

READING *THE SECOND SEX* IN 1950s AMERICA*

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ABSTRACT. *Simone de Beauvoir's The second sex was first published in English in 1953, four years after its publication in French. Since the 1970s, many scholars have come to view de Beauvoir as the most important feminist thinker of the twentieth century and consequently to regard the initial American reactions to The second sex, which rarely discussed it in explicitly feminist terms, as showing that de Beauvoir's work had been misunderstood or misrepresented. This article focuses on what American commentators did say about de Beauvoir, rather than what they did not, and it shows that The second sex was quite widely, and often enthusiastically, discussed. Critics often saw de Beauvoir through the prism of social science, in particular anthropology and the 'science' of sexology. However, three things impeded a wholly sympathetic reception. First, unlike de Beauvoir, American writers believed that 'modern' society, by which they meant America, should combine female emancipation, especially at work, with the preservation of 'femininity'. Secondly, de Beauvoir's view that 'woman is made not born' clashed with biologically determinist ideas popular among American social scientists by the 1950s. Thirdly, and most importantly, American critics were incensed by what they took to be de Beauvoir's denigration of motherhood.*

In the 1970s, Simone de Beauvoir was a feminist icon and her *The second sex* was seen as the canonical feminist text of the post-war period. By contrast, historians have generally agreed that the work was undervalued when it was first published in English in 1953 – the original French edition was in 1949.¹ Stephanie Coontz has argued that 'Because Beauvoir was a prominent left-wing French intellectual, she did not get much of a hearing in the mainstream press of 1950s America.'² In relation to Britain, Martin Pugh has stated 'The Second Sex was published in 1953 without making much impact.'³ Some have noted that

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¹ Toril Moi, *The making of an intellectual woman* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 5, 177; Ursula Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir* (London, 2004), p. 118; Margaret Simons, 'The philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir', *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 14 (1999), pp. 61–71.

² Stephanie Coontz, *The feminine mystique and American women at the dawn of the 1960s* (University Park, PA, 2011), p. 143.

³ Shira Tarrant, *When sex became gender* (London, 2006), p. 190; Martin Pugh, *Women and the women's movement in Britain* (London, 2002), p. 323.

whatever reception de Beauvoir did have was based on misunderstandings that resulted from shortcomings in the translation of the work. Toril Moi, for instance, argues that the original translation, made by zoologist Howard Parshley, suppressed key passages, deformed parts of de Beauvoir's meaning, and failed to convey the subtlety of the philosophical vocabulary in the original French.⁴

The translation did misrepresent important aspects of de Beauvoir's thought, but there were also broader reasons why American commentators were prone to read de Beauvoir in a certain way. This article seeks to show the areas in which the first English translation of *The second sex* was discussed and how this influenced how the meaning of *The second sex* was constructed in an anglophone context. The book was widely reviewed by a group of American public intellectuals in the specialist academic press, such as the *Journal of Educational Sociology*, as well as in more popular magazines like *Time*.⁵ It was also the subject of television debate and of a panel discussion published in the *Saturday Review of Literature* (a weekly magazine aimed at the college-educated population). In fact, therefore, American authors quite quickly began to engage with some of de Beauvoir's arguments, not least because her work fitted in a milieu which provided fertile ground for new ideas about women.

This article focuses on the United States – giving limited attention to the United Kingdom for the purposes of comparison. It is argued that de Beauvoir appealed to anglophone intellectuals and cultural critics who were interested in a variety of social sciences – anthropology, psychology, sexology, and sociology – that were better established in America than in Europe. These thinkers had a heavy presence in the mainstream media in the USA. Their views are worth considering not least because, much like de Beauvoir and Sartre, they were intellectual celebrities with audiences that expanded outside of the academy. They were perceived to be authorities on the topics on which they spoke. For instance, Bob Herridge, a WCBS-TV producer, commented on the fan-mail that one reviewer of de Beauvoir, Ashley Montagu, received when he spoke about anthropology on the channel in the 1950s. Montagu, who had lectured at Rutgers in the early 1950s, claimed that, by the middle of that decade, his public profile was so high that he could afford to become a 'free-lance intellectual', unconnected with a university.⁶ Margaret Mead was another anthropologist reviewer of de Beauvoir – she was even more famous than Montagu. Mead's media presence in the 1950s and role as a 'Public Person' as well as scholar has been well documented.⁷

⁴ Toril Moi, 'While we wait: notes on the English translation of *The second sex*', in Emily R. Grosholz, ed., *The legacy of Simone de Beauvoir* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 37–68.

