WOMEN OF IDEAS

Simone de Beauvoir

by Mary Evans

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SAGE Publications
London • Thousand Oaks • New Delhi

First published 1996

SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Olivers Yard, 55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, CA 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B-42 Panchsheel Enclave
PO Box 4109
New Dehli 110 017

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN 0 8039 8866 4 ISBN-13 978-0-8039-8866-8
ISBN 0 8039 8867 2 (pbk) ISBN-13 978-0-8039-8867-5 (pbk)

Library of Congress catalog record available

Typeset by M Rules
Printed in Great Britain by Hartnolls Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

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WOMEN OF IDEAS

Series Editor: Liz Stanley
Editorial Board: Cynthia Enloe and Dale Spender

This series consists of short study guides designed to introduce readers to the life, times and work of key women of ideas. The emphasis is very much on the ideas of these women and the political and intellectual circumstances in which their work has been formulated and presented.

The women featured are both contemporary and historical thinkers from a range of disciplines including sociology, economics, psychoanalysis, philosophy, anthropology, history and politics. The series aims to: provide succinct introductions to the ideas of women who have been recognised as major theorists; make the work of major women of ideas accessible to students as well as to the general reader; and appraise and reappraise the work of neglected women of ideas and give them a wider profile.

Each book provides a full bibliography of its subject's writings (where they are easily available) so that readers can continue their study using primary sources.

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For
David, Tom and Jamie

Preface

This series introduces readers to the life, times and work of key 'women of ideas' whose work has influenced people and helped change the times in which they lived. Some people might claim that there are few significant women thinkers. However, a litany of the women whose work is discussed in the first titles to be published gives the lie to this: Simone de Beauvoir, Zora Neale Hurston, Simone Weil, Olive Schreiner, Hannah Arendt, Eleanor Rathbone, Christine Delphy, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, to be followed by Rosa Luxemburg, Melanie Klein, Mary Wollstonecraft, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, Margaret Mead, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, Alexandra Kollontai, and others of a similar stature.

Every reader will want to add their own women of ideas to this list – which proves the point. There *are* major bodies of ideas and theories which women have originated; there *are* significant women thinkers; *but* women's intellectual work, like women's other work, is not taken so seriously nor evaluated so highly as men's. It may be men's perceptions of originality and importance which have shaped the definition and evaluation of women's work, but this does not constitute (nor is there any reason to regard it as) a definitive or universal standard. *Women of Ideas* exists to help change such perceptions, by taking women's past and present production of ideas seriously, and by introducing them to a wide new audience. *Women of Ideas* titles include women whose

work is well-known from both the past and the present, and also those unfamiliar to modern readers although renowned among their contemporaries. The aim is to make their work accessible by drawing out of what is a frequently diverse and complex body of writing the central ideas and key themes, not least by locating these in relation to the intellectual, political and personal milieux in which this work originated.

Do women of ideas have 'another voice', one distinctive and different from that of men of ideas? or is this an essentialist claim and are ideas at basis unsexed? Certainly women's ideas are differently positioned with regard to their perception and evaluation. It is still a case of women having to be twice as good to be seen as half as good as men, for the apparatus of knowledge/power is configured in ways which do not readily accord women and their work the same status as that of men. However, this does not necessarily mean either that the ideas produced by women are significantly different in kind or, even if they presently are, that this is anything other than the product of the workings of social systems which systematically differentiate between the sexes, with such differences disappearing in an equal and just society. *Women of Ideas* is, among other things, a means of standing back and taking the longer view on such questions, with the series as a whole constituting one of the means of evaluating the 'difference debates', as its authors explore the contributions made by the particular women of ideas that individual titles focus upon.

Popularly, ideas are treated as the product of 'genius', of individual minds inventing what is startlingly original – and absolutely unique to them. However, within feminist thought a different approach is taken, seeing ideas as social products rather than uniquely individual ones, as collective thoughts albeit uttered in the distinctive voices of particular individuals. Here there is a recognition that ideas have a 'historical moment' when they assume their greatest significance – and that 'significance' is neither transhistorical nor transnational, but is rather temporally and culturally specific, so that the 'great ideas' of one time and place can seem commonplace or ridiculous in others. Here too the cyclical and social nature of the life of ideas is recognised, in which 'new' ideas may in fact be 'old' ones in up-to-date language and expression.

