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Margaret A. Simons and Marybeth Timmerman, eds., *Simone de Beauvoir. Political Writings*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2012. 384 pp. \$42.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 0252036948.

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Simone de Beauvoir. Political Writings is the latest volume in the University of Illinois Press's monumental Beauvoir Series, a seven-volume collaborative book project, edited by Margaret A. Simons and Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir. The aim of the series is to make available scholarly English translations of Beauvoir's writings. Most of the texts presented have previously been difficult to access; some because they were not translated into English, others because they were published in newspapers and editions that are now out of circulation. Some have not been published before. Simons and Le Bon have organized Beauvoir's writings thematically, with philosophical, literary, political and feminist texts collected in each volume (the latter is not published yet). Additionally, the Beauvoir Series includes two volumes of Beauvoir's Diary (a third is to be published). These volumes underlay her autobiographical writings, and also interestingly prefigure many ideas more fully developed in Beauvoir's later works.

The Beauvoir Series covers more than fifty years of writings, demonstrating her theoretical development and growing commitment to ethical and political questions of her time. At the same time, an impressive consistency with regard to her basic philosophical ideas and values is displayed. In addition to being mandatory reading for all Beauvoir scholars, the analyses carried out are unique and provocative, also in context with our contemporary issues. Thus, all who are interested in philosophy, literature, politics and feminism will gain from studying the texts presented in the Beauvoir Series.

Political Writings offers a unique collection of Beauvoir's essays spanning from 1945 to 1985. Together they illuminate Beauvoir's leftist position and her engagement with issues of her own time. Separately, each text addresses and analyzes various forms of oppression, often by way of attacking the arguments used by the oppressors to legitimize their privileged situation, and by voicing the interests of the oppressed.

Prominent Beauvoir scholars have written introductions for each essay, or groups of essays, where they situate Beauvoir and her topics in a historical and cultural context. Since Beauvoir targets events in her own time, and rarely provides the reader with sufficient background information, these introductions are indeed helpful. However, several of the introductions understate the relevance these essays bear today, at the risk that readers could falsely assume that they address obsolete episodes of only historical interest. Beauvoir addresses totalitarianism and consumerism, class privilege, sexual freedom, right-wing ideology, torture, resistance under oppression, workers' conditions, the conflict between Israel and Palestine, as well as the lack of care for elderly—all issues that unfortunately are still highly relevant. The actuality and relevance of *Political Writings* deserves to be voiced far more distinctly.

In her autobiography, *Force of Circumstances*, Beauvoir questions her own privileged position that enabled her to divorce herself from ordinary life, and to carry out an abstract moral philosophy. "Why," she asked herself, "did I write *concrete liberty* instead of *bread*?"[1] The chapter entitled "Political Reporting from Spain, Portugal and the United States" should ease Beauvoir's self-blame, as these early

texts directly address the concrete realities of people lacking bread and other necessities. From Madrid, she discloses the contradictions of a capitalist country ruled by a right-wing dictatorship: excess luxury of food for the few, while the workers could not afford eggs, milk, meat, vegetables or fruit. Despite their deprivation, she notes, the people have not lost their spirits; “Children play, young girls laugh, men talk amongst themselves in cheerful voices. Poverty has not made them into resigned livestock: they remain living men, men who rebel and hope” (p. 20).

In Portugal, the differences between rich and poor are even more extreme. Here, Beauvoir reports on the bad health resulting from a lack of vitamins, where freezing children “wander the streets half naked” (p. 24) in the harsh winter, with young girls “rooting through the garbage cans of Porto” (p. 25). This “illustrates the division of the Portuguese people into two sorts of men; those who eat and are considered as men, and those who do not eat and are livestock” (p. 23). This misery, she explicitly points out, is not caused by nature, but by man: “Those who eat do not concern themselves with changing the fate of those who do not eat” (p. 26). Like Rosa Luxemburg in earlier times, Beauvoir draws attention to how the rich feared the poor “for they know very well that their fortune is the fruit of a shameful exploitation” (p. 26).