⁵ Norman Kell, 'Culture lag and housewifemanship: the role of the married female college graduate', *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 31 (1957), pp. 87–95; *Time*, 23 Feb. 1953.

⁶ *New York Times*, 29 Nov. 1999.

⁷ Phyllis Grosskurth, *Margaret Mead* (London, 1988); Aimee Hess, *Margaret Mead* (San Francisco, CA, 2007); *New York Times*, 19 Nov. 1978.

Although de Beauvoir was received by critics embedded in an American social scientific context, this did not necessarily lead to an ‘Americanization’ of *The second sex*. Often seen as a truly ‘engaged’ French writer who emerged out of an insular francophone culture, de Beauvoir actually began writing *The second sex* as she travelled around the USA in 1947, and had, at one time, contemplated a work of explicit international comparison.⁸ The final text was interspersed with contrasts between French and American society. De Beauvoir engaged with works that had attracted attention in the US media – the 1948 *Kinsey report*, and the attack on ‘Momism’ by Philip Wylie.⁹ She also responded to sociologists and psychoanalysts, Gunnar Myrdal, Sigmund Freud, and Helene Deutsch, who were widely discussed on both sides of the Atlantic. *The second sex* was therefore, to some extent, a transatlantic work from inception, particularly so when seen in the context of social science.

I

Given the view that something was, literally or metaphorically, ‘lost in translation’ when de Beauvoir’s work was received in English, it is worth beginning with a brief look at the reception of *The second sex* in France and drawing some general contrasts with the American response. The book sold well in France and was widely reviewed. Much discussion took place in Paris. The French philosopher, Jean Wahl, suggested that there were three currents of French intellectual life coursing through Paris in the late 1940s.¹⁰ The one with which de Beauvoir herself was most associated was existentialism. She saw her emphasis on the need for women to make ‘choices’ when confronted with the ‘situation’ of their bodies as existentialist – though some of her admirers sought to distance her from what they saw as the pessimism of Sartre.¹¹ The second current was Catholicism or ‘Thomism’; its best-known representative was François Mauriac, who was notoriously hostile to de Beauvoir – though, slightly to his surprise, younger Catholics did not share his hostility.¹² The third current was communism. In spite of de Beauvoir’s leftish views, French communists

⁸ Deirdre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir* (London, 1991), p. 382.

⁹ Philip Wylie, *Generation of vipers* (New York, NY, 1942); de Beauvoir discusses Wylie in *The second sex* (London, 1997), p. 605. Given that there has been some controversy around the translation of *The second sex*, I should explain that I have used Parshley’s 1953 translation because this is the edition to which those authors that I am discussing referred. I have checked all quotes in my article against the 2009 Borde/Malovany-Chevallier translation and, in these particular instances, there is no substantial difference between the two translations. I use the Vintage 1997 edition throughout.

¹⁰ Ann Fulton, *Apostles of Sartre: existentialism in America, 1945–1963* (Evanston, IL, 1999), p. 18.

¹¹ Françoise d’Eaubonne said that she admired de Beauvoir’s ‘optimism and pleasure’, which she contrasted with Sartre’s ‘dark complicity in the sordid.’ Françoise d’Eaubonne, *Chienne de jeunesse* (Paris, 1965), pp. 151–2.

