

Book Review

Political Theory

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Politics with Beauvoir: Freedom in the Encounter, by Lori Jo Marso. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017, 272 pp, US\$29.95, ISBN 978-0822369707.

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For a long time, Simone de Beauvoir was seen merely as Sartre’s companion and disciple, and as doing little more than “applying” his early philosophy to the situation of women in *The Second Sex* (1949). Although this view has now been thoroughly refuted within both feminist and continental philosophy, there has been scant consideration of Beauvoir in political theory. *Politics with Beauvoir: Freedom in the Encounter* is thus to be welcomed for its categorical demonstration that Beauvoir is also a valuable resource for political theorists, feminist and otherwise. In this ambitious book, Marso brings Beauvoir into what she calls “encounter” with a wide range of thinkers, among whom she includes Hannah Arendt, Frantz Fanon, and Richard Wright, as well as various film directors. She also engages with diverse theoretical approaches, including political theory, affect theory, feminist film criticism, and literary theory. The diversity of figures, approaches, and themes that Marso interweaves “in encounter” with Beauvoir is a great strength of the book but also makes it disjointed at times. The book is thus best read as a series of thematically connected reflections rather than by searching for one through-written argument.

Even so, it is possible to summarize what I take to be Marso’s main aims. These are “with Beauvoir,” to center our attention on bodies and bodily affects as key sites in accounting for the endurance of oppressions, while also showing how affectively grounded forms of resistance are always possible, albeit sometimes in perverse forms. In addressing these matters, Marso rightly finds in Beauvoir a nuanced, nonsovereign notion of freedom: Freedom is always situated, constrained, ambiguous and, most importantly, it is possible *only* with others—that is, “in the encounter.” Indeed, encounter with others is “the *only* way to produce and experience freedom” (2). While scholars (myself included) have shown that for Beauvoir freedom always

involves our interdependence, Marso covers new ground in showing us so concretely how *bodies* are always the site of encounters: bodies are where power marks us; they are the sites of sufferings, desires, pleasures, and many other affects. Thus, “freedom in the encounter” is always material.

In chapter 1, Marso reads *The Second Sex* as presenting three different kinds of encounter: those with “enemies” (men who create myths about women); with “allies” (women whose experiences are shared in the book); and with “friends” (readers to whom the book appeals). In the first volume, “Facts and Myths,” Beauvoir lets the enemies “speak” for themselves in order to reveal the profusion of inconsistent ideas that undermines their claims to speak universal truths. Turning to volume two, “Lived Experience,” Marso skillfully draws out Beauvoir’s affective register as she shows how patriarchy works “as a complex assemblage of affects” (24) that frequently attaches women to their oppression. What is valuable here is Marso’s careful mining of the still under-explored vein of affect in Beauvoir’s work. However, this comes at the cost of a certain narrowing of focus, in which Marso tends to lose sight of Beauvoir’s equally strong concern with structural aspects of oppression, notably the role of economic dependency. While it is true that “the personal truly becomes political” in Beauvoir’s hands (80), Beauvoir also insists the political is not *only* the personal and that large-scale institutional changes are also necessary.

Marso employs the three kinds of encounter she sees in *The Second Sex* to organize the three subsequent core sections of the book. Part I, “Enemies,” comprises two chapters. The first puts Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* into conversation with Beauvoir’s little-known essay, “An Eye for an Eye,” concerning the trial and execution in 1945 of the French pro-Nazi intellectual Robert Brasillach. Arendt and Beauvoir are “unrecognized allies” (41), Marso argues, in their mutual insistence that judgment in such cases must be reflective. Both also insist that it is vital to attribute individual responsibility for such crimes. However, Marso also develops a critique of Arendt’s inattention to the political implications of embodiment through her reading of Beauvoir. That Arendt erroneously dismisses as “social” and “private” much that shapes politics is hardly a new objection. However, Marso focuses us in a particularly compelling way on the costs of ignoring embodiment as the site at which political oppression operates, for “the political meaning of certain bodies in public spaces threatens freedom, and sometimes the lives of distinct individuals and erodes the conditions of collective freedom” (58).

In the second “Enemies” chapter, Marso engages Lars von Trier’s film *Antichrist* with Beauvoir’s reading of de Sade (“Must We Burn Sade?” [1952]). Here, bodies and their sufferings (and pleasures) become far more

directly visceral. Much of the chapter consists in a detailed narration of *Antichrist* (accompanied by black-and-white stills) and defends it against numerous critics who have accused von Trier of gratuitous sexual violence and misogyny. Beauvoir's Sade—and Beauvoir herself—serve more as foils for Marso's determined defense of the film rather than as equal participants in this encounter. However, Marso's key point, that the film's extremism can more fruitfully be viewed as an exposé and critique of the violence of patriarchy rather than as its proponent, certainly echoes some aspects of Beauvoir's reading of Sade. Beauvoir values Sade for his dramatic disruption of oppressive normality: He challenges the stultification of sensation, insists on the political centrality of the body and sexuality, and confronts the separateness of human lives. Yet, as Marso too briefly notes (89), Beauvoir also sees Sade as ultimately a failure: He remains isolated and trapped in a logic of "sovereignty" from which he offers no escape. Marso optimistically concludes by suggesting that von Trier may move "us" (whoever we are?) to feel a way "beyond patriarchy" in solidarity with his suffering heroines (92), but I suspect he may be more aligned with Sade's failures.

