owe to it the idea, central to all feminist protests, that woman's value is universally based on her desirability and on fluctuating demand in the law of exchange upon which our society has set its foundations. De Beauvoir – who was the first to philosophically demonstrate its very mechanisms – shows that oppression of woman stems from her being objectified by man and that in the unavoidable interaction of subject/object, dominating/dominated which regulates social interplay, woman represents the object, the dominated, "the other." Objectification of woman leads to society's appropriation of her work and of her body and its reproductive functions. It leads to the appropriation of her psyche as well.

De Beauvoir has denounced the relationship existing between the capitalistic order and the organization of human relationships around the patriarchal law which establishes man as sovereign, as the possessor, and woman as a commodity bought, exchanged, disposed of: we are ever reminded of such an order by the wedding rites, when the daughter is "given away" by her father to a husband; when she is expected to "give" children (preferably male) to her new protector and provider; when she is supposed to "give birth" (and not take or keep that birth for herself) in a system where she cannot possess because she is being possessed.

On such a point, Luce Irigaray does, like de Beauvoir, unravel the varied consequences of phallocentric order as it affects women's lives, but she does so from a psychoanalytical perspective, beyond the Marxist viewpoint:

> *Woman is traditionally use-value for man, exchange-value among men. Merchandise, then . . . Women are marked phallically by their fathers, husbands, procurers.* This stamp(ing) determines their value in sexual commerce. *Woman is never anything more than the scene of more or less rival exchange between two men, even when they are competing for* the possession of mother earth. (Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un *(This Sex Which is Not One). Minuit, 1977. Trans. de Courtivron and Marks, N.F.F., p. 105).*

Appropriation of woman means also occultation of woman. De Beauvoir has, before the new feminists, pointed out that woman's sexuality has been exclusively explained from the male's point of view. She has also shown how the clitoris in woman's sexual pleasure has been obscured in favour of that of the vagina, which is associated with the reproductive function of the womb. In the language of the new feminists, the womb is said to be appropriated and glorified, the clitoris, as the "signifier of an autonomous subject" free of any reproductive function and of dependance on man, is kept secret, untold: a systematic but subtle symbolic clitoridectomy. Having searched beyond philosophy, into psychoanalysis, for the causes of woman's oppression, Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva found that woman "is outside the symbolic" – that is, "does not exist," because she lacks phallus (the "transcendental signifier"),[8] and therefore "does not enjoy what orders masculinity", the castration complex. In Cixous' words, woman supposedly "lacks lack" and such "lack of lack" would be translated as lack of desire: ("jouissance"), or at least, the inability to express it. Hence the obliteration of woman's libidinal economy in patriarchal order. "Outside the symbolic" also means "outside language which is the place of the Law of the Father."[9]

De Beauvoir dismisses theoretical discourse as being impractical, since it divorces facts from expression and since it is, in her Marxist view, a purely élitist occupation from which the masses are excluded. That is why she now finds *The Second Sex* too theoretical and feels closer to North American feminists for being more pragmatic than the French. That is also why her writing has lately taken an activist turn. The review *Nouvelles questions féministes* she directs deals mostly with militant issues on women's rights such as protests against rape, economic or judicial inequities, discriminating practices, and action for free abortion.

De Beauvoir, who still insists that "feminity" is the result of conditioning and not of essence, has to some extent tended to minimize the specificity of female biology and its role in woman's life. And although she concedes now that biology is by no means a negligible factor in the feminine condition, she still does not see it as being determinant. In this, she opposes the advocates of *la différence* and thus fails to take into account the fact that woman's specific "libidinal economy" of biological nature makes her desire, imagine and create differently from man. Above all, de Beauvoir is concerned that the concept of *différence* constitutes a trap, a double-edged representation geared to justify man as the parameter, woman as the non-essential counter-part, and therefore, geared to justify woman's state of oppression.

To sum up, de Beauvoir thinks within the existing symbolic order, whereas the new French feminists, steeped in the climate of *déconstruction* which followed the May '68 crisis, have no difficulty in envisioning a radical reconstruction of the social order. Such reconstruction would start with the symbolic, particularly with language.