And, perhaps most importantly for the *Women of Ideas* series, there is also a recognition of the frequently *gendered* basis of the judgements of the 'significance' and 'importance' of ideas and bodies of work.

The title of the series is taken from Dale Spender's (1982) *Women of Ideas, and What Men have Done to Them*. 'What men have done to them' is shorthand for a complex process in which bodies of ideas 'vanish', not so much by being deliberately suppressed (although this has happened) as by being trivialised, misrepresented, excluded from the canon of what is deemed good, significant, great. In addition to these gatekeeping processes, there are other broader factors at work. Times change, intellectual fashion changes also. One product of this is the often very different interpretation and understanding of bodies of ideas over time: when looked at from different – unsympathetic – viewpoints, then dramatic shifts in the representation of these can occur. Such shifts in intellectual fashion sometimes occur in their own right, while at other times they are related to wider social, economic and political changes in the world. Wars, the expansion and then contraction of colonialism, revolutions, all have had an effect on what people think, how ideas are interpreted and related to, which ideas are seen as important and which outmoded.

'Women of ideas' of course need not necessarily position themselves as feminists nor prioritise concern with gender. The terms 'feminist' and 'woman' are by no means to be collapsed, but they are not to be treated as binaries either. Some major female thinkers focus on the human condition in order to rethink the nature of reality and thus of 'knowledge'. In doing so they also re-position the nature of ideas. Each of the women featured has produced ideas towards that greater whole which is a more comprehensive rethinking of the nature of knowledge. These women have produced ideas which form bodies of systematic thought, as they have pursued trains of thought over the course of their individual lives. This is not to suggest that such ideas give expression to a 'universal essence' in the way Plato proposed. It is instead to reject rigidly dividing 'realist' from 'idealist' from 'materialist', recognising that aspects of these supposedly categorical distinctions can be brought together to illuminate the extraordinarily complex and

fascinating process by which ideas are produced and reproduced in particular intellectual, cultural and historical contexts.

The *Women of Ideas* series is, then, concerned with the 'history of ideas'. It recognises the importance of the 'particular voice' as well as the shared context; it insists on the relevance of the thinker as well as that which is thought. It is concerned with individuals in their relation to wider collectivities and contexts, and it focuses upon the role of particular women of ideas without 'personifying' or individualising the processes by which ideas are shaped, produced, changed. It emphasises that this is a history of '*mentalités collectives*', recognising the continuum between the everyday and the elite, between 'commonsense' and 'high theory'. Ideas have most meaning in their use, in the way they influence other minds and wider social processes, something which occurs by challenging and changing patterns of understanding. As well as looking at the impact of particular women of ideas, the series brings their work to a wider audience, to encourage a greater understanding of the contribution of these women to the way that we *do* think – and also the way that we perhaps *should* think – about knowledge and the human condition.

Liz Stanley

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the many people who have helped in the production of this book. In particular, I would like to record my thanks to Carole Davies, and other members of the Secretarial Office in Darwin College at the University of Kent who have typed (and retyped) the manuscript with endless grace. Pat Macpherson read the first draft and provided her usual sympathetic and critical support. I am extremely grateful to her, and to Liz Stanley, for their advice and comments.

Mary Evans

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Introduction

When Simone de Beauvoir died in Paris in 1986, the wealth of obituaries almost universally spoke of her as the 'mother' of contemporary feminism and its major twentieth century theoretician. De Beauvoir, it was implied as much as stated, was the mother-figure to generations of women, a symbol of all that they could be, and a powerful demonstration of a life of freedom and autonomy. Around the mother's body, both literally and metaphorically, gathered women from all over the world.

