

BOOK REVIEW

***Emancipatory Thinking: Simone de Beauvoir and Contemporary Political Thought.* Elaine Stavro. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018 (ISBN 9780773553545)**

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The question of what constitutes intellectual engagement was central to Simone de Beauvoir's life and thought. Indeed, in the aftermath of the Second World War, Beauvoir dedicated her writing to ethical and political questions, which, although approached through a philosophical lens, always touched upon the concrete, lived realities of women and men around the globe. The Beauvoir series, edited by Margaret A. Simmons and Marybeth Timmermann and published by the University of Illinois Press from 2004 to 2015, introduces newly discovered texts (some available only in English translation, the French original now lost; some made available for the first time in English) that reveal the extent of Beauvoir's lifelong engagement with feminism, colonialism, racism, worker's rights, and sexuality (this list isn't exhaustive). In these collections, Beauvoir confronts these issues not as abstract, theoretical questions, but as concrete problems that require immediate intervention. Such were her reflections on the moral status of revenge and punishment, responding to postwar purges and the war tribunal in France, or on the complicity of the French in colonial crimes abroad, despite their unawareness, in her 1962 essay in *Le Monde* on the arrest and torture of the Algerian NFL member Djamilia Boupacha. Beauvoir's raising of these problems rendered visible as the horizons of her work the historical and cultural landscapes in which she lived and thought. Indeed, her philosophical concept of "the situation" (Beauvoir 1948, 20) makes such concrete landscapes the birthplace of all thought and action; they define the contour of our lives, condition and shape us, but also provide the content on which we act, to which we assign meaning. Our entanglement in historical and cultural realities prevents us from taking a view from nowhere on the problems that we are considering—a point that Beauvoir formulates in her notion of ambiguity. Yet Beauvoir argued that despite our rootedness in such realities, we have certain commitments that transcend the specificity of the situation, such as commitments to social justice, gender equality, and the termination of exploitation and colonialization.

Elaine Stavro's *Emancipatory Thinking: Simone de Beauvoir and Contemporary Political Thought* is attentive to both these aspects of Beauvoir's thought. Indeed, the central point of her book is that Beauvoir's uniqueness is that these two aspects—the commitment to emancipatory principles, her humanism that seems to transcend time and place, and her sensitivity to context, to realities in which humans act—are intertwined in her thinking. Furthermore, Beauvoir is aware of this double thread—which she explores under the title of "ambiguity"—and celebrates it, insisting that we must confront it as a defining feature of our lives. This ambiguity, Stavro claims, renders

Beauvoir's thinking not only unique—she is able to avoid the strict one-sidedness of many philosophical systems (Stavro focuses on Marxism, poststructuralism, affect theory, and identity politics as examples of such systems)—but also particularly relevant to our times, when “global events and an awareness of big problems call for the renewal of general theorizing and collective action” (11). The reality of global economic and environmental crises necessitates interventions, even though, or perhaps precisely because, we are no longer under the spell of “a spirit of optimism about revolutionary change” (5). What we need, therefore, is a theoretical system that enables us to think through the specific exigencies of our time, and, Stavro argues, this is precisely what Beauvoir has to offer.

