

**Sonia Kruks**

*Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity.*

Oxford University Press 2012.

220 pages

\$105.00 (Hardcover ISBN 9780195381443)

While Simone de Beauvoir's political differentiation from the rest of the French intellectual left is often associated primarily with the claim, in *The Second Sex*, that "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, woman," in this book Sonia Kruks draws on the breadth of the Beauvoiran corpus to show that she offers another, more foundational point of political departure. Kruks' insights into and extensions of Simone de Beauvoir's work are uniformly productive and helpful; this book is a nice illustration of that point.

In her 2001 monograph, *Retrieving Experience*, Kruks notices that in many discourses between modernist and postmodernist approaches to subjectivity, neither approach questions the problematic assumption that postmodernism signaled a rupture in western thought. Existential philosophers, she shows, offer a starting point that is neither removed from nor caught up in that debate, and which can help to explain how it arose. In the introduction to the book under review, Kruks similarly begins with the observation that the current "impasse" between "liberal rationalists" and post-structuralists over the self or subject of politics (3-4) is a manifestation of unrecognized human ambiguity: the ambiguity Beauvoir identifies as characteristic of the political terrain of lived engagement. She shows how Beauvoir's thought poses a significant challenge both to the problems of abstract humanism and to post-humanist tendencies to reject the necessity of thinking about the human. Beauvoir's thought provides a more nuanced realism – for lack of a better word – about lived political experience, without succumbing to either naivety or *realpolitik*.

Beauvoir's "humanism," unlike more orthodox humanisms, is grounded in her commitment to noticing situated human embodiment. For that reason, she necessarily eludes post-humanist critiques while challenging both the substitutability of subjects or persons and the model of the subject as "man of reason," yet without reducing the subject to purely circumstantial subjectivity. In "Humanism after Post-Humanism," chapter one, Kruks shows that by offering a theory of the subject, of "the human," and of action, grounded in the embodied, concretely situated subject, Beauvoir allows for the contestation of dehumanizing practices, that is, oppression (a central concern of orthodox humanisms), precisely by making those *human* practices of dehumanization. Beauvoir insists that it is a uniquely human capacity to dehumanize others, which makes it at once vile and a constant possibility. This is a central way in which ambiguity appears throughout political experience.

Beauvoir also reminds us, Kruks shows, that even in fighting oppression there is – and can be – no innocence. Actions have outcomes and products we cannot fully predict, control, or divest from ourselves, and there is no cause one could take up, no action one could engage in, that does not have the potential to do harm. Our freedom is predicated on the freedom of others, but even the work of dismantling systems and practices of oppression entails a commitment to ending the ways of life of the oppressor, which violates his or her (human) interests, and seeks to obliterate the possibility of being that *kind* of human being in the world. Feminist commitments are, among other things, commitments to ending men's (and women's and others') current ways of life; anti-capitalist work involves the commitment to no longer have ways of life that benefit from capitalism. Those ways of life are not abstract, for Beauvoir, since they are lived by actual, embodied people. We can only

dream of eliminating failure from our ethics and politics, and Kruks takes up as a central contestatory move in challenging abstract humanism(s) through Beauvoir's claim, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, that without failure, there is no ethics.

Thus, what is perhaps the indispensable feature of this book is its engagement with Beauvoir's commitment to the idea of human ambiguity through her rejection of the myth of moral "purity." As ambiguous creatures, morality requires us to take responsibility for the outcomes of our actions, which we do not (wholly) seek or intend, in ways that Kruks argues neither traditional humanisms nor post-humanisms recognize. She examines this approach under the specific headings of the successive chapters, on oppression, privilege, making political judgments, and the politics of revenge.

To begin, Kruks notes that for Beauvoir our capacity for violence toward one another is not a special case of human action; it is not good action turned bad. The violation of one another is an inescapable feature of being human, in that we (must) "objectify" others in order to make sense of their actions and negotiate the world with them; the subjectivity of others always escapes us in certain ways. In objectifying, we violate – often transiently – the inherent ambiguity of others. Beginning chapter two, "Theorizing Oppression," with Beauvoir's work on the Marquis de Sade, Kruks argues that Beauvoir surpasses the Hegelian master-slave dialectic of oppression with which she has often been aligned. She shows how nuanced Beauvoir's thinking about oppression was, how it includes her thinking about objectification and alterity. Drawing primarily on three relevant texts, Kruks details three distinctly Beauvoirean ways of identifying oppression as dehumanization: asymmetrical recognition (the production and maintenance of inferiority; *The Second Sex*), indifference (the treatment of individuals simply as members of a group with all of the purported qualities of that group; *America Day by Day*), and aversion (the experience of others as soliciting fear and horror, and as not worthy or capable of providing recognition; *Coming of Age*).