As for the report from the United States, which is further developed in her book *America Day by Day* [2], Beauvoir punctures one of most fundamental cultural myths of “The Legend Land”; that even “the little man” can become rich. This myth, she emphasizes, is pacifying the poorer citizen into the belief that their freedom is unlimited, while they individually bear all fault for their failures. This myth, prevalent also today, masks social structures, prevents collective actions and represents a “mystification.” Mystification is a topic developed in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* [3], and prefigures elements of the methods she applies in *The Second Sex*. [4] Together, these three reports, examples of “committed” literature (p. 174), demonstrate her use of writing as a means of drawing the world’s attention to social injustices. [5]

An important question posed by Beauvoir’s ethical and political writings is the conditions and limits of freedom, a main topic of the essay “Must We Burn de Sade?” Although Beauvoir clearly admires Marquis de Sade’s authenticity when he advocates an eroticism that is totally irreconcilable with conventions, and with “his social existence,” she rejects, as Simons writes, de Sade’s “claim of universality for his libertine ethics” (p. 2). In doing so, Beauvoir also refutes a common objection to existentialism; that it permits any acts as long as the act is freely chosen. According to Beauvoir, the authenticity of an act is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for it to be ethical. In addition to be freely chosen, any act must also respect one’s own as well as the freedom of others, in order to be ethical. Due to social inequality, few people participating in de Sade’s sexual universe had the privilege of freely choosing their involvement, and the performance of violent sexual acts did not respect the freedom of others. Consequently, the relationships formed between the masochists and the sadists are frequently inauthentic.

The inconsistencies in the attempt to universalize privileges are also the topic in “Right-Wing Thought Today.” Here, Beauvoir confronts the thoughts of those she considered to be right-wing intellectuals, such as Drieu La Rochelle, Henry Montherlant, Raymond Aron, Jules Monnerot, Thierry Maulnier, Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, James Burnham, Karl Jaspers, Max Scheler, as well as Nietzsche and Machiavelli. Beauvoir’s lengthy essay features the intensity and hastiness typical of many of her writings, while containing numerous quotations that are commented on, linked together, and analyzed. The text is complex and compact; hence the introduction written by Sonia Kruks is helpful. Kruks nevertheless shows little enthusiasm for this essay, although this reader finds it to be among one the most fascinating in the entire volume. Kruks maintains that, because it was written during the Cold War period, it is “marked by a striking Manichaeism; either one is with the Communists, or one is against them” (p. 109). Beauvoir turns her back, in Kruks’ view, on her own previous insistence on ambiguity, and instead argues like “the serious man” that she rejects in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (p. 109).

Although Kruks admits that some elements of the essay retain an enduring relevance, she nevertheless suggests that “‘Right-Wing Thought Today’ is now mainly of historical interest. Its primary significance is as a document that reveals Beauvoir’s thinking in the context of the Cold War, a political conjuncture that has long passed” (pp. 110-111). This interpretation is too narrow in my opinion. In our contemporary world, where right-wing thought is widespread and the extreme right-wing ideology is again gaining ground, Beauvoir’s analysis provides the reader with important insights regarding right-wing thought. This essay is therefore of great interest *both* for the historians who wish to explore its situated nature and the ethical and political philosophers who should be encouraged to scrutinize the arguments and their relevance today.

Although Beauvoir elsewhere advocates ambiguity, and rejects dogmatism and absolutism, it should not be considered a flaw or an inconsistency when she then takes a clear stand in this text. Beauvoir’s anti-dogmatic position does not require that she also refrain from taking a political position, nor does her defense of ambiguity require her to become a relativist. The alternative to refusing to be “a serious man” is not to become what she terms a “sub-man” or a “nihilist.”[6] Rather, the alternative is to speak up against injustice, and to defend the freedom of self and others. As a matter of fact, certain ideological and political positions, as well as regimes and individuals, aim to deprive groups of people their freedom, while others work to obtain freedom for all.

