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Marine Rouch

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Beauvoirian disturbances : Review of a French workshop

Compte rendu de la journée d'études « Perturbation, ma sœur. Actualité de la pensée beauvoirienne », Toulouse, novembre 2017.

Publié dans la newsletter de The International Simone de Beauvoir Society

At the dawn of her 110th birthday, a workshop on Simone de Beauvoir took place at the University of Toulouse Jean Jaurès, on November 20th, coorganized by Sylvie Chaperon, Marine Rouch and Justine Zeller.

The title « Perturbation, ma sœur. Actualité de la pensée beauvoirienne » was chosen in tribute to the well-known book by the French feminist Cathy Berheim, *Perturbation ma sœur. Naissance d'un mouvement de femmes* (Seuil, 1983) and, by extension, to the MLF (Mouvement de Libération des femmes) which Beauvoir supported. Also, « *perturbation* », (disturbance in English) was the theme that our laboratory chose to explore this year : it was a word that, we thought, suited Beauvoir, her life and her ideas extraordinarily well.

« *Perturbation* » is thus what we explored through Beauvoir's gender disturbance and fluctuating sexual identity, the valorization of the ambiguity in her philosophy, the way she challenged the society, the way she inspired women and led them on the path of emancipation...

Beauvoir studies in 2018 France

But first, the workshop was the occasion to outline Beauvoir's study on the eve of her 110th birthday. For Beauvoir was treated harshly in her own country – and as she still is, it seems more than important to highlight how much she can still bring to us. And the most recent academic works are sufficient proof.

French Beauvoir studies turned over a new leaf at the beginning of the 90's with the arrival of a new generation of researchers. The new interpretations and works on Beauvoir's life and work allowed the consolidation and legitimation of her intellectual position. But Simone de Beauvoir is not a consensual woman and if a few French works, such as Michelle Le Doeuff's *L'étude et le rouet*, tried to demonstrate the pioneering of her thought, she is still suffering from both her personal contradictions and Jean-Paul Sartre's shadow. If Sartre studies almost never mention the twinning of the two intellectuals, the works on Beauvoir's philosophical thought's independence constitute an important subfield : Let's think about

Edward and Kate Fullbrooks' books, or about those, unavoidable, of Margaret A. Simons and Eva Gothlin.

In France, since the beginning of the Twenty-First century, studies on Beauvoir's feminism are falling in favor of literary studies. Among the most recent ones, are *La Fabrique des mémoires* by Amandine Martin-Golay (2013) who analyzes the origins of Beauvoir's autobiographical project and how she created a hybrid form of memoir, between what belongs to private and public spheres; or *L'existence comme un roman* by Delphine Nicolas-Pierre (2016) who reintroduces Beauvoir within the history of French novels. The admission of Beauvoir's autobiographical work in the most famous collection of Gallimard, *La Pléiade*, is awaited in 2018.

Philosophy is not outdone with doctoral researches at the intersection of literary studies and philosophy. A doctoral research is being conducted by Mimose Andre and focuses on Beauvoir's project of a socialist feminism. Other doctoral researches have already been conducted on the beauvoirian experience of death and melancholy (Pierre-Louis Fort 2004¹, Jing Zhao 2014², Sou Linne Baik 2017³).

Regarding history, anthropology and sociology, they are highly under-represented - and even absent - disciplines. A search in the French doctoral subjects' directory⁴, shows that no research is being or was conducted in anthropology or in sociology. Only one relates to history (Marine Rouch⁵), years after historian Sylvie Chaperon wrote her doctoral dissertation about the influence of *The Second Sex* in post-war France. Afterward, Sylvie Chaperon wrote several papers on Simone de Beauvoir's position within the intellectual and feminist field. This under-representation is especially surprising given the extraordinary diversity of Beauvoir's work which invites interdisciplinary studies on various topics.

Indeed, Beauvoir's life and work could feed the history of political and social movements (Algerian war, Vietnam and Russel Tribunal, and, of course, the Second Wave feminist movements), sexual history (*The Second Sex*, Beauvoir's private life), and even the history of tourism as journeys had a huge place in her life. On this subject, a doctoral dissertation has been defended in 2012 by Tiphaine Martin who focused on travel writings within the Memoirs.