The capacity for actualizing dehumanization is always intimately tied to situations of privilege, for Beauvoir, and privilege is an important category of analysis in her work. In chapter three, "Confronting Privilege," Kruks employs Beauvoir to propose an alternative discourse and method for dealing with privilege, particularly among white feminists. Troubling the practice that begins by recognizing one's privileges in order to "work on oneself," Kruks suggests that Beauvoir provides resources for a "politics of deployment," in which one "consciously us[es] the advantages that stem from one's privilege in order to combat structures of privilege" (96). To illustrate this, she charts Beauvoir's coming to consciousness of her own privileges, and to an awareness of the ambiguities of "privilege" and "earned reward." Kruks then considers Beauvoir's move toward employing her privileges as a French citizen and well-known writer with a public voice to support the case of Djamila Boupacha, the Algerian freedom fighter raped and tortured into confessing to a crime she did not commit.

The political ambiguity that Kruks draws from Beauvoir's work rests on the rejection of the "dream of purity" found in abstract humanism. But there are questions to ask about the nature of political judgements where neither moral purity nor a purity of ends are assumed as a possibility. Kruks argues in chapter four, "Dilemmas of Political Judgment," that Beauvoir's assertion that without failure, there can be no ethics, applies to political judgments, too (127). Such judgments involve not just decision, but also what Beauvoir calls "wagers." Drawing Beauvoir into conversation with Rawls, Habermas, Arendt, and Weber, as well as Churchland, McDermott, and Thiele, Kruks turns to Beauvoir's literary oeuvre to consider the nature of political judgment. Making *The Mandarins* a case study in the political wager, Kruks considers Henri Perron in his richly embodied,

lived situation, not as an abstract individual making a rational choice. Political judgments are made, Kruks argues, with our “entire being,” by “embodied and affective,” “idiosyncratic” selves (148). Beauvoir urges us, writes Kruks, “to avoid the hubris that attends too great a faith in reason even as we continue – as we must – to make reasonable judgments” (150).

We can see the tension between making reasonable judgements and embodied and affective judgements in Kruks’ final chapter, “‘An Eye for an Eye’: The Question of Revenge,” which argues that Beauvoir provides a phenomenological analysis necessary for a full-fledged philosophy of revenge. Ethical questions about the rationality of revenge, elaborations of the possible context of its justification, and its relationship with justice, are not sufficient to give an account of the phenomenon of seeking – and getting – revenge, which is inextricable from the affective context in which our ethical questions occur. The focus of Kruks’ analysis here is Beauvoir’s essay “An Eye for an Eye,” which considers Robert Brasillach, the French thinker and editor of the fascist *Je suis partout*, who was tried and executed for “complicity” with German occupiers. While many of her fellow intellectuals wrote a petition asking for his clemency, Beauvoir finds herself unable to sign it. She wants revenge. Yet the experience also leaves “the taste of ashes” in her mouth, because revenge is, in the end, unsatisfying. Beauvoir’s analysis of the structure of revenge, its distinction from punishment, and the embodied features of what it requires, leads her to argue that while the legal system attempts to express and respect human beings, revenge, especially through the courts, is objectifying and dehumanizing.

This book is not only an important addition to the growing body of Beauvoir scholarship, it is accessible to students, and would be fruitfully read alongside Margaret Simons’ anthology, *Simone de Beauvoir: Political Writings*, or with a selection of Beauvoir’s work. It is heavily footnoted, and is rich both in quotations from Beauvoir’s own writing, as well as in references to and critical engagement with Beauvoir scholars. It is an important articulation and tying together not only of Beauvoir’s political work, but of the ways in which all of Beauvoir’s work is political.

**Anna Mudde**

Campion College at the University of Regina