Re-visiting Simone de Beauvoir:

Recognising feminist contributions to pluralism in organizational studies

by

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Re-visiting Simone de Beauvoir: Recognising feminist contributions to pluralism in organizational studies[1]

This section's collection of papers celebrates the 50th anniversary of the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. It takes this work as an historically significant point of departure for scholarship which theorises differences and is contributing to a growing pluralism in organizational studies. It asks what returning to this source can offer now as we move into a new millennium.

We shall focus on insights from feminism, their contributions to re-forming organizational scholarship towards pluralism, and some current prospects and challenges. We appreciate that there are other streams of thinking which develop notions of pluralism. These attend to differences such as race, class and sexuality, and to multiple differences, and so are not all appropriately described under the heading of feminism. We focus here on feminism to reach back fifty years to Beauvoir's work, but do so committed to and enjoying this wider array of mutually relevant scholarship.

This introductory paper sets the scene for the remaining articles in the section by doing three things. It firstly sketchs the background to this collection of papers, explicating some mutual purposes and imagery. It then briefly reviews selected themes from *The Second Sex* which have potential relevance for organizational studies. As it does this, it, thirdly, questions current patterns of scholarship which may limit movements towards pluralism.

COLLECTING TOGETHER TO REVIEW BEAUVOIR'S WORK AND LEGACY

This collection of papers originated as a proposal for a Symposium at the American Academy of Management Annual Meeting in Chicago in August 1999. Three core images inform it. The first is the notion of journeys of change and development. Articulations of insight and theoretical analyses are of their time and context. Feminism has been and is evolving, multiple, often contradictory, often re-visioning previous orthodoxies. This sense of proliferation shows the vitality of feminism as a genre of academic study, but it is challenging, and at times

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disturbing, as a milieu in which to work, think, and live. It is therefore valuable to pause at times, to review earlier reference points and evaluate where we have reached. This is a significant intent of these papers.

The second image is that of pluralism. Often theorizing and associated action are reaching for a next desired state. We may then discover that, realized or not, this becomes unsatisfactory, open to critique in some way. One current formulation of this desired state is "pluralism" – at its best applied to forms of knowing and acting as much as to being able to value an extensive range of voices, qualities, chosen identities and so on. Pluralism is currently valued but somewhat un-defined. This territory includes seeking to understand multiple differences such as race, class, sexuality and gender alongside each other, and offering these *as potentially relevant in all organizational analyses*. Scholars attempt to appreciate theoretically the shifting, multi-dimensional landscape of differences, power and potential oppressions as dynamic processes with implications for persons, patterns of interaction, institutions and other levels of analysis (Collins, 1990; Segal, 1999). This section's papers contribute to pluralist images, and provide cautions about how pluralism's more radical potential can be undermined.

The third image which is repeated in this collection of papers is that of Otherness. We look back to Beauvoir's posing of this notion and its personal and political implications. We explore what is needed to move beyond ascriptions and dynamics of Otherness. (See below.)

Re-visiting Simone de Beauvoir, the many facets of her contribution become apparent. Her published work spans fiction, autobiography, philosophical essays - including the extensive seven part volume *The Second Sex* - and more. Her life as a woman in France, and how this relates to her writing, is also of interest, and often paradoxical. How she defined herself and how she has been responded to by others (for example as a *woman* writer and as writing overtly about sex) offer further avenues for analysis (Fallaize, 1998).

Working with the images above in their own individual ways, the authors in this section follow diverse paths, pushing selectively at different aspects of the rich territory opened by Beauvoir and her successors. Several extend the journeys that departed from Beauvoir. Others go back to Beauvoir and *The Second Sex*, finding insights from aspects of her life and from neglected parts of her work.

