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Lori Jo Marso, *Politics with Beauvoir: Freedom in the Encounter*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. vii + 253 pp. Notes, references, and index. \$95.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8223-6955-4; \$25.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-822-36970-7.

Review by Megan Burke, Sonoma State University.

Who were Beauvoir's enemies, allies, and friends? Who can we imagine them to be? What do we understand about freedom when we read Beauvoir through encounters with others or use Beauvoir's work as a lens to perceive encounters? These are the questions that take center stage in Lori Jo Marso's *Politics with Beauvoir: Freedom in the Encounter*, a gripping and novel reading of Simone de Beauvoir's politics of freedom and Beauvoirian feminism. Foregrounding the language of encounter, indeed showing us that "encounter" is a central political method for Beauvoir, Marso's work refuses an engagement with the old debates and polemics over Beauvoir's feminism and instead opens up an encounter that underscores her relevance to contemporary realities of oppression, struggle, and feminist visions of solidarity. The main claim of this book is that Beauvoir's politics are a politics of *freedom in the encounter*. A welcome contribution to Beauvoir scholarship and feminist political theory, Marso's work teaches us the significance of feminist friendship, the need for allies, and the way enemies and oppression are formed through a refusal of the in-between, the space in which ambiguity, situation, singularity, and difference are affirmed and felt.

The book is aptly organized into three parts—Enemies, Allies, and Friends—which I discuss at length below. The organizational motif underscores Beauvoir's relevance to and difference from modern political theory and, Marso claims, offers a new way to understand the structure of *The Second Sex*. Each section has two chapters that bring Beauvoir into conversation with a variety of topics including affect theory, film studies, pop culture, an array of thinkers including Richard Wright, Frantz Fanon, Hannah Arendt, Alison Bechdel, Sarah Ahmed, and Violette Leduc, and political issues like colonialism, racism, and misogyny. Before we learn how to read Beauvoir through these encounters, Marso lays the theoretical ground for the entire book. In Chapter 1, she advances a critical reading of Beauvoir's account of affect and freedom in *The Second Sex*. In a similar vein as Beauvoir scholars like Toril Moi and Bonnie Mann, who understand Beauvoir to be appealing to her readers to draw them into a politicized existence, Marso suggests the literary techniques and structure of *The Second Sex* are affective; they aim to mobilize allies and friends against enemies.[1] But, by reading *The Second Sex* in relation to Beauvoir's lesser-read essay "Right Wing Thought Today," Marso further suggests that Beauvoir's affective textual strategy is bolstered by a nuanced political account of the relation between affect, oppression, and freedom. Marso concludes the book with a happy ending, "not the happy ending of Disney

movies, romantic comedies, or Thai massages,” Marso humorously writes, but one that “calls upon us as political actors to embrace our (situated, limited, ambiguous, compromised) chance at collective freedom” (pp. 16).

Marso achieves a great deal in this book. Similar to the work of Sonia Kruks, Marso’s study gives us reason to see Beauvoir as a nuanced political theorist. [2] The way Marso stages encounters between *The Second Sex* and other works by Beauvoir that many readers will be less familiar with offers a new window into what Beauvoir scholars have known for decades, namely that Beauvoir’s thinking is much more than many have let it be. Furthermore, in advancing the framework of freedom in the encounter as one central and specific to Beauvoir, Marso offers a fresh consideration of the more recognized Beauvoirian notions of ambiguity and situation and underscores the way a concern with theorizing and pursuing freedom is a consistent theme in Beauvoir’s oeuvre. Lastly, Marso’s reading of Beauvoir’s account of freedom as a matter of affection is an important contribution to political theory, feminist theory, and Beauvoir scholarship. Indeed, by the end of the book, one gets the sense that we have not thought enough, if at all, about Beauvoir’s political theory of affect, a sense I take to be one of the most important contributions of the book.

In part one, “Enemies,” Marso highlights what our confrontations with enemies foreclose and what they demand us to grasp about freedom and suffering. Enemies, we learn from Marso, teach us to feel differently. In chapter two, Marso stages an encounter between Beauvoir and Arendt and their respective enemies, Robert Brasillach and Adolf Eichmann. For Marso, reading Beauvoir and Arendt together “sharpens our comprehension of the deep burdens of judgment” and underscores Beauvoir’s understanding of the way that subjective conditions of oppression and dehumanization foreclose political appeals to freedom (pp. 45). The problem with enemies is thus that they foreclose the encounter. This point leads Marso to a feminist rereading of Lars von Trier’s film, *Antichrist*, in chapter three. Considering the film through Beauvoir’s essay on the Marquis de Sade, Marso argues that it “makes us confront the deadening effects and affects of this world without promising another” (pp. 91). This Beauvoirian reading of *Antichrist* begs the feminist viewer to reconsider the interpretation of the film as dismissive of female sexuality and agency, suggesting instead that von Trier exposes the effects and affects of misogyny and thus forces us to feel the ordinary world as enemy. This exposure, when read in relation to Beauvoir, moves “us to want to feel our way...beyond patriarchy” (pp. 92).

