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## *Simone de Beauvoir, philosophe*

About the book of Michel Kail (Paris, Puf, 2006)

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**Abstract:** Michel Kail's analysis never unravels the points of tension, of ambiguity, of paradox, that is to say the contradictions present in Beauvoir's ideas. It takes these contradictions into consideration, rather than trying to explain them away, exploiting the wealth and the originality upon which rest the foundations of this finely-worked articulation. This constitutes most certainly the greatest merit of this great little book.

**Résumé:** L'analyse de Michel Kail ne dénoue jamais les points de tension, d'ambiguïté, de paradoxe, voire de contradiction que recèle la pensée beauvoirienne. Elle les prend plutôt en considération, en exploitant la richesse et l'originalité où repose les soubassements de cette articulation très oeuvrée. C'est ce qui constitue assurément le plus grand mérite qu'on peut assigner à ce petit grand livre.

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## *Simone de Beauvoir, philosophe. About the book of Michel Kail (Paris, Puf, 2006)*

Deise Quintiliano

If Jean-Paul Sartre's hundredth birthday was celebrated in 2005 by a considerable number of events the world over, the year of 2006 marks the twentieth anniversary of Simone de Beauvoir's disappearance. The wealth of her ideas, the rigor of her reflections, and the creativity of her analysis are incidentally presented in the new book *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophe*, which has recently been published by Presses universitaires de France and authored by Michel Kail.

Using primarily the arguments developed in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, the author returns to the question at the heart of the work, "what is a woman?" which the structure of Simone de Beauvoir's questioning. Michel Kail undertakes an in-depth study of her philosophy starting with Beauvoir's thesis according to which « a woman's dependence is not the result of any event that has already occurred". Examining this dependence, however, results usually in a lack of response as the things we know do not seem able to explain or explore it in depth. Effectively, our knowledge refuses to take on the anguish that questioning an authentically assumed existence would cause. The author strives to make the flat surface of this depthless lake reflect to help understand Simone de Beauvoir's constant inquiries.

In this vein, Michel Kail takes inventory of the elements which define and make up this "domination": the establishment of the defeated as Other, woman's compliance to this attributed role of Other, and the profound complications that keep them from taking charge of their own responsibilities even though their freedom may be inevitable... Simone de Beauvoir unmasks definitively the hidden factors that keep women confined in this depiction of the absolute Other, assurance of men's dominance, that no biological or psychoanalytic analysis or result of deterministic materialism can justify. Additionally, this idea of a new materialism constitutes the real touchstone of Beauvoir's theories. In redefining the term « world," which she considers as a language, for "things speak to us", the writer-philosopher helps us to understand the inter-subjectivity that constantly transfers between subject and object in her revaluation and modification of the assigned status of the "body."

Demonstrating that, according to Beauvoir, the body *is* history, Michel Kail dissects the philosopher's rereading of this real anchorage which penetrates existence, allowing for vital

communications with the world. Beauvoir underlines, in addition, that apprehended as existence, the *pour-soi* proves that a body that cannot be reduced to its spiritual dimension -- and it is through phenomenology that her philosophy seeks to disobjectify the body and despiritualize the *pour-soi*.

This connection of Beauvoir's positions with the theories of Merleau-Ponty (in *Phénoménologie de la perception*) establishes a convergence between the thoughts of both philosophers and articulates a polyphonic dialogue among Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre. In the years that preceded Sartre's "ultra-Bolshevik phase" of *Les Communistes et la paix*, Merleau-Ponty still thought Sartre capable of considering the existence of an action other than « pure action, » governed by the directives of an un-thought-out philosophy of the will, likely to limit its thoughts to the philosophy of a substantial subject. Using precise language, Kail untangles the complicated knot of Merleau-Ponty's radical and equivocal comprehension of Sartre's positions, and the compromise that Beauvoir skillfully sketches between them, and succeeds in releasing from Sartre's ontology the "caricature" that Merleau-Ponty saw it as. In all of this, Kail questions the existence of the "*intermonde*," key word that defines the latter's philosophical concepts. This support of Sartre's innovations which disarticulate the links of the traditional subject-object dualism; the supremacy of the reflexive model and the philosophy of the will; the relationship that Sartre's analyses bear to the distinction between freedom and will; just like Beauvoir's denouncement of the way in which men have rejected women as what they call Other; to finally reach a means to a systematic anti-naturalism; these are the fundamental themes of *Le Deuxième Sexe*.