¹ Écriture et deuil : la mort chez Marguerite Yourcenar, Simone de Beauvoir et Annie Ernaux

² *La mélancolie entre philosophie et littérature : lecture de l'œuvre autobiographique de Simone de Beauvoir* par Jing Zhao, 2014.

³ *Fictions de soi : l'écriture du deuil dans les oeuvres romanesques de Simone de Beauvoir*

⁴ www.theses.fr

⁵ *Si j'en suis arrivée là, c'est grâce à vous". Ecritures des femmes et des hommes "ordinaire" : le lectorat de Simone de Beauvoir.*

Many more ideas of research could be invented but one can already agree on the fact that Beauvoir studies, in France and other countries are destined for a bright future. Two vast conferences have reinvigorated them. The first one was held in 1999 upon the fiftieth birthday of *The Second Sex* (co-organized by Sylvie Chaperon and Christine Delphy), the second in 2008 on the occasion of Simone de Beauvoir's hundredth birthday (organized by Julia Kristeva). One might take place in Paris in 2018 along with various events to celebrate her 110th birthday. Regarding doctoral researches: since 2010, 7 were defended and 10 are being pursued.

But we are facing a cloud on the horizon for if French Beauvoir studies are flourishing, they lack visibility, maybe due to a lack of unity and legitimacy. The transversal aspect of Beauvoir's work has been encountering the strict separation of French academic disciplines, whereas the United States have their *Simone de Beauvoir Society* which gathers researchers from various disciplines since the 80's. A glimmer of hope came in 2012 with a latest attempt of an interdisciplinary book on Beauvoir, which contains a lot of until then unpublished documents that could bring new food for thought⁶.

We tried to join this movement and gathered philosophers, historians and one linguist to investigate some of the « *perturbations* » that came from Beauvoir⁷.

« Perturbation » #1: Lighting domestic work

Long before French materialist feminist Christine Delphy's work, Simone de Beauvoir perceived the specificity of domestic work for women. María Luisa Femenías, Argentinian philosopher, chose to explore the work question to show that in 1949, Beauvoir's conception of work is close to Engels' philosophy and a socialist interpretation of society.

Beauvoir refers to work with a specific lexical field: monotony, oppression and subordination. In *The Second Sex*, she applies these ideas to domestic work and analyzes the way it is lived by women according to their situation (women workers [in farms or factories] or bourgeois housewives for example). But first, she stresses the education of girls that focuses on the house and keeps them away from productive work (as opposed to reproductive work).

⁶ Cahiers de l'Herne

⁷ Unfortunately, Hourya Bentouhami could not join us to talk about the Gender/Race relation in Beauvoir's work. Her work : <http://erraphis.univ-tlse2.fr/accueil-erraphis/hourya-bentouhami-300141.kjsp>

“Ce n’est pas sans regret qu’elle referme derrière elle les portes du foyer ; jeune fille, elle avait toute la terre pour patrie ; les forêts lui appartenaient. A présent, elle est confinée dans un étroit espace ; la Nature se réduit aux dimensions d’un pot de géranium ; des murs barrent l’horizon » (TSS, 2, p. 259)

Or :

« Ces dialectiques peuvent donner au travail ménager l’attrait d’un jeu : la fillette s’amuse volontiers à faire briller l’argenterie, à astiquer les boutons de porte. » (TSS, 2, p. 263.)

This situation also comes from a socialization of the feminine strength as Beauvoir writes in the introduction of her essay, which assigns production to men and reproduction and primary tasks to women.

From then on, Beauvoir considers that women’s defeat lies on this sexual work division. Indeed, this matter of fact makes them dependent on men since they live among and with them and can hardly form a group. They do not have an egalitarian access to work and many social structures, such as maternity leave or the banning of extended work, are confirmation that women are relegated to the household and that their salary is just a contribution.

Still, they work – inside and outside their household. The last pages of *The Second Sex*’s “History” part explores different situations. Inside the household, it is the “supplice de Sisyphe”:

“Jour après jour, il faut laver les plats, épousseter les meubles, reprendre le linge qui seront à nouveau demain salis, poussiéreux, déchirés. La ménagère s’use à piétiner sur place ; elle ne fait rien ; elle perpétue seulement le présent ; elle n’a pas l’impression de conquérir un Bien positif mais de lutter indéfiniment contre le Mal. » (TSS, 2, p. 264.) ;

« Laver, repasser, balayer, dépister les moutons tapis sous la nuit des armoires, c’est arrêtant la mort refuser aussi la vie : car d’un seul mouvement le temps crée et détruit. » (p. 265).

