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### Short Feminist Texts from the Fifties and Sixties: introduction

Vintges, K.

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## INTRODUCTION

by Karen Vintges

Beauvoir's short feminist texts from the 1950s and 1960s follow up on the main themes of her study *The Second Sex*, which was published in 1949. In this voluminous work, Beauvoir had already outlined all the major issues of the second feminist wave of the late sixties and early seventies, namely the issues of economic autonomy for women, women's control over their own bodies, and the liberation of female sexuality. Two decades after its publication, *The Second Sex* was "discovered" by second-wave feminists. However, Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963), which is generally seen as the book that set in motion the feminist movement in the United States, was highly influenced by Beauvoir's study, as Friedan herself acknowledged only later.<sup>1</sup>

Greater availability of contraception and access for women to jobs and higher education are generally seen as the prime initiators of the second feminist wave. The tensions between these new conditions on the one hand and the old patterns of "femininity" on the other formed the social and cultural backgrounds of this movement. From 1968 onward, it spread quickly, from the circles of the new left—where white middle-class women from a variety of oppositional movements began to protest against their own subordination to their male companions—to women in other social strata and

classes. Control by men of female sexuality and fertility was seen as central to the oppression of women, and free contraception and abortion on demand became the key issues. However, after a few years the new women's movement shifted toward identity politics, stressing the difference between men and women and arguing for a female "identity." Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* then was openly criticized as representing a "male"—since Sartrean—view of women that had to be superseded by the new, "real" feminism.

The new "identity" feminism, which started with a lot of energy and passion, soon turned into a kind of fundamentalism. Instead of open and experiential, women's identity came to be seen as fixed and pre-given: second wave's "identity" feminism presupposed an *essential* difference between men and women, and it claimed to know the real nature of women, their unconscious, and their desire. As is well known, Beauvoir was skeptical about the idea of a female nature. But not so well known is her statement in the last pages of *The Second Sex* that there will always be "certain differences" between man and woman, since their sexual worlds have special forms. However, for Beauvoir these differences are not a set of fixed characteristics. She concludes: "new carnal and affective relations of which we cannot conceive will be born between the sexes." She adds: "friendships, rivalries, complicities, chaste or sexual companionships that past centuries would not have dreamed of are already appearing."<sup>2</sup> For Beauvoir, sexual difference is never a matter of pre-given identities but rather involves a continuous work of invention. Her feminist texts of the fifties and sixties also express this original voice of a feminism without blueprints. In these texts, we find Beauvoir once more advocating women's control over their own bodies and lives as well as arguing for new forms of love between men and women. Wanting to reach an audience as wide as possible, she moreover published in popular magazines, like the American fashion magazine *Flair* and the women's magazine *McCall's*.

*Flair* was a spectacular style magazine that lasted for only one year. It published on art, intellect, and fashion. Jean Cocteau, Tennessee Williams, Gloria Swanson, Eleanor Roosevelt, Salvador Dali, and Margaret Mead were among its contributors. In an article entitled "It's About Time Women Put a New Face on Love" (1950) Beauvoir elaborated on the first and the last pages of *The Second Sex*. In the introductory pages of this work, she had criticized the idea that love would vanish with the arrival of emancipated women. Her 1950 text as well starts by criticizing this idea: "A thousand prophets mutter that they will drag love to its ruin, and with it all poetry, illusion, and happiness." Men tend to think of love in terms of inequality and submission. Therefore they fear that the obedient woman (symbolized in Boccaccio's

story of the patient Griselda) shall be replaced by the praying mantis that kills her male partner. But a new kind of love in which both partners are equal is possible, since love has other roots than a societal structure.

Beauvoir then goes into her concept of the ambiguity of the human condition. We are conscious builders of the world, an aspect that we share with our fellow humans. But we are a unique life as well, an irreplaceable being “bounded only by irreparable death.” A human being in other words is an incarnated consciousness, and this double condition (ambiguity) is what love is all about. Love is to see the other both in his impersonal activity and as a finite creature. It can be platonic as well as sexual. But it is sexual desire “that most often gives the physical presence of the beloved its matchless value.” As in the final pages of *The Second Sex*, she in this context points to certain differences between men and women that will always remain. “I believe that what fascinates each in the other is the discovery of a human world like its own but *different*: the *other* sex has the fascination of an exotic country; it is a treasure, an Eden, simply because it is different.” The bodies and sexuality of men and women are not the same; the sexes differ “in their sensuality, their sensibility, their relation to the world.” When they accept each other as ambiguous beings, as consciousness incarnated in flesh, the mutual magic is always there. We cannot predict the forms these new relationships between men and women will take. It may be that certain forms of sensibility are bound to disappear but others will be born. Beauvoir concludes by explicitly arguing for the attitude of invention: “rather than grimly hanging on to what is dying, or repudiating it, would it not be better to try to help invent the future?”