It is the faulty arguments, presented by the right-wing “intellectuals,” whose aim is to confine the freedom and possibilities of the “masses” that Beauvoir is addressing in this essay. Not because she is dogmatically blinded by communist ideology, but while she is carrying out the task of presenting the contemporary right-wing ideology and attitudes of the time for the readers of *Les temps Modernes*, these thoughts and attitude appear to her as completely inconsistent. She is above all targeting the anthropology of the right-wing—a view that holds the “masses” in contempt, depicting them as animalistic, while granting privilege to themselves. Beauvoir is not defending communism as a political system in this essay, but as a view on humankind where *everyone* is ascribed equal humanity, dignity, freedom and possibilities.

Revealing how the ruling class attempts to mask their privilege is a main topic, not only in “Right-Wing Thought Today,” “Political Reporting from Spain, Portugal and the United States,” and “Must we Burn de Sade?” (as well as in *The Second Sex*), but also a core theme in her general political thinking. Demasking oppressive myths and false justifications of privilege is also the first step toward a liberation of the underprivileged. The analyses she carries out were clearly inspired by Marx and Engels’s *The German Ideology*, in which they famously pointed out that “each new class has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational universally valid ones” (quoted by Beauvoir, p. 119). But how, Beauvoir asks “is it indeed possible to provide a universal justification for specific advantageous claims?” (p. 119).

One way, she points out, is to appeal to nature. “Nature is on the right” and it is “used as an authority for those” who will defend inequality (p. 176). “By subordinating men to a hierarchal form and subjugating them to a pre-established order, the ideology of the right...denies individuals their autonomy and their ability to achieve immediate solidarities among themselves” (p. 177). “Inequalities are not unfair when they are givens; men’s fortune is not a crime if no one caused it,” she notes (p. 178). However, despite asserting—and praising—significant differences in human nature and the natural hierarchy between men, the elite still must impose an order based on power. This is one of the contradictions in the right-wing ideology and attitude. Other striking contradictions, as summed up by Kruks, are simultaneously “defending a brutal *real* politic and a spiritualist withdrawal on the other,” as well as the “celebration of the organic and harmonic nature of human society and the atomistic view of society with competitions” (p. 109).

These contradictions lead Beauvoir to conclude that there is no point in seriously engaging in argument with the thinkers of the Right; “after all they are not interested with arriving at the truth, but only with obscuring it” (p. 109). Consequently, they are not interested in methodically established facts, or scientifically demonstrated laws. Typically “they prefer the anecdote whispered from ear to ear,” because these stories “represent the experience of the privilege” and “they want no other warranty of its truth but the quality of the elect who are spreading it” (p. 146). In general, the right-wing do not trust speech, because it is common to all. “Authentic men communicate through the substance in which they are rooted all together,” she writes, and thereby also explains why “right-wing literature excels in describing such wordless harmonies and in singing the praises of such mute insights” (p. 149).

When only “the Elite” is granted true humanity, it also becomes mandatory for this group to differentiate itself from the masses: art, beauty, elegance, and good taste are only for the select few. As for literature, it “has a value insofar as it distinguishes writers and readers from the common herd” (p. 174). If the masses were not ugly, stupid, and debauched, the elite would not be special.

Bourgeois ethics are, according to Beauvoir, also founded on the existence of the disadvantaged. Permanent eradication—rather than minor, temporary relief—is not an option as it would deprive the privileged the opportunity to perform their self-righteous charity work. The same holds true for the bourgeois artists who drain creative energy from the poor and the filthy. Consequently, the poor and starving people must continue to exist. All in all, the “bourgeois ideology amounts to this truism: privilege belongs to the privileged” (p. 164).

It is not only the right wing who is criticized by Beauvoir. In “Solidarity with Israel. A Critical Support,” she openly voices her disagreement with the French Left as they vigorously condemn Israel and unreservedly favors the Palestinians. Beauvoir, who supports a two-state solution, bluntly suggests that underneath the Left’s negative attitude towards Israel, anti-Semitism was lurking: “what is called anti-Zionism is sometimes a euphemistic way of translating an anti-Semitism that one dares not admit” (p. 319). Moreover, the Left romanticizes the purity of a country that did not exist, while harshly criticizing the shortcomings of an actual state. They are obviously overlooking the fact that as soon as a Palestinian country “is incarnated, it will be in the grip of contradictions, ruptures and mistakes” (p. 320). With regard to the flaws of Israel, she points out that “if one is not *a priori* prejudiced against it, one must put pressure on it and try to struggle with all the means one might have against what one reproaches it for, but one must not reject the country as a whole” (p. 321).