¹² See, for example, Guy De Bosschère’s article, first published in *Le Figaro* and republished in Ingrid Galster, ed., *Simone de Beauvoir: Le deuxième sexe* (Paris, 2014), pp. 63–4.

denounced her work. They were influenced by moral conservatism, particularly seen in favourable attitudes to motherhood that had dominated the Soviet Union since the mid-1930s and which were expressed in France by Jeanette Thorez Vermeersch (wife of the party leader).¹³ The communist writer Jeanette Prigent wrote one of the most savage attacks on *The second sex*.¹⁴

The French responses to de Beauvoir, both favourable and unfavourable, were not echoed in America when it was translated and reviewed there. Catholicism played a smaller role in American intellectual life, as did communism, which had fallen out of favour following the Moscow Trials (1936–8) – indeed, US authors would probably have been disconcerted if they had realized how their own emphasis on the ways in which ‘modernity’ might be combined with ‘traditional’ views on maternity and romantic love paralleled communist thinking in Europe. Some of de Beauvoir’s French critics were simply unknown in the anglophone world. Roger Nimier – who denounced *The second sex* and who was taken sufficiently seriously by de Beauvoir herself to merit inclusion in an essay that she wrote on right-wing thinkers – was only known in Britain and America, if at all, as the author of the screenplay for Louis Malle’s *Ascenseur pour l’échafaud* (1958).¹⁵

Existentialism had been discussed in America before 1953 but it was less important to de Beauvoir’s reception there than it was in France. This was partly because of the ‘philosophical incompetence of the translation’,¹⁶ which failed to recognize, for example, the particular significance that French existentialists attached to words such as *authentique*. However, a downplaying of the existentialist element in *The second sex* in America also sprang from conscious decisions about the potential market for de Beauvoir’s work. Blanche Knopf, de Beauvoir’s American publisher, chose to present *The second sex* as a work of social science largely because she wanted to distance it from existentialism, which she regarded as a ‘dead duck’ and a potential impediment to sales.¹⁷

It is important to stress that one absence was conspicuous in America. The word feminist was rarely used in new debate about women in the early 1950s. It was associated with outdated struggles for suffrage and with an earlier generation of female activists. The now rather staid journal *Time and Tide* was almost the only published vestige of pre-war feminism in the post-war anglophone world and even it had largely moved on to different issues, pacifism

¹³ David Hoffmann, ‘Mothers in the motherland: Stalinist pronatalism in its pan-European context’, *Journal of Social History*, 34 (2000), pp. 35–54; Mark Mazower, *Dark continent* (London, 1998).

¹⁴ Jeannette Prigent, ‘Kirche, küche, kinder’, in *La nouvelle critique*, printed in Galster, ed., *Le deuxième sexe*, p. 282. Prigent later left the party and expressed regret for her attacks on Sartre and de Beauvoir.

¹⁵ Marc Dambre, *Roger Nimier, Hussard du demi-siècle* (Paris, 1989), pp. 191, 255, 256, 294, 357, 373.

¹⁶ Moi, ‘While we wait’, p. 40.

¹⁷ Blanche Knopf to Harold Parshley, 2 Nov. 1951, Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin, Alfred A. Knopf Inc. Records, 689 / 13, ‘I like your preface very much indeed ... The only thing that I want to point out to you is that existentialism is really a dead duck.’

in particular. If anything, feminism was even more *dépassé* in France, partly perhaps because pre-war feminism had often been associated with a rather conservative moral outlook and right-wing politics. De Beauvoir herself stressed that she did not consider herself a feminist until long after the publication of *The second sex* and her French followers also distanced themselves from the word.¹⁸

The response that de Beauvoir aroused in America illustrates that her work was read in an environment in which there was already a debate about womanhood even though it was rarely referred to as 'feminist'. She was discussed by several reviewers who were devoted to exploring the status of women in society; this contrasted with the situation in France, where critics, although responsive to de Beauvoir's ideas about women, had primary intellectual interests elsewhere. In America, then, de Beauvoir's work was often seen as 'contemporary',¹⁹ not least by her translator who emphasized that 'In the preface my intention is, of course, in addition to making personal contact with the reader, to connect de.B with these matters of current American interest.'²⁰ The sense that de Beauvoir was 'of the moment' is unsurprising. *The second sex* was translated in the middle of a publishing boom that included many new social scientific works which debated 'sexuality' and the nature, role, and behaviour of men and women when fixed understandings of these terms no longer seemed to exist. In 1954, sociologist Robert Bierstedt saw *The second sex* as the latest in a recent succession of 'women books': Alfred Kinsey's *Sex and the human male* (1946) and his *Sex and the human female* (1953), Ashley Montagu's *The natural superiority of women* (1952), and Mirra Komarovsky's *Women in the modern world* (1953).²¹ To these can be added books by Philip Wylie, Viola Klein, and Margaret Mead.²² When *The second sex* was discussed in *Time* magazine in 1953, women's 'fulfilment' was already, and would continue to be, a popular topic of debate.²³

