

## Simone de Beauvoir and writing feminisms

Twenty years ago, Mariza Correa (1999) began her introduction to the dossier *Simone de Beauvoir and 20<sup>th</sup> century feminisms*, published by *cadernos pagu*, by saying that her first reaction was that Simone many not have liked tributes, but, given the importance of her work, she certainly deserved them.

This dossier jumps off this introduction, so keeping with Mariza's style, and off this conviction that this woman, Simone de Beauvoir, continues to deserve many tributes, because her multidisciplinary work always allows for new readings. After all, the fact of being a woman is not a fact of nature, but rather the result of a history, as Simone reaffirms in her first televised interview, in 1975.<sup>1</sup> However, the biggest interest in the interview is that it is the first in which Simone, then aged 68 years old, unequivocally declares herself a feminist. It is also worth noting that Simone's interview itself was related to the fact that women's issues had entered the United Nations' agenda, – and that 1975 had been declared International Women's Year. However, Simone, in her modesty, did not realize that the feminist struggles that had made the International Women's Year possible were largely a result of her theoretical work, especially *The Second Sex* (1949).

As is known, the foundational book of modern feminisms was written by a philosopher who did not consider herself a feminist, but an intellectual who was a critic of women's social situation at the time. If, even after 70 years, here theses persist, one may well imagine the impact of Simone de Beauvoir's work in the

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<sup>1</sup> The then-young journalist Jean Louis Servan-Schreiber is the interviewer who compares the impact of Simone's work to that of Karl Marx. And, he emphasizes, those who find the comparison disproportional have not yet realized the power of the feminist movement.

years following World War II. In 1999, as part of celebrations of the books 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the amount and diversity of publications on Simone's work revealed a sort of renewal of her readership. Many of the studies were in-depth explorations of the philosophical issues raised in *The Second Sex* and other works by Simone, which led to a renewed emphasis on her originality as a thinker and on how current her concept of "situation" is.

Continuing in the same vein, bringing together tribute and study, the articles that make up this dossier not only prove the importance and applicability to current times of Simone de Beauvoir's oeuvre, but also the diversity of possible readings and its existential impact on many of our lives.

True to the Beauvoirian problematic of the text in its context, Heci Candiani's (Unicamp) article "What can be criticized in critiques of *The Second Sex*" analyzes the issue of the book's reception in France and the United States in the 1950s, showing the limits and interest groups that were behind its rejection. Thus, she seeks to understand the social and historical conditions of production of these critiques, the power relations characteristic of intellectual milieus – especially in France, in the United States and in England – and "the way in which these critiques are associated with a process of silencing Simone de Beauvoir". The rekindled interest in her oeuvre, especially from the 1980s onward, is based especially on readings that privilege the book's philosophical dimension.

María Luisa Femenías (Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina) explores the ethical importance of the Beauvoirian oeuvre and its originality in the article "Philosophy of ambiguity or the ambiguous place of women". She emphasizes that, starting in her first essays, Beauvoir's thought is different from Sartre's in its interpretation and use of concepts such as freedom, project or body, and its insistence that it is in its moral dimension that human existence truly presents itself as human. Thus, the originality of Simone's thought sets her apart from the other existentialists and qualifies her as a true 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher.

Teresa López Pardina (Universidade de Madrid) also emphasizes the singularity of Beauvoir's existentialism, understood as a kind of modulation that has the consequence of producing a different perspective of the world because it encompasses dimensions of reality that had not been taken into account by the other existentialist schools of thought. According to her, Beauvoir's originality is highly evident with regard to the philosophical theories of her time, even if they make use of existentialist and phenomenological principles.

Karen Vintges (University of Amsterdam) disagrees with a reading by Nancy Fraser, a representative of North American neoliberal feminism, which emphasizes the dimension of autonomy in feminisms, disconnecting them from issues related to social classes and reinforcing neoliberal principles. In "*Feminism versus neoliberalism: women's freedom practices in a world perspective*", Vintges reminds us that the essential dimension of feminism, in its inception, was that of solidarity and democratic participation and that the distortion of identitarian strands that insist on the dimension of the exclusive individual autonomy cannot, in any way, be attributed to Simone de Beauvoir's liberal principles. Fraser's reading therefore leaves aside feminism's dimensions of freedom and solidarity.

