

**Simone de Beauvoir**

*Political Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons & Marybeth Timmerman.

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408 pages

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This volume is the latest in The Beauvoir Series co-edited by Margaret Simons and Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir. While all of Beauvoir's work is philosophical, political, literary, and feminist, its division into separate volumes is practically helpful (the body of work is large, and some manner of separation is necessary for publication), and the thematic distinctions are a satisfying way of doing so.

As readers of the Series have come to expect, each entry by Beauvoir is prefaced by an excellent introduction by a notable Beauvoir scholar. This series not only highlights Beauvoir's work, some of which it makes available for the first time in English, or for the first time in philosophically accurate translation: it also reveals the rich state of Beauvoir scholarship and gives a sense of the ways a diverse community of scholars reads her work in the early years of the 21st century. These books are at once historical documents in their own right and invaluable resources for those who are interested in a thinker who has often been "erased" as a philosopher and theorist.

As with each of the volumes in the series, *Political Writings* can stand alone. Here, most pages of the compilation are occupied by lengthy pieces—the well-known but now more appropriately translated "Must we Burn Sade?" as well as "Right-Wing Thought Today" and "Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism", each originally published in *Les temps modernes*. These were reprinted together in the French volume titled *Privilèges* (1955) and were prefaced by a short introduction written by Beauvoir, an English translation of which is included in *Political Writings* as an endnote.

What emerges in this volume is the extent of Beauvoir's sensitivity to nuanced and various types of privilege, to the ways that privilege is formed in human lives and political situations, and to the subtleties of its maintenance by those human beings in those situations. As Simons suggests in her introduction to the volume, Beauvoir's writing in, for example, "Right-Wing Thought Today" extends her analysis in *The Second Sex* of "the ways in which sexist thought is shaped by men trying – in bad faith – to justify their privileges in male-dominated societies. But her analysis [in "Right-Wing Thought Today"] also surprisingly anticipates the three volumes of her autobiography [*Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, *La Force de l'âge*, *La Force des choses*]... where she explores the ways in which her own thought was shaped by her privileged upbringing..." (5).

Elizabeth Spelman, among others, has rightly noted that while Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* offers insightful analyses of polyvalent structures of privilege which constitute lived situations (both overarching and in particular contexts), she often falls back to discussing the sorts of privileges denied to white, middle-class (often heterosexual) women (see Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*, Beacon Press 1988, 62–65).

While Beauvoir insists that the social and political workings of race and class greatly affect the capacities of women to (among other things) develop bonds and relationships of solidarity across race and class differences, she often returns to talking about the relationship between men and women as though they were unaffected by class, race, global politics, cultural belief and practice.

With this important critique in mind, what I read in this collection is a political thinker who struggles, as any thoughtful person with (situated) privileges must, with her own privilege. This is perhaps less obvious in the pieces from *Privilèges*, which are aimed at exposing and critiquing privilege held, asserted, or assumed by others. Yet even these serve as a reminder of why those who experience privilege might be right to worry about it. Beauvoir argues, especially in “Right-Wing Thought Today”, that privilege is undergirded by a certain “idea of man” as “radically cut off from reality” (131), which can be lived only by resisting the weight of the world, and thus of worldly experience, including the destitution, suffering, and injustice of others. Indeed, such an idea of man presses us to hate others for their suffering, and for “extreme” (read: any) attempts to change their situation. She continues, “Separated from the world, the individual is *a fortiori* separated from his fellow man... His sole motive is self-interest which is expressed either by empty ambition or, if this ambition remains unfulfilled, by resentment”. In Beauvoir’s hands, the life of the Marquis de Sade illustrates the extreme case of “systematically [assuming] particularity, separation, and egoism” (95); the bourgeoisie refuse the reality of injustice in order to ensure that the “justice” (i.e., privilege) they experience is protected (“Right-Wing Thought Today”); and Merleau-Ponty, in his political disagreement with Sartre about communism, expresses the privileges of the intellectual class, equating what is good for those with privilege with what is good (“Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism”). While some of the writing in these pieces is repetitive and polemical, their occasional lack of polish communicates the liveliness of Beauvoir’s thinking at the time they were written and is a reminder that writing (and reading) is an art and a process.

This volume, by comparison with others in the series, most clearly features Beauvoir’s attention to lived privileges, seen through the political issues of her day. The volume begins with pieces of Beauvoir’s journalism, which show her newfound commitment to political engagement, dispatched from Spain, Portugal, and the western United States. Here, we see Beauvoir capturing the lived experiences of a sensitive traveler. Without being propagandistic, she conveys the desperation of the Spanish and Portuguese people just after the war (between 1945 and 1947). As with her other writing about the United States (e.g., in “An Existentialist Looks at Americans,” and *America Day by Day*), “Poetry and Truth of the Far West” captures features of the landscape and of the people she encounters, revealing social hierarchies and juxtaposing her lived observations with the Far West of the French imagination.

The later entries reveal Beauvoir in her own positions of privilege. Often, what she writes is an exercise of her privilege, as a public intellectual and someone with an audience. In the prefaces to *Djamila Boupacha* (which she co-wrote with the attorney, Gisèle Hamili) and *Treblinka* (a novel by Jean-François Steiner), in her review of Claude Lanzmann’s film, *Shoah*, in her defense of Israel, in a piece condemning the deaths of factory workers in France, and in the (transcript of the) film about old age, which exposes the treatment of elderly people in state-

run nursing homes, Beauvoir uses her considerable verbal acuity and situational sensitivity (and, by 1962, her fame), to make people *care* about distant others.

Yet in none of these pieces does Beauvoir appear to live her privileges unambiguously, a point that many of the historically oriented introductions help to highlight. Beauvoir writes about but does not put herself in the position of the child or the parent of Lisbon or Madrid, trampled in poverty by their governments and fellow citizens; she is not an Algerian freedom fighter, like Djamila Boupacha, who was tortured and raped with a (broken) glass bottle, while still a virgin (a point which Beauvoir refuses to paraphrase, despite a request from her editors); she is not a Jewish prisoner in Treblinka, nor the mother of an Israeli or Syrian child held captive in another country; she is not a French worker retired from a mine or the service industry. And yet, she is neither ignorant of, nor unaffected, untouched, by what their lives mean to hers, giving new weight to her capacity to return to France and to food, her freedom from torture, her privileged status as non-Jew, her material and financial security. Where her writing touches on the Holocaust, it is clear that her privilege(s) have not protected her own situatedness; like all of us, she is implicated in the horrific projects of others by being distinguished from those who will suffer.

This keen attention to the formation and ambiguities of one's lived situation draws readers back to Beauvoir's more philosophical works, found especially in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, but also to her autobiographies. Her analysis of Sade, in which she bemoans the absence of information about his childhood and formation as a privileged subject, suggests by contrast the good fortune of being able to read the work of someone who wrote not only as a novelist and philosopher, but also as an autobiographer. And yet this volume also raises (Beauvoirean) questions: What lived experiences and sensitivities are present or nurtured in a person who grows to have Simone de Beauvoir's attention to privilege, especially her own?

For those new to Beauvoir – or for those seeking an alternative entry point to her theoretical work – this is an accessible and worldly series of papers, which gives a sense of her philosophy in action. For readers of Beauvoir, this compilation provides ample opportunity to find ties to her other work, to illustrate parts of her philosophical writing that are overly abstract or opaque (e.g., in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*), and to reflect on how thinking is, necessarily, and importantly, situated.

**Anna Mudde**

Campion College at the University of Regina