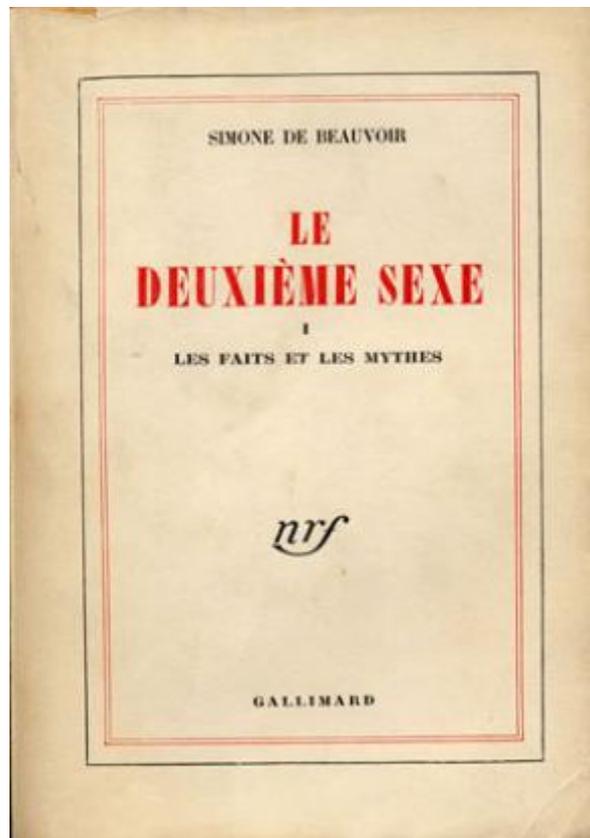


The reception of *The Second Sex* in Europe

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ABSTRACT

From the date of its publication in France in May 1949 to the 2000s, the European reception of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*—of which the French component is well known—gave rise to many debates and critiques in literary and political circles as well as among feminists. Its contents indeed challenged the dominant sexual order, and served as an invitation for the liberation of morals and gender equality. Neither the work nor its reception can be separated from the rest of the author's work, or from her life, travels, and political commitments. Until the mid-1960s, the critical reception was closely linked to the international diffusion of French existentialism as well as the political and cultural logic of the Cold War. Feminist debates dominated from the 1960s to the 1980s, before the development of Beauvoirian studies led to a scholarly reevaluation of the book.





In *The Second Sex*, which was published by Gallimard in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) directly attacked

the dominant sexual order: she called for the liberalization of contraception and abortion, rehabilitated feminine homosexuality, emphasized the violence of sexual relations, and dispelled the myths of the maternal instinct, femininity, and maternity. The French reception of the lengthy essay was highly polemical. When one of the chapters appeared in the journal *Les Temps Modernes* in May 1949, François Mauriac (1885-1970) sparked a controversy in the literary supplement of the newspaper *Figaro*. He was indignant that the “literature of Saint-Germain-des-Prés” had reached the “limits of the abject” with the text entitled “Sexual Initiation of the young woman,” and encouraged Christian youth to react. Approximately forty responses were published in the ensuing issues. Major press outlets and most literary reviews seized upon the debate as a way of challenging the post-war cultural hegemony of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and his review: both of them were targeted through de Beauvoir.

Often using similar arguments, communist and right-wing circles—proponents of a traditional morality—proved the most aggressive in their criticism of the book, while progressive Christians and the non-communist left supported all or part of de Beauvoir’s arguments.

The scandal sparked by the work propelled it to the top of sales in France: 22,000 copies were sold in the first weeks, and over a million in less than forty years. In Europe, the book was of particular interest to Francophile circles close to existentialism, with whom Sartre and de Beauvoir met during their travels in connection with their increasing number of interviews and conferences. French cultural centres abroad thus played a driving role in the essay’s impact. The political dividing-lines present in France went beyond its borders: Christian intellectuals refused the atheist logic of existentialism and the shattering of traditional sexual morality, while communists criticized it—as they did any form of feminism—for its idealistic, individualistic, and bourgeois vision.