But as de Beauvoir, like all other women, was well aware, the relationship of women with their mothers is never simple. Indeed, identification with the mother is for many women a problematic identification since it involves sharing an identity with a person who may well be socially powerless, and who is, however feminine, not masculine. The emotional and social costs of not being male have become widely understood and documented by contemporary feminism. A generation of feminist writers who have not refused Freud and psychoanalysis as vehemently as de Beauvoir herself did, have been prepared to examine the implications for women of psychoanalytic understanding of the biological differences between the sexes. De Beauvoir's endlessly quoted assertion that women are 'made not born' appears to emphasise the social above the biological, but in juxtaposing the two possibilities she establishes that tension between woman-born and woman-made which is to be an endlessly creative resource in her work.

What follows in these pages is not, and cannot be, given the scope of this essay, either a biography of de Beauvoir or a full discussion of her work. Rather it is an attempt to give the reader an account of de Beauvoir's life, together with some suggestions about the themes and tensions that inform it. Since I first wrote about de Beauvoir (in the early 1980s) feminism has again shifted and developed; unlike some other traditions in Western thought, feminism has remained vital and dynamic, so much so that in a special edition of the journal *Signs* on de Beauvoir's work Mary Dietz noted references to first, second and third generation feminists, all with different relationships to de Beauvoir (1992: 76). What this seemed to be suggesting was that de Beauvoir, introduced here as a mother, had in fact become a grandmother, and that the generation of women to whom she was a mother was fast becoming part of a feminist history, rather than a feminist present. Whether or not de Beauvoir will sit like a 'dead weight' on subsequent generations remains to be seen. At present, there seems good reason to suppose that whether as mother or grandmother, or in whatever relation to feminism, de Beauvoir still occupies a place in what used to be referred to as the canon. Clearly, like all mothers, she has been subject to mixed reviews, but what is notable in many accounts of her life and work is the claim of de Beauvoir as an example. Women write, as they have written of their own mothers, of the 'inspiration' of de Beauvoir, and the strength (particularly strength of purpose) which they have drawn from knowledge of her life and work (see, for example, the women writing in the collection edited by Forster and Sutton, 1989). The construction of de Beauvoir as an autonomous woman-of-letters (a construction in which de Beauvoir was quite as active as anyone else) was one which empowered many women and indicated their determination to lead a life committed to politics and literature.

De Beauvoir as the icon, as well as a maker, of twentieth century feminism, is thus a central figure here. My subject is not one de Beauvoir, but several, all of them inspired by the same actual person and the same social circumstances which inspired de Beauvoir herself. Thus just as 'the other' was a central person in de Beauvoir's work, so the other de Beauvoirs are important here, 'others' who have de Beauvoir's name, but who are often a long

way removed from the public person whom de Beauvoir and feminism would like to record. What is raised here, then, is the possibility of the 'bad' mother; to read de Beauvoir as 'the mother' is, in the days of psychoanalytically informed feminism, both far too simple and has far too little allowance for ambiguity and ambivalence. This account will not be an attempt to define the 'real' de Beauvoir, since the existence of such a person is questionable. Rather, what follows is a reading of de Beauvoir and her work; the woman, like her work, is not to be regarded as a stable text. We know that she lived, we know a great deal about her public and private life (and an important function of this essay is also to tell first time readers of de Beauvoir something about the main events of her life) but we know relatively little, particularly from de Beauvoir herself, about the personal dynamic and the experience of the emotional world which made de Beauvoir the person she was to become. As de Beauvoir herself said in *Force in Circumstance*, 'an experience is not a series of facts', and although we need to know the 'facts' about de Beauvoir, we also need to consider those general 'facts' about human beings which help to make us what we become.