Turning in Part II from "enemies" to "allies" Marso stages encounters with Frantz Fanon (chap. 4) and Richard Wright (chap. 5). These are, in my view, the two richest chapters of the book. Marso puts Beauvoir and Fanon into conversation to show how oppressions, here of women and the colonized, are lived in the body. Oppressions are "expressed somatically" in repetition and in an immanent, rather than linear, sense of time. Women, in their enclosed and repetitive domestic lives, tend towards narcissism, while incorporating the colonial violence to which they are too often subject leads colonized men to aggress against each other. Such pathologies, Marso rightly insists, should be seen "not as individual ailments but as social symptoms that offer a poignant critique of political conditions" (100). Yet, neither women nor the colonized are merely victims: their somatic manifestations of oppression often involve "perverse forms of protest" that, if redirected, can offer potential for collective agency and perhaps for new forms of politics.

Transformative politics are more directly the focus of chapter 5. Wright is the only figure discussed in the book with whom Beauvoir personally had an extensive intellectual and political relationship. They met when Wright was in Paris in 1946, he was her key guide to race matters during her tour of America in 1947, and their friendship continued long afterwards. Extending her discussion of the "perverse" identities of the oppressed, Marso reads Beauvoir along with Wright to explore the difficulties of building a new politics on their basis. Wright has no sympathy for the then-influential affirmation of "African" culture in the *negritude* movement or for celebrations of what he calls the "rot" of tradition among American blacks. Backward looking and falsely homogenizing, these

cannot be the basis for forward-looking movements of solidarity, he insists. Similarly, for Beauvoir, women must move beyond the myths of Woman, and not cling to traditional “femininity.” It is only in collective struggle and not on the basis of worn-out identities that a “we,” can be produced. For Wright, “solidarity” is essential and should cross class and race lines, while Beauvoir, as Marso recalls, ends *The Second Sex* with a demand for men and women to affirm their “brotherhood” (144). Wright and Beauvoir both portray the real, affective weight of oppressive identities while appealing for a politics of solidarity that may leave them behind.

Part III, “Friends,” begins by showing the costs of women’s isolation from each other, before arguing for the centrality of a politics of “feminist friendship” in which women can share conversations about topics other than men. Chapter 6 turns to film as a medium through which to portray perverse, yet real, forms of resistance pursued by some isolated women. It seems a lost opportunity, however, that Beauvoir’s novels, where the profound costs of women’s isolation from other women are frequently portrayed, are not used as a resource here. Disclosing the close emotional conjunction of sexual pleasure and danger, all three of the films treated (*Jeanne Dielman*, *Gone Girl*, and *Nymphomaniac*) depict an isolated and desperate woman who ends by committing violence against a man. The actions of all three women are pathological, and feminist critics have read these films as misogynistic. Marso argues, to the contrary, that each film may also (and better) be viewed through a “feminist lens” (175), as a study in perverse resistance. Not simply victims, these women demonstrate the distorted manifestation of agency that Beauvoir illustrates so well in *The Second Sex*. What they also illustrate is the need to redirect this agency toward collective resistance.

However, instead of further pursuing the politics of solidarity advocated in Part II, Marso ends the book by affirming what she calls “the freedom-enhancing potential of feminist friendship” (150) as the way forward. Chapter 7 begins by exploring Beauvoir’s relationship with Violette Leduc, as portrayed in the film *Violette*, and Marso very briefly suggests that the film raises the possibility of horizontal (what she calls “sororal”) bonds among women even when radical class and status differences prevail. Turning next to Arendt’s *Rahel Varnhagen*, she provides an excellent discussion of how the early Arendt portrayed the merging of private and public, delving sympathetically into Varnhagen’s affective life and showing how “what” her embodied identity was shaped “who” she was. Marso’s third exemplar of “feminist friendship” is Margarethe von Trotta’s film *Hannah Arendt*. Marso’s analysis offers much excellent discussion of Arendt’s own vital friendships with women and an interesting reflection on “thinking” as both a solitary “dialogue” with oneself and a dialogue with friends. However, although Arendt called Varnhagen her

“friend” and von Trotta speaks of how Arendt “increasingly became a friend” for her (199), I fail to see how affirming “friendship” with somebody who is dead can model the concrete bonds of reciprocity that are necessary if friendship is to be the vital feminist political resource that Marso claims.

Although Beauvoir certainly sees the pain of isolation as one of the egregious harms that women endure, she would not follow Marso in attributing such great significance to women’s friendships as a site for transformative feminist politics. For it is striking not only that *The Second Sex* ends with an appeal for solidarity among women *and* men but that friendship with women was not a vital aspect of Beauvoir’s own political activity. Indeed, she has been criticized for her lack of empathy for Djamila Boupacha, the tortured Algerian militant woman for whose freedom she organized a campaign during the Algerian war: Boupacha was arguably just “a case” Beauvoir used to attack the French public’s hypocrisy about torture in Algeria.

For Beauvoir, as for Wright, transformative politics requires solidarity more often than friendship. It frequently involves acting with those we may not particularly know or like in order to resist powerful state and other institutions. Furthermore, it may sometimes require us to objectify those with whom we act in solidarity, as Beauvoir did Boupacha. What Marso offers in her encounter with Beauvoir (and, in the company of Beauvoir, in her encounters with so many others) is a wonderful set of illustrations of the bodily and affective aspects of politics that are too often overlooked. However, as Beauvoir also shows us, “freedom in the encounter” may require that we act in more impersonal ways than Marso proposes, forming alliances with those who are not our “friends.”