Before Shira Tarrant's work, *When sex became gender*, was published in 2006, histories of women in post-war Britain and America had tended to neglect this important moment of debate about gender relations in the mid-1950s. Historians had usually focused on a comparison between 'First' and

¹⁸ Note the lengths to which both Edith Thomas and Francoise d'Eaubonne went to find a word that they might use instead of 'feminism'. See Sylvie Chaperon, 'Une génération d'intellectuelles dans le sillage de Simone de Beauvoir', *Clio. Histoire, femmes et sociétés*, 13 (2001), pp. 99–116.

¹⁹ Philip Wylie and Margaret Mead label it contemporary in their reviews of it in *Saturday Review*, 21 Feb. 1953.

²⁰ Harold Parshley to Alfred Strauss, 7 Nov. 1951, Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin, Alfred A. Knopf Inc. Records, 689/13.

²¹ Roger Bierstedt, 'The women books', *Antioch Review*, 14 (1954), pp. 224–35.

²² Wylie, *Generation of vipers*, and idem, *The disappearance* (New York, NY, 1951); Viola Klein, *The feminine character* (London, 1946); Margaret Mead, *Male and female: a study of the sexes in a changing world* (New York, NY, 1949); Viola Klein and Alva Myrdal, *Women's two roles* (London, 1956).

²³ *Time*, 24 Nov. 1952; *Time*, 13 Sept. 1954.

'Second Wave' feminism – between the feminist activity before the Second World War, which emphasized suffrage and legal impediments to women's professional lives, and the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, which laid a heavier emphasis on issues of sexuality and reproduction.²⁴ This article explores a debate in America between these two waves, concentrating not on whether its contributors were feminists, but rather on the ways in which they attempted to re-classify women and sexuality and to challenge the way in which society was currently organized.

After a brief exposition of de Beauvoir's existential philosophy of freedom and the possible implications of seeming anglophone indifference to her philosophy of the female body, the next part of this article explores how, in the context of American debate about women, three main aspects of de Beauvoir's work drew attention: her ideas about sexuality, the career woman, and maternity.

It will be concluded that, on a superficial level, de Beauvoir was received with approval in the United States: she was frequently hailed as the leader of a coming revolution in women's social standing. However, this apparent affinity between de Beauvoir and those who commented on her work should not mask some writers' fundamental disagreements with her over what such 'liberation' or 'revolution' would entail. Anthropological respondents, who were also de Beauvoir's most prolific reviewers, often understood liberation and revolution to mean a re-emphasis of, or reconnection with, an older vision of women as necessarily and biologically different to men. As a result, they disagreed with de Beauvoir's views on women's work and maternity in which she downplayed the importance of biological difference. The reception of *The second sex* therefore fits awkwardly into the historiography of the 1950s. Much of this historiography has focused on the question of whether this should be seen as a culturally 'conservative' or 'progressive' decade.²⁵ I argue that reactions to de Beauvoir's work do not fit neatly into either of these categories. Her book was read with interest and attention but those who commented on it rarely drew the same conclusions from it that the readers of the 1960s and 1970s would.

²⁴ Jo-Ann Pilardi in Margaret Simons, ed., *Feminist interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir* (University Park, PA, 1995), p. 39; Ginette Castro, *American feminism: a contemporary history* (New York, NY, 1993); Barbara Caine, *English feminism, 1780–1980* (Oxford, 1997), p. 147; Flora Davis, *Moving the mountain: the women's movement since 1960* (New York, NY, 1991).

²⁵ William Young and Nancy Young, *The 1950s* (Westport, CT, 2004); David Halberstam, *The fifties* (New York, NY, 1994); Stephanie Coontz, *A strange stirring: the Feminine mystique and American women at the dawn of the 1960s* (New York, NY, 2001); Alain Pétigny, *The permissive society* (Cambridge, 2009); James Gilbert, *A cycle of outrage* (New York, NY, 1988); Dolly Smith Wilson, 'A new look at the affluent worker: the good working mother in post-war Britain', in *Twentieth Century British History*, 17 (2006), pp. 206, 229; Sara Evans, *Tidal wave: how women changed America at century's end* (New York, NY, 2003), p. 18; Eugenia Kaledin, *Mothers and more: American women in the 1950s* (Farrington Hill, MI, 1984), preface pp. 3, 4, 12–13, 190.