In the short, but interesting “Preface to Treblinka,” Beauvoir attacks essentialism, and analyzes an extreme, oppressive situation’s impact on the possibility to act. She opens the preface with a question asked by many during the Eichmann trial: “Why did the Jews allow themselves to be led to the slaughter like sheep?” The question is quickly countered by referring to the Treblinka death camp, where a committee of resistance organized an armed revolt enabling approximately 300 prisoners to flee. Beauvoir argues that neither the existence of Jewish heroism, nor the *Judenraten* in Treblinka can be explained by referring to a particular Jewish nature or “Jewish soul,” but by the particular circumstances in which they found themselves. The situation in the death camp is almost incomprehensible for outsiders, but Beauvoir attempts to explain heroism, resignation and collaboration by applying Sartre’s concept of seriality. This concept is developed in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* in order to describe an individual’s relationship to social class, and to the capitalist system of production and consumption.[7] Beauvoir applies it in this essay to elucidate how “the SS divided the population into the pariahs and the privileged ones: only the first endured the raids, but the second category was again divided all the way to the final liquidation” (p. 307). The inmates’ situation forced them “to make enemies of each other and therefore enemies of themselves” (p. 306).

Susan Rubin Suleiman, who introduces “Preface to Treblinka,” has objections to comparing “the Jewish organizers of the Treblinka uprising to workers who join together to make collective demands of their

employers” (p. 298). According to Suleiman, “the comparison strikes one today as quite odd, an indication of Beauvoir’s leftist leaning and of the ongoing influence of Marxism in France during the 1960s more than anything else” (p. 298). For this reader, most odd is the fact that the enduring relevance of Sartre’s analysis and Beauvoir’s attempts to address one of ethics’ thorniest questions—i.e., moral agency under oppression—are not better advanced. Sartre’s theory is not confined only to the situation of the workers. It is also used to describe the oppression of women, slavery, and nation-building. Perhaps it could also be used to understand the situation of elderly—the last topic addressed in *Political Writings*.

“A Walk through the Land of Old Age,” which is a transcription of a film, offers a harsh critique of France’s state-run nursing homes. Because old people no longer are workers in a capitalist society, they are “thrown out” of the community (p. 342). They are “no longer integrated in society” (p. 342), and abandoned by their families. Their “lives have been stolen from them” (p. 342) and they are confined to a form of “care” that is the equivalent to repressive treatment, Beauvoir forcefully argues.

The foundation for the political engagement revealed in the latest volume of the Beauvoir Series can be traced back to the ethics of freedom that Beauvoir developed in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*—an ethics that clearly aims at concrete actions and engagement. One way of reading *Political Writings*, is as a collection of examples that illustrates how Beauvoir applies her own ethics to contemporary issues. Throughout the entire work, Beauvoir speaks out against injustice and oppression, while advocating freedom and equality. Fearlessly and consistently Beauvoir criticizes both right- and left-wing intellectuals, both her own government and foreign governments, as well as specific French capitalists, and the entire capitalist system. Where some might read this collection of Beauvoir’s essays as examples of outdated, left-wing radicalism, others will find *Political Writings* both theoretically interesting and politically empowering. Above all, this remarkable volume demonstrates how Simone de Beauvoir, through her writings, made compelling contributions to the ongoing struggle against ignorance, deception and injustice.

NOTES

[1] Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance* (Harmondsworth: Middlesex Penguin Books Ltd, 1965), p. 77.

[2] Simone de Beauvoir, *L’Amérique au jour le jour* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954); translated by Patrick Dudley, *America Day by Day* (London: Duckworth, 1952).

[3] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1976).

[4] Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

[5] “Committed” literature refers to literature with a particular political goal, and is often used when describing Beauvoir and Sartre’s writings. The term in French is *littérature engagée*.

[6] de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 45, 57.

[7] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (London: Verso, 1976).

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