What is the potential of embodying freedom in the face of enemies? How do we transform violence and oppression into freedom? What does solidarity across borders of gender and race look like? These are the questions that frame part two, “Allies,” in which Marso introduces two Beauvoirian allies, Frantz Fanon and Richard Wright. Given that *The Second Sex* neglects a critical discussion of race, this encounter with Fanon and Wright generates a Beauvoir who is an ally in colonial struggles and antiracism. Marso begins the discussion of allies in chapter four with a conversation between Beauvoir and Fanon, centering their similar understanding of the psycho-somatic experience of oppression and their different views on the relation between violence and redemption. The most important aspect of this chapter is Marso’s discussion of Beauvoir’s theory of violence, a theory that highlights the everyday, embodied operation of violence in intimate encounters, language, our bodies, muscles, and in everyday and distant processes. It is with Beauvoir, Marso suggests, that we understand that violence is not just exercised by the state and the military, but is also deeply intimate. It is this point that makes Beauvoir and Fanon allies—they both grasp how violence and oppression structure ordinary

encounters and tether our situations to enemies. As a result, they both suggest the need to move and to feel in new ways. Chapter five, “In Solidarity with Richard Wright,” takes up the question of how to realize such a movement. Framing Beauvoir and Wright as intellectual and political allies (as well as friends), Marso underscores a Beauvoirian politics of freedom that is plural, diverse, and focused on a solidarity that eschews identity politics without losing sight of the importance of embodied and material difference. Marso’s reading of Wright’s *12 Million Black Voices* is particularly satisfying, though she does not offer any extensive commentary on Beauvoir’s own address of racial oppression in the United States in *America Day by Day* (or the way Beauvoir explicitly accounts for friends, allies, and enemies in her encounters in and with America), an interesting choice given that it deepens Marso’s claim about the intellectual and political alliance between Wright and Beauvoir. Nevertheless, reading Wright and Beauvoir together, we learn that “[f]reedom entails siding with the oppressed and opening up the possibility of freedom for everyone” (pp. 140).

In part three, “Friends,” Marso considers the making of feminist worlds through friendship between women. In an unexpected but engaging use of the “Bechdel rule” as the interpretative frame for the final two chapters, Marso reads several films in relation to Beauvoir to show how “[f]ostering encounters between women,” even ones on screen, can “begin new conversations” that change “all the rules” (pp. 151). Although Marso’s reading of the films in this section—*Jeanne Dielman*, *Gone Girl*, *Nymphomaniac*, *Violette*, and *Hannah Arendt*—are rich and likely to interest film studies and pop culture scholars, I found the underlying political point about the significance of friendship to feminist world-making to be the most intriguing. As Marso claims, in “[h]earing and seeing conversations between women...new conversations can begin...These conversations transform the way we think about what women speaking together can help us see, help us imagine, and help us do” (pp. 201). Feminist friendship is, Marso shows, the creation of the in-between, the space where freedom lies and a new world, a new way of feeling and living, in our differences, singularity, ambiguity, and solidarity, becomes possible. And it is Beauvoir, Marso wants us to feel, who helps us get there, who helps us grasp the political significance of women in conversation about something other than men. Indeed, Marso’s reading of feminist friendship gave me language for what I have already felt by studying Beauvoir over many years and reading her with others. Beauvoir’s work has been a friend, giving me a way to be moved differently, and has forged friendships that are vital to my feminist life. Feminist friendship is, Marso highlights, freedom in the encounter.

Marso’s project is simultaneously ambitious and humble. She shares just what Beauvoir has taught her. Fortunately for her reader, those lessons are rich. She chooses not to engage in critical debates in favor of an invitation to perceive the in-between and to encounter Beauvoir anew, perhaps a happier, more hopeful Beauvoir than many of us know. As Marso writes in the book’s happy ending, “[r]eading Beauvoir with new sets of questions and with an emboldened curiosity about her relevance for today moves her feminism, and indeed her political thinking, beyond a set of commitments that need not and should not constrain us now” (pp. 205). But in no way does Marso’s reading neglect a critical lens or refuse a complex encounter with Beauvoir. In the spirit of Marso’s happy ending, I have chosen to focus my encounter with her book on what it opened up for me, the Beauvoir it revealed, and the incitement to hear Beauvoir as a political theorist of affect. This choice does not mean I agree with everything Marso has to say about Beauvoir. But my quibbles are small. They are ones that happen between friends, formed through a textual encounter, who are seeking out a feminist world together.

Ultimately, Marso's book is a welcome read for those of us who have already encountered Beauvoir and it will prompt new friends and allies. As for enemies, Marso at least shows us that as much as they hurt us, we might need them...at least for now.

NOTES

[1] Bonnie Mann, "Beauvoir and the Question of a Woman's Point of View" in *Philosophy Today* 52.2(2008):136-149; Toril Moi, *What is a Woman? And Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[2] Sonia Kruks, *Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

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