II

In *The second sex*, which is more descriptive than prescriptive, de Beauvoir combines philosophy, literary analysis, anthropology, and history. She uses what had, by the 1940s, come to be seen in France as existential/phenomenological terminology. Women are described as having been 'the other' and 'immanents' throughout history and are urged to 'transcend' their history and biology in order to construct a personal and authentic identity. The themes running through her work are action, choice, lived experience, and freedom.²⁶

Existentialism, with its emphasis on social choice, is not the same as social constructivism, which emphasizes the ways in which choice is constrained by society. However, de Beauvoir's philosophy, that drew on Sartre's existential terminology, stressed that the body was a 'situation'²⁷ that could be interpreted in many different ways. Her argument therefore ran against biological determinism in a way that sometimes paralleled a type of social constructivism that had been popular among American social scientists in the interwar period.²⁸ De Beauvoir's view that biology has no fixed meaning other than that which is ascribed by society is central to understanding why she was critical of the cult of maternity. It is therefore worth quoting at length:

Nevertheless it will be said that if the body is not a thing, it is a situation, as viewed in the perspective I am adopting – that of Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty ...

Once we adopt the human perspective, interpreting the body on a basis of existence, biology becomes an abstract science; whenever the physiological fact takes on meaning, this meaning is at once seen as dependent on a whole context; the 'weakness' is revealed as such only in the light of the ends man proposes, the instruments he has available, and the laws he establishes.²⁹

De Beauvoir believed that the female body did not need to bind all women to the same adult future role of child-rearer just because it had reproductive capabilities. She suggested that whether or not women reproduced was a 'choice', not a biological imperative set down by the 'fact' that they had a womb. The specifically philosophical foundations of this part of de Beauvoir's argument were overlooked by most of her critics. This was partly because in America philosophy had come to be overshadowed by the new social sciences that had exploded into public culture at mid-century. Representatives of these sciences were dominant in the media and that is why in the context of media debate she was so often discussed in a social scientific, not philosophical, light. American anthropologist Ashley Montagu even claimed that while de Beauvoir

²⁶ Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir*, pp. 115, 120.

²⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre refers to the fact that there is freedom within any situation in *Being and nothingness* (London, 1993), p. 549.

²⁸ Neil Gross, *Richard Rorty: the making of an American philosopher* (Chicago, IL, 2008), p. 43.

²⁹ De Beauvoir, *The second sex*, pp. 66–7.

might *think* that she was an existentialist philosopher, she was, in fact, 'very trenchantly and refreshingly like a sensitive anthropologist'.³⁰

De Beauvoir's philosophy was also overlooked because, after the Second World War, sociologists', anthropologists', and sexologists' attitudes seemed to have swung in favour of an argument that male and female temperaments were determined, in part, by biology, and in particular, for women, by the existence of a maternal instinct. I will go on to show that anthropologists specifically argued that motherhood was woman's most important social role. Several reviews, therefore, focused so much on de Beauvoir's perceived shocking conclusion – an apparent denigration of maternity – that they did not engage with the philosophical process through which she had arrived at it.

Although the tendency to refrain from discussing de Beauvoir as a philosopher resulted in a lack of discussion about the philosophy that underpinned her ideas about motherhood, the downplaying of the philosophical element was not incongruous with her general approach. *The second sex* drew on several different disciplines and was aimed at an audience beyond academic philosophers, or, indeed, academics of any kind. Even in France, reaction to de Beauvoir's work had mainly come from literary figures rather than philosophers. Academic philosophy in France, where every lycée pupil was required to study Descartes and Pascal, was, anyway, rather different from the highly specialized discipline of academic philosophy in the anglophone world.