In Western Europe, the first translation appeared in the FRG in 1951 under the title *Das andere Geschlecht* (The Other Sex). The book was republished three times and sold 14,000 copies in five years. The critiques, of which there were few, were dominated by faith-based arguments rejecting the challenge to the essence of femininity and maternity, or to marital commitment. However, in both French- and German-speaking Switzerland, the reception of the work was positive and even enthusiastic.

It was by way of a translation from the United States—on the initiative of the New York editor Blanche Knopf (1894-1966), who promoted the work of many French intellectuals—that English speakers in Europe gained access to the book. Its translation was entrusted to Howard Parshley (1884-1953), a retired professor of zoology, specialist in reproduction, and eminent critic of books about sex. At the initiative of the publishers, who were mindful of helping the average reader, and with little help from de Beauvoir, who disregarded his correspondence, he stripped the text of its philosophical content. *The Second Sex* was published in 1953 with a naked woman seen from behind on the cover. The Briton Jonathan Cape purchased this American translation the same year, and published it immediately.

In Italy, it was not until 1961 that Il Saggiatore published the work under the title *Il secondo sesso*, while the Vatican put it on the Index in 1956. Banned by the dictatorships of the Iberian peninsula, it began to circulate secretly in 1954 via Argentina thanks to the philosophy publisher Psique. After an initial refusal, the Spanish Ministry of Information and Tourism authorized the translation of the essay into Catalan in 1968, by the publishing house Edicions 62. In Portugal, *O segundo sexo* was read in its Brazilian translation published by Edipe (São Paulo, 1960). In Eastern Europe, where gender equality was supposed to have been achieved, censorship was severe. In Yugoslavia, the Serbo-Croatian translation (*Drugipol*) from the late 1960s was not published until 1982, but met with success. In East Berlin, it took until the fall of the Berlin Wall for the publisher Volk und Welt to publish the work in 1989, and until 1997 for Progress Publishers to release it in Russian.

Simone de Beauvoir’s growing fame—crowned by the prix Goncourt in 1954 for *The Mandarins*, and basking in the

success of *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* in 1958 and the impact of second-wave feminism in the 1970s—created a favourable environment for the work. The public and critics subsequently approached de Beauvoir’s essays much more positively. Feminist intellectuals relayed, commented on, supported, and popularized the writer’s arguments: in France, Françoise d’Eaubonne (1920-2005), Colette Audry (1906-1990), Célia Bertin (1920-2014), Andrée Michel (born in 1920); in Spain, Maria Campo Alange (1902-1986) and Maria Aurelia Capmany (1918-1991), the “Catalan de Beauvoir”; in the FRG, Alice Schwarzer (born in 1942); in the GDR, Irene Selle (born in 1947)... Nevertheless, in the mid-1960s, some women protested against the hegemony of the work in feminist debates, and attempted to positively reevaluate femininity and especially maternity, seen as the essence of being a woman. This was notably the case in France with the radio journalist Ménie Grégoire (1919-2014) or the writer Geneviève Gennari (1920-2001), and in Belgium with the philosopher Suzanne Lilar (1901-1992). At the centre of the MLF’s battles, in which de Beauvoir took part mainly alongside revolutionary feminists, new readings of *The Second Sex* appeared through a psychoanalytic interpretation and a reflection on feminine writing. Antoinette Fouque (1936-2014), Luce Irigaray (born in 1930), Hélène Cixous (born in 1937), and Julia Kristeva (born in 1941) insisted on the specific features of “being a woman”, forming a trend that American female intellectuals named “French feminism”.

From the 1990s, commentaries on *The Second Sex* were increasingly scholarly and dispassionate, as feminist studies became institutionalized in the academic world. The commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of *The Second Sex*, and that of the centenary of de Beauvoir’s birth, were marked by republications, conferences, publications, films, and press files across the globe. The quality of early translations was called into question, with feminist networks proposing new ones and calling on specialists in philosophy or feminism, with new introductions or postscripts by analysts on the thought and influence of de Beauvoir (Germany 1992, Spain 1998, United Kingdom 2009). In Northern and Eastern Europe, distribution of the work continued in Bulgarian (1996), Russian (1997), Romanian (1998), and Norwegian (2000), demonstrating the rise of Beauvoirian studies in Europe.

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