BEAUVOIR AND *THE SECOND SEX*

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was published in France in 1949 and translated into English in 1953. Before this she was known as a novelist and for her relationship with John Paul Sartre. Her prominence contributed to the book's early impact and circulation. *The Second Sex* is widely credited for inspiring the contemporary women's movement. Beauvoir is regarded as "surely the greatest feminist theorist of our time" (Moi, 1985, p.91) and "a spiritual godmother to the women's movement" (Heller, 1998, A22). Fallaize (1998) notes: "Beauvoir's influence has been so widespread that it is impossible to draw up an exhaustive list of feminists indebted to

her work." (p.15) Her intellectual influence is apparent even when unacknowledged (Moi, 1985). Beauvoir has also been much criticised and ignored. Whilst her work remains widely recognized, it has not been as widely cited, even in feminist scholarship. The fiftieth anniversary of *The Second Sex* is prompting a reappraisal of her contributions.

Beauvoir transformed the women's movement through her application of the existential philosophy Sartre articulated in *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Her analysis is extensive, drawing on biology, psychoanalysis, history, anthropology, socialism and literature, and incorporating a stage by stage critique of women's lives. Her thesis was simple but profound:

> throughout history, women have been reduced to objects for men: "woman" has been construed as man's Other, denied the right to her own subjectivity and to responsibility for her own actions (Moi, 1985, p.92).

A few quotations from *The Second Sex* (1988 edition) illustrate Beauvoir's analysis:

> man represents both the positive and the neutral... whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. (p.15)
>
> humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. (p.16)
>
> She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her.... He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other. (p.16)

Whilst Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought in the creation of self as subject, usually the Other can claim the consciousness of subject for themselves in reciprocal relations. But, according to Beauvoir, woman never becomes the subject in this way and so cannot reach the necessary consciousness for emancipation.

Beauvoir argued that this view of woman as man's Other is the premise of all political and social life and has been internalized by women themselves, who exist in a state of "inauthenticity", enacting patriarchally prescribed roles. Thus Otherness is intra-psychic as well as institutional. She rejected women's complicity as either legitimation of patriarchy or as evidence of a female nature or essence. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1988, p.295) is the assertion for which she is most famous. Beauvoir's analysis of woman as Other is historically important, looking beyond biological sex to the social construction of gender. It established the groundwork for this conceptual frame of analysis.

Much of Beauvoir's early influence was political. Consciousness-raising movements encouraged women to explore for themselves - and to resist - the prevailing social views they internalized to "become" woman. The inherent interconnectedness of the personal, political and intellectual became apparent in this process. The challenging summary phrase "the personal is political" emerged.

However, when we look to *The Second Sex* to understand how to escape being positioned as Other its messages are ambiguous. Beauvoir's writing is contentious. She is accused of being male-identified in her typing of desirable human characteristics, contrasting entrapping female passivity and immanence with male transcendence, the existentialist route to freedom and agency (Moi, 1994). She appears to believe in universal disgust at the female body and to devalue motherhood (Fallaize, 1998). However, through her extended existentialist analysis she also suggests that women are more ambiguously placed in the world than men and so more thoroughly challenged to live fully the ambiguities of human existence (Moi, 1994). In this Issue, David Knights engages in this territory, debating whether a concept of the autonomous subject is necessary to the feminist project of development. He explores the dilemmas opened by this questioning.

Beauvoir identified one way forward from oppression toward eventual freedom as the life of "the independent woman" (1988, p.689), finding economic and social autonomy through paid professional roles and reciprocity in relationships with those men who are able to relate without domination. She also explored the myriad impediments to this happening. Politically, Beauvoir sought equality with men, regarding herself, for much of her life, as a socialist rather than a feminist because, in her estimation, class struggle would more successfully improve the position of women than would independent advocacy of women's rights. Moi (1994) argues that she "seriously underestimates the *strategic* value of a politics of difference" (p.212) – a matter of continuing debate - instead depicting "women's struggle for liberation... as a slow and contradictory process" (p.208).

We might ask whether understanding the social construction of gender and other differences gives individuals and societies sufficient tools to escape the extreme shaping of consciousness that Beauvoir described and the associated dynamics of Otherness. Sometimes it certainly does not. The territory of choice - for identities, interaction patterns and so on - is largely shaped by binary oppositions which encode differences and power, a challenge reflected in Beauvoir's own theorising. Much feminist work has focused on this dilemma (Segal, 1999) and on trying to escape it. Thus as we seek to deconstruct dominant thinking we challenge established epistemologies. It is therefore worth pondering what those of us who think of ourselves as "diverse", as scholars living outside the mainstream, have simultaneously internalised from prevailing world views. I see these as currently challenging issues, as some people achieve the relative comfort of apparent acceptance into dominant academic cultures for their representations of difference. Are we both enabled and disabled by this positioning (as Moi, 1994, suggests Beauvoir was by hers)? How do we conduct ourselves and what identities do we create? The work of consciousness-raising seems to need repeated renewal.