Failure to engage with de Beauvoir as a philosopher did not mean failure to engage at all. *The second sex* was published in translation by Knopf, one of the leading post-war publishers for non-specialist literature who had passed over Sartre's *Being and nothingness* for being too specialist. Furthermore, *The second sex* was translated into English before *Being and nothingness* (1956). Hazel Barnes, who translated Sartre's work, remembers that she felt the impact of *The second sex* in a personal transformation in which she realized what it meant to be a 'woman' in the 1950s. By contrast, Barnes's relationship with Sartre's work was, at the start, more strictly academic.³¹ Publishers believed, probably rightly, therefore, that de Beauvoir's work had an audience that was broader and different than that for Sartre's philosophy.

III

In America in 1953, de Beauvoir's work was often defined as 'sexology' rather than as a contribution to feminism or philosophy.³² Sexology was, in fact, a slippery term. It referred both to the scientific study of sex, as well as to manuals

³⁰ *New York Tribune*, 22 Feb. 1953.

³¹ Hazel Barnes, *The story I tell myself: a venture in existentialist autobiography* (Chicago, IL, and London, 1997), p. xv.

³² Judith Coffin, 'Beauvoir, Kinsey and mid-century sex', *French Politics, Culture and Society*, 28 (2010), pp. 18–37.

of practical advice and/or moral exhortation that were designed to help people have 'better' sex. Knopf's decision to market de Beauvoir as a sexologist was part of the broader way in which she was seen and discussed in terms of social science in America.³³ The apparent connection between de Beauvoir and sexology that Knopf forged in their promotional literature was strengthened when her reviewers compared her writing to that of famous sexologists. The way in which de Beauvoir was seen as a 'sexologist' in these overlapping contexts of promotion and review resulted in an exaggeration of the importance of sexology in her work. Nonetheless, she certainly depicted human experience of sexuality as a central feature of male–female social relations.³⁴ She engaged with American research on sexuality in the human male and put forward a sensitive, psychoanalytical account of the complexities of female sexuality and eroticism.

On the cover of the first American edition of *The second sex*, Knopf gave disproportionate attention to those areas of the work that explored women's sexuality. Other aspects of de Beauvoir's argument received less emphasis. Her ideas on motherhood were not mentioned at all. In fact, the only hint on the blurb that de Beauvoir looked at maternity was a nod to her discussion of childbirth, which was referred to as a 'side-issue':

Her picture of the sexual life of woman, which comprehends far more than genital activities, describes the amusements of childhood; the shock of puberty; the frustrations of adolescence; the cultural and intellectual sublimations of the young woman; the mores of marriage; the various side-issues of childbirth; the attitude of the young matron; the ennui of the older matron; the escapes of the neglected woman ... the decline of sexuality.

Brendan Gill, a journalist at the *New Yorker*, commented that '*The Second Sex* is probably the best manual of instruction on making love now available in English' and this was given pride of place on the dust jacket.³⁵ The Harvard anthropologist, Clyde Kluckhohn, was also quoted on the jacket as saying that de Beauvoir 'provided the philosophical sophistication and historical depth to accompany Kinsey's statistics and tables'.³⁶ Long before they designed the layout of the cover, Knopf had made decisions that showed they understood de Beauvoir in terms of sexology. For instance, the choice of H. M. Parshley, a zoologist at Smith College, to translate *The second sex* in 1949 sprang from the

³³ *Saturday Review*, 21 Feb. 1953; Philip Wylie had discussed de Beauvoir in terms of her scientific credentials and argued that although de Beauvoir did not always provide solutions for women, like the greatest scientists she knew how to identify the problems which, in this case, was to ask the questions, 'What is woman? What is man? What is sexuality?'.

³⁴ De Beauvoir, *The second sex*, pp. 393–415, 737.

³⁵ *New Yorker*, 28 Feb. 1953.

³⁶ Clyde Kluckhohn, 'Sexual behaviour in the human female and the second sex', *Perspectives USA* (Spring 1954), pp. 144–7.

fact that he was an expert on human sexuality, who had both written and reviewed books on this topic since the 1930s.³⁷