Indeed, the question of language has become central to feminist debates, since language reflects the oppressive phallocentric order, glorifies it, reinforces it, based as it is on a conventionally binary division of the world into masculine and feminine, active and passive, etc. Words stab feminity in the back, through a continuous process of inferiorisation, objectification, or exclusion. The French language could not represent a better example of such a process, with its "mute e" intended to designate the feminine, or with its gender structure which calls for the masculine to supersede the feminine. Since everything in the end is filtered through language, and since language is phallocentric, woman, in the eyes of the new feminists, should reject language as the instrument of her colonization. Indeed, if woman wants to exist as a sovereign, as *sujet à part entière* and not as an object, she must invent a discourse of

her own, signs of her own which render her own experience, her own perceptions, her imaginary world, her subconscious, her "true" sexuality. In a word, she must create her own symbolic order.

How, then, are we to define this woman yet to be born and her "gynesian" discourse?[10] Perhaps both are never to be defined except for their "open, non-linear, unfinished, fluid, exploded, fragmented qualities," or their "unheard of fantasms (*fantasmes inouis*), their "delirious drifting flux (*délire, dérive*), their unreasonable flow made to unsettle the reasoning phallocentric.[11]

It has always been true that, within the *male symbolic order*, women demonstrate lack of logic and of assertiveness, for their language reflects their insecurity and their dependance. "Woman never speaks the same" says Luce Irigaray, "what she emits is fluent, fluctuating, swindling (*flouant*) and no one listens to her, *'sinon à y perdre le sens (du) propre'* 'lest one lose the proper meaning of things and sense of what is proper'."[12] The language theorists look for is the one women would use within a symbolic domain of their own, where they would perceive themselves as subjects. Such a language would defiantly define itself through non-linearity and non-binarity.

"Women have been turned away from their bodies" writes Cixous, "so let them win their bodies back," and "discover the natural rhythm of their pulsations," open the gate to "the untold." Although in France the production of women's writings has considerably increased in the last ten years, only a few women writers have answered Cixous' call *à la lettre*, or like Wittig, have experimented with *"l'écriture du corps"* in defiance of order. The "un-doing," "unleashing" (*dé-lire, dé-rive*) of words and language, does not appeal to Simone de Beauvoir: indeed, de Beauvoir dismisses this kind of writing as a "narcissistic exercise and a dangerous one, since it would, in her opinion, reintegrate woman in the ghetto of the body in which she has been imprisoned for so long, whereas Cixous or Irigaray believe that the body, being the prime signifier of libidinal economy, is where to start for a *"prise de parole"* as well as for a *"prise de pouvoir."*

Today, however, de Beauvoirians and theorists seem to converge towards the same goals of practicality and efficiency. Governmental action in France lately has forced "politique et psychanalyse" supporters to enter the arena of politics and its patriarchal process – although they had claimed that they would reject it totally. There are times when theories and principles must yield to practical emergencies. And Simone de Beauvoir could not agree more.

[1](Shocken, New York: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981). Further references to *New French Feminisms* will appear as *NFF*.
[2]Formerly called "Psychanalyse et Politique", from the group of academics which formed it, the movement was born in the aftermath of the May '68 crisis.
[3]Introduction to *NFF*, p. xii.
[4]"Sorties," in *La jeune née* (Union Générale d'éditions, 1975), p. 125.
[5]I shall use the term "feminity" instead of "femininity" for obvious reasons. The word is now accepted as synonymous of "all that pertains to *being a woman*" (philosophically speaking), whereas "femininity" tends to stress feminine characteristics as defined within phallocentric order.
[6]Gontier Fernande and Claude Francis, "Entretiens avec Claude Francis," in *Les Ecrits de Simone de Beauvoir* (Gallimard, 1979), p. 560 and seq.
[7]*Les Ecrits de Simone de Beauvoir*, "préface au livre d'Anne Ophir 'Regards féminins'", p. 577 and seq. Translation and italicization are the author's.
[8]See Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation," *Signs* (Vol. 7, No. 1, 1981), p. 46.
[9]Woman is also absent as maker of meaning. In Lacanian terms, "women don't know what they are saying, that's the only difference between them and me" (quoted by Luce Irigaray in *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*).
[10]Hélène Cixous, *La jeune née* ("the new born"), (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1975).
[11]M. Le Clézio quoting C. Marward in *BREFF (Bullétin des études féminists francophones)*, (Fall 1980); and Irigaray, "La mecanique des fluides," *L'Arc*, 58 (1974), p. 52.
[12]"Laugh of Medusa", *Signs* (Summer 1976).

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