De Beauvoir's admitted project in life was to make herself into an independent woman intellectual. Her interpretation of 'independent' was material and intellectual; what it very often was not was *emotionally* independent of Jean-Paul Sartre. Frequently separated from him as she was, she nevertheless remained deeply involved in his life. The nature and pattern of that involvement is discussed in the following pages, an account of de Beauvoir which is informed by my own reading and experience, reading in post-de Beauvoir feminism, in psychoanalysis (and in particular for this study of de Beauvoir, of the psychoanalytic literature on depression) and the experience of motherhood and post-Second World War, Anglo-Saxon culture. De Beauvoir was of the generation of my mother and as such it is impossible not to recognise the similarities between the experiences of middle class women in England and France. De Beauvoir became particular, and more individual than she could have dreamt of, in her childhood ambitions. But she also belonged to a generation of women which was claiming and testing the possibilities of emancipation. France, partly because it

remained a predominantly agricultural society for so much longer than England (indeed until well after the Second World War), was slower, in some respects, to allow formal emancipation than England. Nevertheless, particularly in the case of secondary and higher education in France, the absolute central control by the state of secular education made possible the careers of women such as de Beauvoir (and, in the same generation, Simone Weil and Colette Audry). In England, as in France, women born at the beginning of this century were subject to the control of individual patriarchs; equally, both countries were experiencing that process of modernisation which includes the emancipation of women. It was a process which de Beauvoir was to help construct.

The brief account of de Beauvoir's life and work which follows in these pages is written in the context of late twentieth century Europe, a Europe without the political boundaries which dominated much of de Beauvoir's life and a Europe within which women have social freedoms unknown to many women of de Beauvoir's age and generation. Yet for all that, there is still a sense in which 'plus ça change, ça ne change pas'; the very freedoms known to women have often placed them in vulnerable situations, while many normative shifts have benefited men rather more than women. Indeed, looking back on de Beauvoir's life, it is possible to argue that she actually enjoyed considerable freedom and autonomy: she did train for an élite profession, she did live outside conventional society with apparent ease, and to all extents and purposes she lived that life of personal independence which she chose for herself at an early age. Thus to speak of de Beauvoir as belonging to some distant, essentially different, past, in which women were absolutely un-free and subject to patriarchal domination makes a nonsense of her life, and that of other women.

However, what de Beauvoir did help to construct was a self-conscious, theoretical account of the position of women in society. Her contribution, therefore, was to assist in the understanding of the limits of the 'natural' in the ordering of the social world. The great nineteenth century advances in knowledge had been demonstrations that the market economy and human evolution were not works of God, lost in impenetrable clouds, but works and events which were both the product and the possible subject of human

understanding. In the early twentieth century Freud was to complete the great triumvirate of Marx, Darwin and Freud, and through his work begin the discussion of the construction of human emotional life. I write, and you read, within the context of the issues and the questions raised by these men. So, of course, did de Beauvoir, and although she often took a critical stance in her work against Marx and Freud, she was nevertheless as much a person of the Western twentieth century as any of her contemporaries. Her central concern was to show that women's social situation could be changed; from a position which initially took issue with the conventional imperatives of bourgeois France, she subsequently moved to a position which demanded change in 'all the social relationships' (most particularly of class and gender) of her given world.

Hence she was to support, in her politics, those governments which seemed to be moving most rapidly towards social transformation. From a position, in the 1930s, of indifference to organised politics, de Beauvoir moved, after 1940, to a clearer identification with the left. Politics became an interest, and for many years of her life a consuming interest at that. But in this account of de Beauvoir's life, what appears to be a radicalisation has also to be read in terms of the ways in which other ideas, besides those of de Beauvoir, developed in Europe after 1945. In the first place – and particularly so from the 1960s onwards – a growing scepticism questioned the idea of progress which so clearly informs de Beauvoir's work, and in particular *The Second Sex*. The major influence in European thought here is Foucault (who always entertained a personal hostility to de Beauvoir), who argued that ideas change, but do not necessarily accord with a model of human progress. His radical deconstruction of the very concept of the Enlightenment *as such* shook the theoretical foundations of writers such as de Beauvoir who believed in development and progress in human ideas. A second – and closely related – shift was the growing articulation of interest in the politics of personal life; for de Beauvoir, politics are seen in terms of government and state structures. Although she is, through her existential inheritance and commitment, an individualist, she nevertheless maintains a model of the relationship of the individual to the social world which is