There was certainly a degree of commercial calculation in the decision to market de Beauvoir as a sexologist. The sex-manual and birth control movement had taken off in England and America in the interwar period and open discussion of sexuality was increasingly identified as healthy for society.³⁸ The encounters and separations of the war, and the burst of marriages that came with the return of servicemen, stimulated further publications in both countries. Most importantly, Alfred Kinsey had published *Sexuality in the human male* in 1948 to much critical acclaim, followed by *Sexuality in the human female* in 1953. Knopf was keen to latch de Beauvoir on to both branches of the sexology movement – both that which explored the mechanisms of sex as well as that which suggested how men and women might better fulfil each other sexually. Alfred Knopf wrote to Parshley in 1951 that, once published, de Beauvoir's discussion of female sexuality would appeal to 'young ladies in places like Smith who . . . will be nursing it just as students of my generation managed somehow to get hold of Havelock Ellis'.³⁹ A *New Yorker* discussion of *The second sex* in 1953 confirmed that Knopf had been right, reporting that after publication young female college students were hanging around bookshops reading passages daily – though to Knopf's frustration, not actually buying it.⁴⁰

The quotes on the front and back cover of *The second sex* were taken from magazine and newspaper reviews of her work. They show that de Beauvoir's critics also naturally connected her with sexology. As Judith Coffin has noted, critics were particularly inclined to compare de Beauvoir and Kinsey, who were often reviewed together.⁴¹ Although the Kinsey tag was a sure-fire way to raise the profile of new writers, academic judgements on the value of his work were ambivalent at best. Quite often, de Beauvoir's more qualitative and 'human' approach was compared favourably to Kinsey's allegedly colder style. One sociologist wrote :

If *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* is a long parade of excellent statistics, they are nevertheless statistics . . . they are all two dimensional. In *The Second Sex* . . . we have a book of a very different kind. Here, the two dimensions turn into three, the black and white become a full-color treatment. Mlle. De Beauvoir is dealing not with

³⁷ Howard Parshley, *The science of human reproduction* (New York, NY, 1933). Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Parshley reviewed books on human sexuality in the *New York Herald Tribune*, cited in Richard Gillman, 'The man behind the feminist bible', *New York Times*, 22 May 1988.

³⁸ Adrian Bingham, *Sex and the British press* (Oxford, 2009).

³⁹ Alfred Knopf to Howard Parshley, 27 Nov. 1951, Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin, Alfred A. Knopf Inc. Records, 689/13.

⁴⁰ *New Yorker*, 28 Mar. 1953.

⁴¹ Coffin, 'Beauvoir, Kinsey and mid-century sex': some critics who urged de Beauvoir and Kinsey to be read together, or reviewed them together, include Clyde Kluckhohn, 'The female of our species', *New York Times*, 22 Feb. 1953, pp. 3, 33; Naomi Lewis, 'The last thing civilised', *New Statesman*, 14 Nov. 1953, p. 606; A. R. Mangus, 'The second sex', *Marriage and Family Living*, 15 (1953), pp. 276–7.

females but with women, not only with acts but also with attitudes, not only with sex but also with philosophy. She is interested in sex as outlet and activity but even more in sex as miracle and mystery.⁴²

Millicent McIntosh was the president of all-girl Barnard College and was applauded by both the government and the press for her advanced view that women could successfully combine the roles of mother and worker (she was one of three people to receive the Roosevelt Medal of Honor in 1948 and was on the front cover of *Newsweek* in 1951). In 1953 she wrote of de Beauvoir :

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* presented with unforgettable vividness the exploitation of the woman in a sex relationship. And now Dr. Kinsey comes along, setting woman in his animalistic world, lining up statistics which seem to show that she is not really different from the bitch, the cow, or the female goat.⁴³

When discussed as a sexologist by sociologist Bierstedt, anthropologist Kluckhohn, and educator McIntosh, de Beauvoir's methodology – which involved considerable empathy and interpretative analysis – gained significant praise. The humanity of her discussion was seen as a corrective to the seeming absurdity of Kinsey's overly-scientized detachment. I will show later that when social scientists, including Kluckhohn, discussed de Beauvoir's ideas about maternity, the same methodology was heavily criticized.