Following Beauvoir, much scholarship has concentrated on the social construction of gender, limiting other kinds of analysis based on difference. In this Issue, Linda Krefting argues that emerging evidence from biology and evolutionary psychology can complement explanations of gender differences grounded in social construction. Mindful of the historical use of "essential" biological differences to exclude people designated Other that concerned Beauvoir, she considers strategies to counter the risks. Can pluralism allow a more subtle, multi-dimensional framing? And what forms might it take? How can we account for, rather than deny, embodiment in our theorising, as Beauvoir sought also to do?

Beauvoir's existential analysis of a universal woman as man's Other has given way to more complex interpretations (Fallaize, 1998; Moi, 1985, 1987). Later French feminists added the perspectives of Lacanian psychoanalysis to the concept of Otherness. Many other developments have enlarged or moderated the ideas Beauvoir offered. Her concerns are now recognized as historically-culturally situated: those of a bourgeois, white, Parisian woman at mid-twentieth century rather than of a universal woman. Feminism's interest in Otherness has been extended beyond affluent white women to other voices, including to women of color and to men, and has combined with interests in identity. Examining processes through which Others have been marginalized and excluded requires new theory and methods of research because existing scholarship is part of the process through which Otherness, identity, and pluralism are obscured (e.g., Harding, 1990). These journeys of change continue.

In this Issue, Marta Calás and Linda Smircich argue however, that, despite developments, we have not yet "transcended" Beauvoir and they return to her for inspiration. They review ideas which have seldom been figural in analyses of Beauvoir's work and present them anew for our consideration. Playing with "good reasons", they explain why there have been good reasons for North American feminists to overlook Beauvoir and why deeper reading of her treatments of reason and of good provide good reasons for remembering her work. They offer these "re-readings" of Beauvoir to engage/interrogate contemporary organizational literature on gender and social identity.

PARADOXES OF THE SCHOLAR'S LIFE – MIRRORING ONE'S THEORISING

Beauvoir's work and analyses repeatedly remind us that the personal, professional and intellectual are interwoven. *The Second Sex* emerged because she set out to write autobiography and realized that she had first to ask herself the question "What has it meant to me to be a woman?" (Fallaize, 1998, p.3). She wrote instead "an onslaught on contemporary ideas about women" (p.3). Commentators look to Beauvoir's life to understand her ideas and contribution. The interplay of memberships and marginalities in her story present especially interesting conundrums. Moi (1994) identifies Beauvoir as "an intellectual woman", a pioneering woman of her time, entering previously all-male institutions of education.

> Given her unique opportunity to develop herself fully as an intellectual in a country and at a time when intellectuals were considered important members of society, Simone de Beauvoir became more *purely* an intellectual, as it were, than any other woman of her era. (p.1)

Yet Beauvoir could also identify woman as Other in the male-defined world in which she lived. She experienced the ambiguities of such a placing, wanting to be taken seriously as an intellectual and also to achieve love, and emotional and sexual happiness. The resulting tensions permeate her writing and theorising. Evans (1996) adds a valuable cautionary note to this theme of analysis, "to ask exactly what (and indeed who) intellectual women are, and what non-intellectual woman are like." (p.120) Thus, describing Beauvoir as "intellectual" is both illuminating and poses further questions. It paradoxically counters disparagement of women's intelligence; yet it is also referring to historically and situationally defined membership of an

elite rather than to a universal attribution of value. With many other academics, I would advocate appreciating a range of forms of knowing, not privileging propositional knowledge above all others.

