Book Review: Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity

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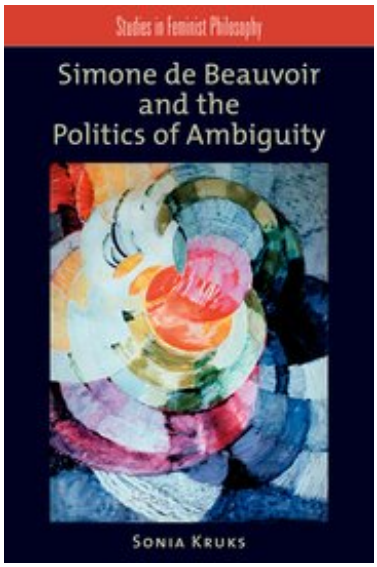
Best known as the author of The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir also wrote an array of other political and philosophical texts that are less well known. Together, these constitute an original contribution to political theory and philosophy, and this book aims to locate Beauvoir in her own intellectual and political context and demonstrate her continuing significance. Reviewed by ***Emily Coolidge Toker****.*

Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity. Sonia Kruks. Oxford University Press. December 2012.



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Sonia Kruks' *Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity* is a comprehensive, holistic treatment of Beauvoir's contributions to political thinking, drawn both from the full breadth of her written corpus and from her lived experiences during and following the German occupation of Paris. Although a great deal of attention is given to *The Second Sex*, Kruks is equally nimble when incorporating Beauvoir's lesser-known work, in particular her work on the elderly and her forays into fiction – a breadth of source material which greatly strengthens her contribution to the question at hand: the nature and possibilities of political agency.

Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is still very much present in the feminist movement. Most familiar is the opening line, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman," with which Beauvoir seriously jarred the long-standing equation of sex and gender. The latter came to be understood as a complex social construct – albeit one in which most women were fully complicit, and one which had to be internalized to be effective – while the former remained bound to the physical materiality of the body. This distinction, between the material body and the socially-influenced 'psyche' (for lack of a better word), and its implications, is at the heart of feminist thought. But that's not new. What's new here is the idea that this relationship between our physicality and the whole of ourselves as 'essence made body' could offer novel insights into the sphere of political action and individuals as political actors.

And this is Kruks's primary intention: to make the general public aware of the breadth and relevance of Beauvoir's "profoundly original and significant" contribution to political thinking (p.3). The ambiguity referred to in the title here is crucial, used throughout the book to bring attention to the "paradoxes and necessary failures of action" in which it results. As such, the word's original meaning – the ability of something to be interpreted in two or more equally reasonable ways – bears repeating: in Beauvoir's understanding, this idea is applied both to an action, which can have, presumably, as many legitimate 'meanings' as there are people to interpret it, and to the basal condition of human existence as both a physical body (acted upon, subject to, and moulded by social conditions) and the more difficult-to-pinpoint 'mind', which is tied to (but not necessarily contained within) the body.

Ambiguity, Kruks is careful to point out, is not necessarily a strict negative indicative of fault; rather, it is to be seen as a "quality of phenomena themselves, signifying their indeterminacy" and, most importantly for Beauvoir, is used "to denote relationships in which antithetical qualities coexist in agonistic tension" (p.6-7). The ambiguity most particularly relevant in political action and thought is, in Beauvoir's words, "the strange ambiguity of existence made body" (p.7), which becomes manifest in the vaporous but undeniable boundaries between self and society, and the various means by which a self and its actions acquire meaning.

This ambiguity is irresolvable for the very simple reason that we are not the sovereign, autonomous consciousnesses theorized by Enlightenment-era humanists; as such, the first and most profound point on which Beauvoir (through Kruks) insists, is that we come to terms with the ambiguities and tensions intrinsic to all action (and inaction). It is towards this end that Kruks mines Beauvoir's work for examples of how these ambiguities play out and what meaning they acquire in the political realm.