The original contribution of Beauvoir's thoughts relates to, according to Michel Kail, the theorization of situations and human liberty as they pertain to politics. Refuting the dualism of subject (that Sartre would have done away with) and the object (from which Merleau-Ponty forms his interrogations on the concept of nature,) and in concentrating on the evaluation of a given circumstance – the oppression of women - Beauvoir invested the link between philosophy and politics. From this perspective, freedom and the situation are not simply terms that she has juxtaposed in her reflections; what is important, in effect, is the relationship between freedom, considered as the "revelation of existence," and the situation, presented as the "thing being revealed" itself, separated by our own subjectivity as well as that of others because "all men have to deal with other men."

Based on Sonia Kruks' research, Kail's interpretation highlights the influence that Beauvoir exerted on Sartre's philosophy, as the latter adopted, at the end of the 1940's, a social philosophy which reevaluates his individualist concept of freedom, an idea that did not appear in *L'Être et le Néant*, but one that Beauvoir had been exploring since the beginning of the 1940's.

The power of the oppressor originates in his incapacity to recognize that those whom he has oppressed exist or to anticipate that the situation might change, even that the future will not only bring more of the same. This closed view of the future is objectifying: it reduces hope to something imaginary or to a sort of dream that anchors freedom to the limits of the human condition. These barriers, however, do not make up, precisely, freedom's limits as liberty cannot exist except in a given situation. The importance given to the body allows for the discounting of physiology and biologism from one's analysis as, from the moment that the courteous aspect of human relations makes itself known, the concept of the body doesn't distinguish itself from the consciousness. This being so, the « pour-soi » (that's to say, the subject) does not abide in crystal purity; it is rather a fixed and socially-conditioned freedom, from which comes the interdependence of subjectivities that allows for the subject's exploration in all of its fragility. This debate on the subject's acceptance of its domination allows Kail to allude to Sonia Kruks' theories, as she reflects on the fundamentally innovative aspect of Beauvoir's critique with regards to *Le Deuxième Sexe's* detractors, because the philosopher, unlike Sartre and Hegel, proposes a concept of degrees of freedom, one that blurs the precise definitions of free and constraint actions, for both find themselves dependant on social situations capable of changing the idea of liberty itself.

The central issue is not woman's Otherness as it is, but rather the fact that this Otherness is not reciprocated by woman towards man. It is the definition of woman as an unequal and submissive Other that requires a profound exploration. Kail explores this original aspect of Beauvoir's thoughts to explain the need that the dominated have to legitimize their domination or to restrict themselves to the small concessions offered to them. In other words, no domination can be questioned by the Other, nor can it possibly be in error. This constitutes a risk to the oppressor, who knows it well, reinforcing the prospect of a human universality of freedom. Simone de Beauvoir's originality lies in the fact that she proposes as many new solutions as there are specific problems to be solved: all freedoms are at stake faced with all others, for better or worse, in which the best possible outcome is the recognition by one's own freedom of that of others.

This reasoning allows for interesting remarks by the author on "paradox and freedom." Alerting us to the fact that, according to Beauvoir, our relations to one other are never fixed firm but are modified at every instant, he indicates how Beauvoir introduces the concept of imprecision into the precision that symbolizes the law of the human condition: "In this precise situation, imprecision is the rule, for every act of a subject isolated by his subjectivity gives rise to another act done by another subject isolated by his own subjectivity." There is no possible addition because to claim that such an addition exists would reinforce *a contrario* to the intention of the person that would claim it, this imprecision." Humanity is a disjointed series, for human acts are

never transmitted by some kind of atavism, they rather happen *de per si*. Any thesis which tries to make up for this disjointedness instead reflects back on the concept of human nature. Ridding her work of dialectic in the treatment of paradox, Beauvoir shows that paradox is the very truth of the human condition. Unlike Hegel, who immediately judged paradox intolerable and confused it with contradiction, Beauvoir devalues the discursive strategies which strive to overcome paradox in qualifying them inauthentic.

Beauvoir's hermeneutics apply themselves, thus, in ambiguities and relationships, which, far from restricting her to the confines of a behaviorist psychology, lead her to the open horizon of situational freedom. It is from the relation between writing and perversion, moreover, that the study of Sade ("Must Sade be burned?") corroborates Beauvoir's philosophic reflections. In pushing the human condition to its limit, the conjunction of sexuality and the literary, here defined as "excess," enables Sade to consider, according to Beauvoir, ethics as a work of literature. It is for this reason that Sade's eroticism, as well as his concept of cruelty, considered in all of its complexity, leads us to the ethical meaning of his work, which does not limit itself to a mere biologism but rather urges us to consider sexuality as a social issue.