It has been troubling for some feminists that Beauvoir seemed to devalue her own creativity. She placed herself second to Sartre, and also initially chose a different realm of writing – fiction - as her territory, rather than philosophy (Moi, 1994). Scholars now debate the traditional positioning of Beauvoir as a disciple of Sartre, and affirm her influence on his work and her own independent contributions (see Calás and Smircich this Issue).

There are several strands of interest here for current scholars. The tenacious mindset of needing to prove someone "independent" in order to value their work is open to critique. What does or would it mean to have a more relationally appreciative model of academic life? An opposite concern is how aspects of someone's contribution can be obscured, overlooked, if they are interpreted as disciple. There is also value in taking seriously the work Beauvoir did as novelist, autobiographer and biographer. She was engaging in forms of inquiry and scholarship which have their own epistemological and methodological richness and challenges. Falaize (1998) notes that she was criticised by some for being unfeeling (for example in her accounts of her mother's and Sartre's deaths), "never parted from her notebook at the most emotional or delicate moments". (Fallaize, 1998 p.5.) I find this interesting. Does her work, and that of a similarly interwoven kind, breach academic "good taste"? For me it points to the challenging territory of conducting self-reflective sense-making with appropriate practices of quality (Marshall, in press). However well we believe Beauvoir did this, her work extends the realm which should be accounted for, appreciating the personal, professional and intellectual as companion strands in scholarship.

In this Issue, Ella Bell reflects on the relevance of the intertwined journeys in Beauvoir's life to those of a Black feminist scholar fifty years later. Despite differences, she finds meaning in the borderlands where plural identities engage. She finds Beauvoir's questions and challenges relevant to her own life.

BEAUVOIR AND PLURALISM IN MANAGEMENT

The influence of Beauvoir's epochal work on organizational scholarship has been indirect, but substantial nonetheless. *The Second Sex* was a point of departure for significant change and development journeys which have enhanced pluralism in management scholarship over the last half century.

Feminist scholarship in management addresses ways to incorporate pluralism and discontinue the silencing of Otherness. It has gained recognition among the critical perspectives featured in special issues of established major journals and those specifically seeking new approaches (e.g., Fletcher, 1998; Martin, Knopoff & Beckman, 1998; Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Mumby & Putnam, 1992). Following Beauvoir's precedent, feminism enriches organizational research by importing theory and method from other disciplines (e.g., Martin, 1990; Calás & Smircich, 1991;

Fondas, 1997). The United States tends to dominate mainstream management knowledge-making internationally (Jacques, 1996). Scholarship on gender has been a point of entry for non-US perspectives (e.g., Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Collinson & Hearn, 1996; Gherardi, 1995; Hearn, et al., 1989; Marshall, 1995; Mills & Tancred, 1992; Wajcman, 1998). These developments have the potential to enhance pluralism in form, content and method.

The recent *Handbook of Organization Studies* (Clegg, Hardy & Nord, 1996) provides a not atypical illustration of how appreciations of gender and diversity are currently placed in organizational scholarship. The inclusion of women and diverse identities in separate *Handbook* chapters (Calás & Smircich, 1996; Nkomo & Cox, 1996, respectively) makes plural representation visible. This is indicative of change. The editors shaped the *Handbook* to foster pluralism generally, for example selecting contributions to provide "a panoramic vista" (p.xxi) of different views, and using the metaphor of opening up conversations. But the form of inclusion of diversity related issues also reflects a continued Otherness. Such issues are raised but then marginalized by mainly *separate* consideration. The index of the *Handbook* suggests that beyond the Introduction and Conclusion (which are thoughtful in these terms) there are few references to diversity, ethnicity, feminism, gender, race, women and so on in other chapters. There are substantial sections of mainstream "conversation" which focus their referencing on a relatively small band of dominant scholars and do not incorporate pluralist appreciations. The *Handbook*, as the editors recognize, reflects current organizational scholarship and organizational practice. We may, then, achieve potential or apparent pluralism, but persist in enacting many traditional forms of organizational theorizing.