Women from bourgeoisie backgrounds often do not have a salaried work. Sometimes, they have maids to assist them. But others cannot and have to reconcile those two lives: *“Il en va tout autrement pour l’ouvrière, l’employée, la secrétaire, la vendeuse, qui travaille au-dehors. Il leur est beaucoup plus difficile de concilier leur métier avec le soin du ménage (courses, préparation des repas, nettoyage, entretien des vêtements demandent au moins trois heures et demie de travail quotidien et six heures le dimanche ; c’est un chiffre considérable quand il s’additionne à celui des heures d’usine ou de bureau). »* (TSS, 1, p. 231.)

Discussions during this session pointed out the fact that, despite those negative interpretations of work, Beauvoir, especially in the 70’s – argues that human beings need

work to realize themselves. For that to be possible, capitalist society must end and move on to a socialist and more egalitarian work organization. Indeed, in 1949, Beauvoir thinks that the advent of socialism will improve women's condition. But in the 1970's, she concedes that sex struggle needs to prevail over class struggle and that a socialist society won't mean women's emancipation. Only a financial independence will help women to emancipate themselves. But sacrifices will have to be made, she warned several times.

For María Luisa Femenías, it is because Beauvoir considers that power relations exist between men and women that she can perceive the specific women's relationships to work and thus, understand how *the Woman* was historically built as the Other. From a macropolitical point of view, Beauvoir's work allows one to consider a larger structure of men and women's power relations.

« Perturbation » #2: Theorizing the ambiguity

Beauvoir's theorization of ambiguity could shake our thought and social structures up. That is what Françoise Rétif proposes to explore from the first beauvoirian philosophical essays, *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and her youth diary. Ambiguity implies an idea of duality which is a characteristic of Beauvoir: she is as complex as her entire work. Françoise Rétif introduces the notion of androgyny, which she developed in her essay *Simone de Beauvoir: l'autre en miroir* (1998). Indeed, the youth diary shows how Beauvoir defines herself in ambiguity - between "masculine and feminine". Her bourgeois family circle imposed on her a model according to which there is no symmetry between genders. Masculine incarnates superiority through knowledge and intellectual life – to which F. Rétif refers to as the cultural side -, whereas feminine is relegated to spiritual life – referred to as the natural side. But the young Beauvoir cannot adapt to those principles and tries to philosophically handle her internal conflicts. She early decides that she won't give up on anything :

« *Et puis, mes chers amis, vous n'aimez pas les jeunes filles, mais songez que non seulement elles ont une raison à satisfaire, mais un cœur lourd à comprimer. Et en cela je veux rester femme, plus masculine encore par le cerveau, plus féminine par la sensibilité* » (Cahiers de jeunesse, p. 374).

Or later:

« *je suis terriblement avide, aussi, je veux tout de la vie, être une femme et aussi un homme* » (Letter to Nelson Algren, July 3rd, 1947).

Simone de Beauvoir adds value to ambiguity in a process of correction of Philosophy in general and sartrean existentialism particularly, which do not consider human beings as consciousness incarnated in bodies. Plus, Sartre, in the 30's and the 40's, insists on human failure: « Et il est vrai aussi que dans l'Être et le Néant, Sartre a surtout insisté sur le côté manqué de l'existence humaine » (Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté, p. 17). For Beauvoir, bodies and passion can reconcile them through (physical and psychological) pleasure during which one is subject and object at the same time. The Other – one's existence, one's freedom - becomes necessary.

That is how Beauvoir reintroduces nature and body in order to create a balance. The philosopher was one of the first – if not the first – to invent gender in its current acceptance but her ethics of ambiguity invites to think over the traditional boundary between men and women, between culture and nature.