Let's look at a specific political action: suffragette Emily Davison throws herself under King George V's horse in 1913. This action could be legitimately interpreted as one of rebellion, defiance, accidental death, terrorism, suicide, martyrdom, and no doubt arguments could be made for any number of other interpretations. Anyone familiar with G. K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* has heard the argument for suicide and martyrdom being as polar opposites, and that two such radically different interpretations are readily applicable to Emily Davison's political action is a strong indication that Beauvoir's insistence on the inevitability of failure is not uncalled for. Add consideration of Ms. Davison's intentions and the muddled soup of personal and collective concerns to the variety of possible interpretations and the ambiguity becomes increasingly multifaceted, and clearly a necessary aspect of any action.

This does not make Beauvoir a feather in the cap of hard-core relativists, by any stretch. Rather, despite her scorn for "intransigent moralists" and "moral purists," Beauvoir considers political "realists" to be an equally shady example of "bad faith" – of wilful ignorance or self-deception, in this case of too readily accepting and absolving themselves of the consequences of a "realistic" lesser evil. Kruks writes: "this does not mean that action should not be guided by values. That existence is ambiguous does not mean that it is absurd or meaningless but rather that 'its meaning is never fixed, that it must be unceasingly won'. Thus, values must function as heuristics, as guidelines [...] rather than as commands to be followed blindly" (p.42). Beauvoir offers freedom as guidance for action, albeit one that neither dictates action (or inaction) nor "justif[ies] the injuries that a politics oriented towards expanding freedom may produce" (ibid).

While the reader may, at this point, be understandably frustrated, a thread running throughout the book provides an important indicator of the quality of this 'freedom'. This recurring theme is that of mutual recognition between individuals of others' embodied subjectivity, and can be followed through her analysis of Beauvoir's discussions of modes of dehumanization and oppression in the second chapter ("Theorizing Oppression"), through the difficult acknowledgment of "the impossibility of eliminating alterity and objectification from human relations" even when one is, in good faith, doing one's best to fulfil the obligation to struggle against oppressive/dehumanizing practices (discussed most explicitly in the third chapter, "Confronting Privilege").

This thread re-emerges in the fourth chapter, "Dilemmas of Political Judgement," as Kruks, through Beauvoir, explores the implications of viewing judgments as "acts of situated freedom" which "must exceed the application of principle" (p.125). She does so primarily through Henri Perron: the founder and editor of a left-leaning independent newspaper in Beauvoir's novel *The Mandarins* who finds himself, after the war, facing a series of difficult decisions with regard to his own future and the future of his newspaper. Caught between his desire to isolate himself from politics and resume his successful writing career (to become "the old Henri", a desire he ultimately realizes is impossible: the "old Henri" no longer exists), and his personal loyalty to his mentor and his broader loyalty to the Resistance, the judgements and decisions he makes are informed by a very messy combination of emotions (tied both to personal hopes and ideals, and to interpersonal relationships) and emotionless practical "reasoning."

In the last chapter, "'An Eye for an Eye': The Question of Revenge", Kruks uses Beauvoir's discussion of three different types of revenge – the desire for revenge on one's own behalf; on behalf of others; and in the context of legal prosecution – to tease out the relationships between the subjectivities involved, with the ultimate assertion that revenge always "fails to accomplish much of what is desired" (p.161).

The book itself is organized very much with the student in mind, with each chapter titled (and very nearly treated) as a discrete entity; and while some readers may be tempted to do likewise, the progression of Kruks' argument throughout the book requires more holistic attention to avoid drawing incorrect or overly simplistic conclusions about Beauvoir's contribution.

Beauvoir, if presented with this volume, would find herself competently situated both historically and in political and feminist theory. And she would feel herself certainly among friends: a great deal of ink is spilt defending Beauvoir against a number of very specific criticisms, stemming mostly from second-wave feminists. This attention, while of course useful to a certain extent, nevertheless distracts from Kruks's much more interesting and original readings of Beauvoir's corpus.

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