What might we expect new genres of scholarship and representation, informed by pluralism in form, process and content, to be like? They might, for example, place other voices so that they challenge, fragment, supplant and stand alongside rather than "simply" add to the current mainstream. Multiple, mutually informing and aware, contributions could be in the same arena, within the same purview, rather than separately located. (The *Handbook* above moves in this direction.) Should we develop scholarship of such form, the notion of mainstream might dissolve altogether. Until it does any claims for radical pluralism are contentious.

In this Issue, Joanne Martin considers how mainstream organizational research continues to present itself as gender-neutral despite abundant analyses to the contrary, and thus incorporates blindspots and weaknesses. She selects a range of traditions of organizational scholarship – including Weberian bureaucracy, stress, bounded rationality and institutional theory – and employs a variety of analytic techniques to show their gendered assumptions and to present alternative readings. She encourages others to engage in similar scholarship as a path to re-visioning the field, moving beyond the marginalization of gender concerns and developing new insights. She lists theories which might warrant such attention.

OFFERING FEMINIST CONTRIBUTIONS

In this section I take the origination of this collection of papers and their subsequent performance at the Chicago Academy of Management Meeting as an example of the interwoven dynamics of change and resilience in cultures of organizational scholarship.

Changes towards greater incorporation of pluralism can be seen in the history and current functioning of the Academy of Management (AOM), as in other institutions. It is a professional association of management educators and practitioners, based in the United States but with world-wide membership and influence. It is an important institution in terms of making meaning in management scholarship. (Are there resonances here with the power of the intellectual elite in mid-twentieth century France to which Beauvoir belonged?) Representation of diversity has increased both in AOM membership and in leadership positions. Some years ago, consciousness raising about gender issues influenced establishment of a Women in Management Division. Mirroring growing recognition of diversities beyond gender this Division recently chose to transform itself into Gender and Diversity in Organizations.

It is to the Academy of Management that the Symposium proposal from which these papers are derived was made. Justifications were offered for the relevance of re-visiting Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* to organizational scholarship. They were accepted.

The AOM Annual Meeting Programme has a similar pattern in terms of incorporating pluralism to that identified as currently typical above. Diverse representation is achieved, but usually with continuing separation of most material to do with gender, race, diversity and difference from 'mainstream' sessions. I shall not pursue this issue further, but turn to the performative aspects of our Symposium.

A major intention of the Symposium proposal was that we should enact pluralism, allowing it also to be engaged experientially rather than only discussed. This required taking a different form for the session than that typically followed. Incorporating radical ideas into dominant modes of scholarship and presentation dilutes or subverts their potential. Form can carry conformity. Generating alternative forms, incorporating alternative foundational principles, opens possibilities for change.

In practice, there were limits to our ability to innovate within the session. Two planned elements were relinquished: that of speakers being positioned amongst the audience (because of sound quality); and everyone incorporating their personal, political and intellectual journeys in their presentations (because of time pressures). Other intentions were achieved: the designated speakers kept strictly to their allotted times in order to free a significant space for the "audience" and speakers then to meet in discussion groups, allowing expression to a plurality of voices. There was thus a session facilitator (me) rather than allocated "expert" discussants. In the closing phase of the Symposium some participants voiced their responses and thoughts. People reported that the Symposium had provided a different experience from that of other sessions -

more engaged, “a warm place in a chilly climate” - and that their own concerns had been mirrored in the presentations.

It seems, then, that for some we did achieve a different, more dialogic, form of encounter – engaging, reflective, offering resonant ideas, multiple – an alternative space, appropriately transitory. And then we dispersed. I wonder whether we left any traces.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

I have taken opportunities during the course of this paper to query the current state of pluralism in organizational scholarship. It seems both to be developing and in some significant ways constrained. I am left with concerns about how enactments of academic scholarship - individually, interpersonally and institutionally - might be self-limiting, and with several questions. What, then, does pluralism mean? How can this notion retain a radical, jarring edge rather than become diluted, co-opted? Through what forms and dynamics can it be achieved? Can analyses be suitably subtle, multi-faceted, complex, and yet vibrant? What does the praxis of pluralist scholarship look like? How can responsibility for change and incorporation of difference become more widely shared? Finally, if Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* marked a significant departure from prior scholarship in its time, I wonder what would be an equally radical departure now, and how we would treat it.

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