Carla Rodrigues (PPGF/IFCS/UFRJ and Faperj), in her article "Beauvoir read by Butler – Hegelian and post-Hegelian issues", based on the issue of the subject, returns to readings of Hegel in France in the 1940s/1950s, examining the issue of the passage from natural consciousness to self consciousness. Beauvoir questions the possibility that the interdependence between men and women may be analogous to that established by Hegel in the relationship between master and slave. In this critique, she operates an important distinction between activity and function, to consider the problem of biology as destiny. The article defends the hypothesis that Beauvoir becomes the first thinker in the history of philosophy to show that there are no subjectivation scripts that contemplate the constitution of women as subjects. In Butler's reading, in Beauvoir, there is also a contradiction that continues to operate in

feminist theory: the universal subject is understood as male and taken as reference, which excludes women; or the woman is included in this abstract universality, which requires disembodiment of the abstract male subject, without the woman being able to become a subject of her own corporeity.

The other articles start from the extraordinary impact that reading Simone de Beauvoir had in the lives of an entire generation that found in her work ammunition to face sexist discourses and comments, helping us to understand our own unease. Thus, there is a reception in the intellectual field and another more situated in the existential field, considering all that the book and Simone's lifestyle opened up as perspective.

Carmen Barroso (Co-Chair of the Independent Accountability Panel appointed by the UN), in "The ideas and ideals that define a life: Simone de Beauvoir and Carmen da Silva", confesses that, of her many identities, one is central: that of feminist, and that it was based on the ideas of the French philosopher and the Brazilian social scientist that she was able to put into words the nonconformity and rebelliousness that had accompanied her from an early age. In the current debate, despite the immense transformations that took place in the intervening years since *The Second Sex* was published, she states that some basic issues remain unresolved. Her article focuses above all on women's role in the species' reproduction and the obstacles that are still interposed to free motherhood, especially access to contraception and abortion.

Magda Guadalupe dos Santos (PUC Minas – FaE/UEMG), in the article titled "The challenges of writing 'by demand' and the effort of demystification in Simone de Beauvoir's thought", investigates the argumentative relationship between topics from *The Second Sex*, published in 1949, and the texts written "by demand" for North-American editors, such as *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita syndrome*, first published in August 1959. Santos understands that what they have in common is the proposal of demystification, present in the theoretical writings and even in those considered auto-biographical. In all situations, she believes

Beauvoir discussed relevant themes such as symmetry, identity and difference, both between cultures – from Europe to the Americas –, and between the sexes – in the complex relationship of the feminine, criticized based on a supposed “nature” of women, and the masculine, which is emphasized in patriarchal society. Beauvoir’s point is not to revert, through writing, the dilemmas of history, but to criticize the impact of culture on reading and writing the real, without resigning herself to arbitrariness and to impositions. The axiological tenor present in her writings “by demand” is the same that is configured in *The Second Sex*, in the effort to demystify the illusions that hover above historical reality, with the possibility of using Beauvoir’s analytical method as a matrix of contemporary feminisms.

Mónica Tarducci (UBA, Argentina), in the article “‘We would all like to be like Simone’”. The first readings of *The Second Sex* in Argentina”, seeks to track the book’s impact, as well as the impact of Beauvoir’s lifestyle, unconventional for the time, which influenced her work’s reception. She understands that Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre were a “free” couple (a freedom that also appeared in Beauvoir’s works), since they were communists, visited Cuba, were anti-imperialists and in favor of Algerian independence. The intellectual circles in Argentina, inclined to admiring French culture, followed the Sartrean discussions and many called themselves existentialists. Tarducci highlights that it is impossible to separate Beauvoir’s life from her work, showing how this fact appears in accounts of women who read *The Second Sex* in the past.

Lastly, Maíra Kubík Mano (PPNEIM/UFBA-Bahia), in her article “Disappointed women: from Simone de Beauvoir to the ‘gender ideology’”, examines how, in 2015, Beauvoir was the target of a motion of repudiation in the Campinas Municipal Legislature, accused of mentoring the so-called “gender ideology”, an expression used by conservatives to confront the scientific production regarding male and female social roles in relation to the inequalities and hierarchies that derive from them. Similar arguments were used in many state and municipal legislatures not

only to prevent the inclusion of gender and sexuality in education plans, but also to stop related themes from being taught. The author asks why, after 70 years, does “becoming a woman” continue to be such a provocative and even dangerous sentence? Are the fears and critiques it provoked at the time the same as those it encounters in the present, or are we facing a new moral panic? The article seeks to reflect on how these parliamentary arguments and movements, as a significant part of the process of social and political fascistization that Brazil has been undergoing, have Beauvoir as one of their main targets.

We hope this dossier will result in a reflection regarding the transformation process that the culture has undergone and that the dark times experienced in some historical situations may also be called into question in the confrontation of ideas and texts that turn feminisms into signs of great social and political expressiveness. Beyond their theoretical references, the articles that compose this dossier show how *The Second Sex* reverberates in contemporary feminisms, as well as how its successive applications in analyses of culture have an impact on changes in mentality.

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