The project of the book is “the recuperation of Beauvoir” (18) as a thinker whose sensitivity to the force of local, material conditions, on the one hand, and commitment to emancipatory projects that transcend such conditions, on the other, makes her particularly important for our time and age. In recuperating Beauvoir, Stavro shows that she avoided the pitfalls of many theoretical turns taken in the twentieth century—she did not give up on human agency (as posthumanism does), yet refused to think of the agent as a rational subject (as Habermasians do); she avoided psychic and historical determinism (characteristic of Freudian psychoanalysis, at least as Stavro reads Beauvoir's reception of it, and orthodox Marxism respectively), while not subscribing to a view of the subject as fully self-transparent and self-determined (as Sartre's existentialism, in some readings, did). Beauvoir's ability to navigate these positions and avoid an either/or stance is supported by her use of a number of theoretical frameworks, and the seven chapters that make up *Emancipatory Thinking* (and that can be read independently of one another) trace these frameworks and spell out the ways in which they are present in Beauvoir's complex body of work—her philosophical texts, literary work, diaries, and journalistic pieces. Stavro proceeds by situating Beauvoir in relation to, and often in conversation with, contemporary theories and debates, such as feminist standpoint theory (chapter 1); feminist philosophy's involvement with social constructivism (chapter 2); affect theory (discussed in chapters 4 and 6), as well as schools of thought with which Beauvoir engaged more directly, such as psychoanalytic theory (chapter 3) and Marxism (chapter 4). From these encounters, or “conversations,” she distills Beauvoir's position on the matter at hand (issues in feminist theory in the first three chapters of the book; history and material conditions in chapter 4; the relationship between emancipatory struggles and macro- and micropolitical forces in chapter 5; the role of the public intellectual in chapter 6; the relationship between literature and political participation in chapter 7). The book therefore offers a comparative reading of Beauvoir, presenting her positions vis-à-vis other thinkers who also dealt with these issues. In the second chapter, for example, which maps Beauvoir's work onto the Anglo-American sex/gender distinction, she is presented as a precursor of sorts for Judith Butler's notion of the performative, refusing a purely biological basis for sex and gender. Yet unlike Butler, Beauvoir's performativity doesn't render the body a discursive effect. Stavro situates Beauvoir beyond the body/culture dichotomy, interpreting her phenomenology of the body as the meeting point of the biological and the cultural (indeed, the locus from which they can consequently be distinguished from each other). Connecting this to the question of feminism's emancipatory goals, Stavro suggests that by situating the body as a biological-cultural hybrid, Beauvoir is able to avoid tracing all forms of oppression to gender or sexual oppression. She understands these categories as produced by social, economic, and cultural forces; this means

that there are myriad vectors of oppression, and consequently different trajectories for struggles for liberation.

The presentation of Beauvoir as a nonbinary thinker, surpassing conceptual dichotomies, is a leitmotif in Stavro's reading of Beauvoir. At its best, this line of thinking enables Stavro to reveal previously unexplored facets of Beauvoir's thought. Chapter 3, for example, which situates Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in relation to psychoanalysis, mainly Freud, Lacan, and object relations theory, explores Beauvoir's account of childhood development, a topic that has received little attention in research on Beauvoir. Stavro's analysis sheds light on Beauvoir's conception of subject-formation, and in the process tackles the notions of female sexuality, affectivity, and agency in a manner that will be useful to scholars working on these questions. Chapter 6, one of the most interesting chapters, examines Beauvoir's position as an engaged intellectual in relation to Foucault's critique of the universal intellectual and his notion of self-fashioning as an aesthetic project. In contrast to Foucault's charge, Stavro argues, Beauvoir's position was both universal and particular—she thought that her position as an intellectual, free of market pressures and demands, entailed both privilege and a commitment to fight against oppression, but she refused to think that she was necessarily better suited than the oppressed to direct the struggle. The tension between her commitment to freedom, on the one hand, and her “pluralistic approach to radical movements” (270), on the other, made her confront questions of identity and identification, guilt, complicity, and appropriation, and led her to adopt an ideal of ethical self-formation, as opposed to Foucault's aesthetic ideal.

Such discussions provide us with what we may call a Beauvoirian “legacy,” a complex philosophical position that enables us to navigate the contemporary political world and the urgent demand to transform its injustices and inequalities. In outlining this legacy, Stavro takes notes of what she characterizes as Beauvoir's lack of interest in “esoteric academic debates” (12). She appreciates Beauvoir's refusal to dedicate herself to purely theoretical debates and, in a way, mimics this refusal in her book. As a result, the picture she paints of Beauvoir is made in broad strokes, often ignoring the details of the various positions under examination. The first chapter, for example, which addresses Beauvoir's phenomenology in relation to Merleau-Ponty, mentions in passing his influence on feminist thinkers such as Iris Marion Young and Butler, but ignores Beauvoir's direct influence on their work. This lends credence to the oppositions that Stavro sets up between Beauvoir and other feminist thinkers, but the contrast drawn can at times remain superficial.