Thus considered as a spectacle by the intermediary of literary distribution, the erotic act offered Sade a legion of reader-voyeurs that no orgy could have given him. His literature precedes the advent of psychoanalysis and satisfies the imagination by means of its ability to be represented in writing. It is this which enables the Marquis de Sade to avoid, unwittingly, any kind of determination or determinism; this literature makes explicit, all the while, the author's ethical anxiety. Sade's affirmation that everything human is determined here on earth agrees with Terence's famous sentence: "homo sum : humani nihil a me alienum puto," and with the avatars of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century who replaced the idea of God with the very suitable *physis*, confusing sexual desire with life's very motion. Nevertheless, Sade's work is not merely an exaltation of the natural instinct that revives sexuality. The author also considers it an invitation to crime. While Sade points out the voracious nature of this instinct, with an original ethical decision – Kail shows us – a man can choose it, all the while accepting crime: "suivons-la."

The breakdown of transcendent values as well as Sade's anti-determinism and atheism bring to light Beauvoir's intention to establish a new conception of the "world," in which eroticism would constitute the only means of communication to be had for mankind. Beauvoir acknowledged Sade's great « power to inspire reflection » especially as it relates to sexuality and ethics. The fact that sexuality represents a concrete manifestation of existence which does not denote, to Sade, an unchanging concept leads to the philosophy that will eventually foresee the current theoretical discussions concerning the exploration of the difference between sex and gender. These studies lead Christine Delphy to affirm, in 1989, that while the primacy of sex over gender is historically

explainable, it is not nearly as theoretically justifiable. This statement contradicts the antecedent of sex over gender and touches on the preexistence of gender over sex: that sex (man/woman) only exists because society has fabricated it as something unrelated to gender definitions (male/female.)

With no preliminary preconceptions Kail's study underlines the contradictions and paradoxes indicated by Beauvoir between, on one hand, the desire for freedom from domination and, on the other hand, the fear of real emancipation from categorical taxonomies. It is by this analysis of "oppression" and its political acceptance that Beauvoir's thoughts differentiate themselves from the doxa which would rather allude to the "feminine condition," using a basic, naturalist explanation to evaluate this social phenomenon. The principles of biology reinforce the hostility elicited by the term "female" towards that of "male," to which Beauvoir reacts to this in presenting the central thesis of the *Deuxième Sexe*: "Woman is Other because she is no more than her sex in a world where the rules are fundamentally masculine." Biology's theses lend themselves to confirming masculine platitudes such as those mentioned above, those which Beauvoir strives to unmask as she questions the prejudices that constitute the ontologic foundation of sexual differentiation.

In fact, concerning the behavior of human females, Beauvoir remarks that the embryo defines itself as androgynous, according to which it preserves either the father or the mother's embryo: "Woman, like man, *is* body : but her body is something else than she is." The idea of sex is apparently very complicated and it hides behind the concept of gender the "exact facts" that are, in fact, only relationships, just like the facts that are meant to allow sexuality to exist. The real importance is held by the physical body, the one lived in by the subject, rather than the body-object that science describes, for "it is not nature that defines a woman; rather, she defines herself in taking nature into account as per its affectivity."

Despite her recognition of the contribution of psychoanalysis to the psycho-physiologic model of sexual analysis, Beauvoir insists on one conclusive point: from no vantage point other than that of existence can the meanings of body and sexuality be discovered. The author also establishes that psychoanalysis eludes the existential perspective from the moment where it dismisses Woman as Other : "Man is defined as a human being and woman as a female : every time that she acts like a human being it is said that she's imitating the male."

Beauvoir's reflections are able to surpass the perspectives offered by the three traditional narratives, those of psychoanalysis, historic materialism, and biology, by paying attention to the "fundamental effort of the person who exists to transform himself into a being." This hypothesis of interpretation reflects back on the "original choice" suggested by Sartre's existential psychoanalysis, which takes into account « man as a whole and not as a collectivity" and

considers each human action, no matter how trivial, very revealing in critical evaluation. Beauvoir calls upon a dimension of freedom in which the woman finds herself in a world of values by which she has to invent solutions at every moment to overcome her alienation as an Object.

Kail doesn't hide the difficulties that Beauvoir finds as she resorts to ontology at the expense of sociology, for example, to explain the "that has not yet occurred" which constitutes the main idea of her work. In effect, it is this ontological ambiguity that expresses the social conditions of existence. As it warns us that there are only links, no concrete facts, ontology discredits nature, biology, and the substantial subject. The new routes opened by Beauvoir's reflection, suggesting eternal surveillance, allow us to develop a systematic argument that philosophy has not before conceived of on this issue. Michel Kail's analysis never unravels the points of tension, of ambiguity, of paradox, that is to say the contradictions present in Beauvoir's ideas. It takes these contradictions into consideration, rather than trying to explain them away, exploiting the wealth and the originality upon which rest the foundations of this finely-worked articulation, constituting most certainly the greatest merit of this great little book.