In her prefaces to two books by Marie-Andrée Lagroua Weill-Hallé, from 1959 and 1960, respectively, Beauvoir goes into the theme of women’s control over their own bodies. Until the sixties, family planning was still taboo and the sale of contraceptives was restricted all over the world (the birth control pill was approved for sale in the United States in 1960; in France, the sale of contraceptives, including the pill, was not legalized until 1967). Through her experiences as a doctor, Lagroua Weill-Hallé was convinced of the need for family planning. Together with sociologist Evelyne Sullerot, she had started the MFPE, the French Movement for Family Planning in 1956. In the same year, the communist journalist Jacques Derogy published *Des enfants malgré nous* (Children in spite of us) in which he investigated the dramatic reality of clandestine abortions in France—a book that provoked a debate in the French press, and for which he was expelled from the Communist Party by chairman Maurice Thorez.

In her preface to Lagroua Weill-Hallé's *Le planning familial* (Family planning) (1959), Beauvoir points to the strange contradiction between the overall conquering of nature by man on the one hand and the "laissez faire" politics on such an important issue as natality on the other. Because contraceptives were prohibited, the number of illegal and often very dangerous abortions matched the number of newborn children in France every year (between 400,000 and 500,000). Birth control is the only solution. In *La grand'peur d'aimer* (The great fear of loving) (1960), Lagroua Weill-Hallé reported the heartbreaking stories of the women who consulted her but whom she could not help due to the ban on contraceptives. In her short preface to this book, Beauvoir again emphatically argues for the availability of adequate birth control for all women who want it, so that love in the family may survive—a love which for millions of women is their unique recourse against the world's harshness.

In an essay for the journal *La NEF* (*La nouvelle équipe française*), entitled "La condition féminine" (The condition of women), Beauvoir elaborates on women's overall condition in France. *La NEF* published two special issues on this topic and asked Beauvoir for a concluding article. The first special issue, on women and work, *La femme et le travail* (1960), contained sixteen articles, by among others Gisèle Halimi, Colette Audry, and Andrée Michel—whose article "La Française et la démocratie" (Frenchwomen and democracy) Beauvoir refers to twice. The second special issue, on women and love, *La femme et l'amour* (1961), contained another seventeen articles, by among others Madeleine Chapsal and Suzanne Lilar, as well as a cynical letter from the French writer Jean d'Ormesson, which Beauvoir also refers to and in which he criticizes the board of *La NEF* and Beauvoir for denying "the little difference" between men and women.

Beauvoir starts her article by claiming that the condition of women in France has not improved since 1919. Especially women's working conditions have not improved, whether they are working inside or outside the house. The housewife is still socially isolated and without an income of her own. But the woman who works outside the house and earns a salary also has reason to complain. Even for men, working conditions are far from rewarding in this world of capitalist exploitation and individualistic solitude. But women's careers often stagnate because of a lack of support from male colleagues. The working woman moreover is still not allowed to decide when to procreate, due to lack of birth control. She is neither supported by widespread nurseries and day-care facilities nor given easy access to services of domestic help. The cooperation of the father being still secondary, she often

lacks enough sleep to recuperate: women in these conditions suffer from chronic fatigue. All in all, women constantly interrogate themselves: working mothers anxiously wonder if they should stop working; housewives ask themselves if they were wrong to give up their occupations. The majority of women throughout the world nevertheless prefer to have jobs. The only possibility for the time being is to struggle and move on until this period of transition is over. If a national economy requires women to work, then the government creates laws and institutions to facilitate the combination of work and raising children, as it has happened in China. If one day in France the economical conditions demand full entry of women in the job market, all the obstacles for women's success would disappear. Men then would take it for granted that women work and would adapt their sensibility and sexuality to it. As for the children, little conformists as they are, they easily would adjust to the new situation. But this takes a reversal in the system of production: socialism is a necessary condition for the many changes that must take place on the level of ideology and myth, as well as relationships between spouses and between parents and children.