Sylvie Chaperon's talk echoes Françoise Rétif's considerations for she shows that Beauvoir's double gender identification is perceptible in her sexual life. The historian advances the hypothesis according to which Beauvoir was a physical and psychological bisexual before the word even took the meaning it has today. John Gagnon, which considers sexuality as both sexual and social phenomenon, uses what he calls "sexual script" in order to understand sexual conducts that take place out of norms. Sylvie Chaperon proposes to interpret Beauvoir's ambiguous sexual life in light of Gagnon's theory. Beauvoir's sexual script is characterized by the flame theme: her passionate friendships with young girls sometimes become sexual, or, some other times, stay platonic. Those "flames" are only accepted – although they are forbidden by law – because they are regarded as transitory, and consequently do not challenge norms. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir treats this kind of conducts as so: Is not "The lesbian" chapter in the "Formation" part?

« Perturbation » #3: leading women towards emancipation

Simone de Beauvoir led millions of women on the path of emancipation, inviting them to shake not only their daily life but also society, and to assert themselves. Simone de Beauvoir was a tireless letters writer. Her published correspondences (To Sartre, Algren and Bost) show this but the letters she received from her readers confirm that more. Those letters, which she used to answer almost systematically, are kept at the Bibliothèque nationale de

France since 1995⁸. Marine Rouch is pursuing a doctoral research on them. They allow the evaluation of Beauvoir's work influence and reception by anonymous people. From 1958, letters written by women are majority: 60% in 1958, more than 80% in 1959 and between 68% and 72% in the next years. The autobiography seems to have been what pushed women to write the author: Beauvoir seems closer while *The Second Sex*, although revolutionary, was a dry reading.

« Après vos mémoires, vous êtes descendue d'un piédestal, dans le bon sens, vous êtes devenue plus humaine et votre supériorité culturelle et intellectuelle ne vous rend plus si lointaine. »⁹ (Letter, 20, june 1959)

Thus, from the first volume of the autobiography, Beauvoir has become a privileged confidante and has been receiving testimonies on women's private lives: pregnancies, abortions, loneliness, domestic violence etc. In her replies (not kept, but Marine Rouch found some of them) Beauvoir appears as an intellectual mentor and personal counselor.

Since letters to writer allow the readership's concretization to the writer's eye, Marine Rouch proposes the hypothesis of an influence in return of these women letters on Simone de Beauvoir's feminist, intellectual and militant path. Indeed, the radicalization in Beauvoir's militancy corresponds to the peak in letters written by women in which they confide themselves and appropriate Beauvoir's work. This hypothesis is being pursued.

As a linguist, Alice Caffarel-Cayron – like Beauvoir and Halliday – considers language as a way to act upon the world. Halliday writes: « Language is not only a way of thinking about the world; it is also, at one and the same time, a way of acting on the world – which means, of course, acting on the other people in it. » (2009:4¹⁰). From this theory, Alice Caffarel-Cayron tries to understand how Beauvoir's language and conception of literature act upon her readers through a transcendental force. She bases her talk on a particular correspondence: her mother's. On July 11st 1964, Claire Cayron wrote Simone de Beauvoir for the first time, after reading *Force of Circumstance*:

« L'année dernière, c'est après avoir lu la *Force des Choses* que m'est venue l'envie de vous écrire et de solliciter votre avis sur ma première tentative d'expression. C'est encore le cas aujourd'hui. Vous avez mis dans ce livre un tel pouvoir de communication, un tel besoin même (me semble-t-il), qu'il paraît normal, l'ayant clos, de venir bavarder avec vous. »

The two women engage in a regular correspondence that shows the transformations of the reader. When she first wrote Beauvoir, Claire Cayron was a single and unemployed

⁸ NAF 28501.

⁹ Lettre du 20 juin 1959.

¹⁰ Halliday, M.A.K. (2009). *The Essential Halliday*, edited by Jonathan Webster. Continuum

mother. Over the years, she is pushed by Beauvoir to write and publish books: *La nature chez Simone de Beauvoir* (1972), *Divorce en France* (1974). To Alice Caffarel-Cayron, Beauvoir's language is dialogical. In her work and letters, she invites people to respond, to talk to her. By analyzing this, the linguist seeks to understand Beauvoir's influence on "millions of hearts".

Focusing on "perturbations" has allowed scholars to see more clearly the complexity and the ambiguity of Beauvoir's work's but also its ability to interrogate our current representations. At this birthday year, let's venture that more and new reflections will challenge Beauvoir studies.

Marine Rouch. January 2018.