Nonetheless, the often generalized reading is not in itself a shortcoming of the book. Stavro is clear that one aim of the book is to transgress disciplinary boundaries, and in this respect “what Beauvoir said” is not its focus. Reading Beauvoir as an engaged thinker, who considers each person's singular situation as “the basis for building bridges between subjects who can successfully collaborate and work towards the freedom of all” (5), requires that we resist the urge to treat her work as a closed, monolithic, and well-defined system, one that can only be the object of exegetical acts. Instead, Beauvoir's insistence on situated and embodied subjectivity contains a self-reflective call that it be taken up and be thought anew in different historical and cultural contexts. This is what Stavro does, and in this respect, she proposes that we think not only *about* Beauvoir's work, but that we think *with it*, that we use it to address questions and problems that she might not have directly confronted. The result is often a refreshing engagement with Beauvoir's work, where Stavro articulates what she understands to be the essential philosophical issues, without going into tedious detail or scholarly

debates. The problem is that by avoiding details, the positions that she outlines often stay too vague and loose. Her discussion of performativity in chapter 2, for example, makes the interesting suggestion that Beauvoir is a performative theorist *avant la lettre*, but there is very little engagement with Beauvoir's texts and very few references to her work to support this reading. At other times, Beauvoir's positions are not problematized and challenged, and Stavro often explains away Beauvoir's theoretical shortcomings rather than using them as an opportunity to examine Beauvoir's position. This happens, for example, in her discussion of Beauvoir's view on lesbian experience in chapter 2, which does not reflect on Beauvoir's framing of this identity as a form of deviation, or ask about the relevance of Beauvoir's claim to homosexuality. Or, in chapter 6, when Stavro wishes to highlight Beauvoir's valuation of the position of Algerian women, who are oppressed but still able to fight for their freedom, she does so by quoting Beauvoir's problematic and paternalistic statements from *The Ethics of Ambiguity* on women and black people as eternal children, without reflecting on her rhetoric or the assumptions on which they rest. When Stavro engages such statements, as for example in her discussion of Beauvoir's view of lesbianism, she often assumes an apologetic tone: "Beauvoir's work on lesbian sexuality is clearly deficient; nevertheless it was one of the first candid treatments of lesbianism. However inadequate it is, one must remember it was written in 1949 . . ." (106). At such moments, one feels that the book betrays its own underlying theme of cultivating a position of "in-between," for what we are offered is a picture of either/or: Beauvoir is either in the right, ahead of her times and offering a more sophisticated position than contemporary theories, or, if she is wrong, it is because she could not have written otherwise (in 1949, as a bourgeois, and so on). If we want to uphold what is so valuable in her work—and as Stavro compellingly shows, there is much to uphold—we ought to address the complexity of her position and take her to task for the implied assumptions that underlie some of the deficiencies in it.

Having said that, Stavro's focus on the concrete political and social realities to which Beauvoir responds in her work sheds light on her writings as well as her activism, and provides an illuminating perspective on her work. Stavro offers a valuable contribution to the study of Beauvoir as a political thinker (joining recent books by Sonia Kruks, Lori Marso, Nathalie Nya, and Marguerite La Caze, to name a few). The nontechnical language in which the book is written makes it suitable for a general readership, as well as undergraduate students, who wish to learn more about Beauvoir's work. For these audiences, one of the book's merits is the clear and engaging introduction to the central theoretical debates to which Beauvoir was responding (around, for example, existentialism, phenomenology, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and various French feminist theories) and to the debates in which Stavro situates Beauvoir's work (affect theory, poststructuralism, and posthumanism).

## Reference

Beauvoir, Simone de. 1948. *The ethics of ambiguity*. New York: Kensington Publishing Corporation.

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