Beauvoir wrote another, very short, preface to the book *The Sexually Responsive Woman* (1964) by Phyllis and Eberhard Kronhausen, a study of female sexuality, based on laboratory experiments as well as women's autobiographies. Beauvoir expresses her sympathy for the Kronhausens' views on overcoming the myths about female sexuality and their efforts to call into question the notion of women's "physiological destiny." In contrast to male prejudices, "the authors grant women an autonomy—both physiological and psychological—equal to that of men."

In 1965, Beauvoir again goes back to the topic of love in an essay in the American women's magazine, *McCall's*. In this essay, she once more celebrates love as a joy and a gift. Why do we fall in love? There are too many reasons. But almost always it has to do with a certain feeling of emptiness. "You do not fall in love when you are completely happy or on the crest of the wave. . . . It is when the monotony of the world becomes apparent that you begin to dream of new horizons." Through another person a new world is revealed and given. The artist, the ambitious man, and the man of action can change their relation to the world or even the world itself. But very often women are not in that position, and even if they are, they often prefer to find a new world through love. To fall in love takes an Other: it takes someone who escapes me and who can introduce me into another world. We experience "the unexpected and wonderful joy of receiving everything without so much effort."

The last text, entitled “Amour et politique” (Love and politics) (1969), is in line with the first in that Beauvoir deals here with a love in which both partners are equal. The text is from an interview Beauvoir did for Radio Luxembourg in which she was asked to react to the novel, *L'aveu* (*The Confession*) by Artur London. The novel dealt with the Stalinist show trial in which he had been prosecuted (a novel that was made into a film by Costa-Gavras in 1970, with Yves Montand in the role of London). The Stalinist show trials, which were meant to underline Stalin's hegemony, were all about confessing crimes: once the confession was made—of course under torture—proof of the crime was accepted and the victim was sentenced. Arthur London's wife, Lise London, asked for a divorce immediately after hearing the news of her husband's confession, but once she heard from him the full facts of the case she ceaselessly fought for his release.

When asked about Lise London's first reaction, Beauvoir reflects on how she is to be understood. Rather than seeing her as unfaithful to her husband, we should realize that she was a woman with a political conviction as unconditional as his. Lise London was a heroine of the French Resistance movement. During the Second World War, she once stood up in public and called for women to participate in the French Resistance. Her political passion was as deep as her husband's. They both loved each other “through politics.” Beauvoir thus sided with Lise London, a gesture for which Lise London recently expressed her gratitude.<sup>3</sup>

Discussing Lise London's absolute faith in communism, Beauvoir added this remark: “I myself have never had a political conviction as unconditional as hers.” And if we take these short texts together, we indeed find that they emphasize openness to the future and do not suggest any belief in blueprints. Beauvoir advocated the freedom for women to create their own lives and to put new faces on love, in open orientation to the future. She argued for thorough social economic change that would diminish women's burdens in the family and allow the couple to equally share these tasks. The theme of the chronic fatigue of women, caused by the combination of new responsibilities of work and education and traditional conditions of women, including motherhood, remains with us today. Standing up for family planning and contraceptives on behalf of women is still necessary in large parts of the world. The effects of the Vatican's ban on contraceptives are dramatic for women in the third world, especially in relation to the wide spread of HIV. Whereas, among others, the Vatican accused feminism of wanting to break up the family, Beauvoir's feminist texts of the fifties and sixties show that her aim on the contrary was to make it possible for love within the couple

to survive. Her articles on love are moving in that they show how she conceives of love as “mutual magic” and as a joy and a gift, a view that keeps its urgency in today’s oversexualized, not to say pornographic, society.

## NOTES

1. Sandra Dijkstra, “Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan: The Politics of Omission,” *Feminist Studies* 6, 2 (Summer 1980): 293–94.
2. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Knopf, 2010), 765.
3. Lise London, “Amour et politique, le soutien de Beauvoir” (Love and politics: Beauvoir’s support), *Cinquantenaire du deuxième sexe* (Fifty years after *The Second Sex*), ed. Christine Delphy and S. Chaperon (Paris: Éditions Syllepse, 2002), 376–79.