While the emphasis on de Beauvoir as sexologist means that she was not contextualized in an explicitly 'feminist' debate that used this term, sexologists were in fact discussing issues that would later be of interest to feminists. McIntosh applauded de Beauvoir for illustrating how women were 'exploited' in sexual relationships – a theme that would come to central prominence in the late 1960s and 1970s. Margaret Sanger, who had been a birth control and women's rights campaigner in the interwar and early post-war period, actually connected de Beauvoir with earlier branches of feminism and approved most of Parshley's appointment as translator of *The second sex* because he was 'a friend of the Planned Parenthood Movement'.⁴⁴ On rare occasions, some did openly talk about sexology as a 'present-day' type of feminism. In 1956, the American sociologist Sonya Rudikoff argued that both Kinsey and de Beauvoir could be seen as part of a feminist tradition :

Feminism was, of course, not thoroughly routed; some militants stayed on the ramparts long after the enemy surrendered, and they may be found in quite unexpected quarters. The name may seem strange in this context, but Dr. Kinsey is

⁴² Bierstedt, 'The women books'.

⁴³ Millicent McIntosh, 'I am concerned', in D. Geddes, ed., *An analysis of the Kinsey Reports on sexual behaviour in the human male and female* (London, 1954), p. 146; Sonia Rudikoff, 'Feminism reconsidered', *Hudson Review*, 2 (1956), p. 181. Rudikoff argued that Kinsey saw women as lower than dogs because he suggested they did not respond to psychological stimuli, while dogs did.

⁴⁴ Margaret Sanger to William Cole, 26 Jan. 1953, Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin, Alfred A. Knopf Inc. Records, 1177/ 21.

such a one ... but it is quite impossible to imagine the fate of an interest in women's sexual behaviour without the precipitating encouragement and support provided by feminism ... Simone de Beauvoir addressed herself to the subject of women several years ago, and it is her long ambitious book, *The Second Sex*, which I have in mind as an example of a more sophisticated feminism.⁴⁵

Rudikoff was unusual for an American reviewer in the 1950s because she referred to 'feminism' as a good thing, and because she consequently suggested that because of de Beauvoir's broader feminism her work was better than just sexology. Rudikoff therefore pre-empted shifts in the 1970s when de Beauvoir was applauded as a general feminist theorist, and when 'sexology' would have appeared to be an incomplete description her work. De Beauvoir herself did not see *The second sex* as primarily a work of sexology, or a book that should most obviously be paired with Alfred Kinsey's. Nevertheless, in the 1950s, it was precisely the sex connection that facilitated some of the most enthusiastic and positive reviews of de Beauvoir's work in America. Her arguments about work and motherhood would be received with more reservation and ambiguity.

IV

De Beauvoir's emphasis on the importance of women having a career and economic independence elicited mixed responses. De Beauvoir argued that a world of male and female equality would be achieved if women were raised and educated exactly like men, working under the same conditions for the same salaries.⁴⁶ In 'Towards liberation', the final, and most prescriptive, part of de Beauvoir's work, she made clear that only with financial independence from men and a career identity could women become free and self-fulfilled.

A woman supported by a man—wife or courtesan—is not emancipated from the male because she has a vote ... It is through gainful employment that woman has traversed most of the distance that separated her from the male; and nothing else can guarantee her liberty in practice. Once she ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles; between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator.⁴⁷

Married women's participation in the workforce was increasing in England and America during the 1940s and 1950s⁴⁸ and there was much discussion in the press and in social scientific work about how a woman could combine career work with the roles of home-maker and mother.⁴⁹ De Beauvoir's ideas on

⁴⁵ Rudikoff 'Feminism reconsidered', pp. 179, 185.

⁴⁶ De Beauvoir, *The second sex*, p. 733.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 689.

⁴⁸ For UK, A. H. Halsey, *British social trends since 1900* (Basingstoke, 1988); USA Figure Three, 'Women labor force participation by age, 1950–2000', in D. Cotter et al., 'Gender inequality at work', *Report for the Russell Sage Foundation and Population Reference Bureau* (New York, NY, 2004), p. 78.

⁴⁹ *New York Times*, 18 Jan 1956; *New York Times*, 9 Sept. 1951; *New York Times*, 11 Mar. 1955.

working women, therefore, attracted interest in the US, even on television. In 1957 and 1958, once in an interview with Philip Wylie and then again with novelist Pearl Buck, ABC interviewer Mike Wallace raised what he referred to as 'de Beauvoir's view' that a working and independent woman was happier than one who was dependent on her husband.⁵⁰

The reception of *The second sex* could be favourable in the USA when de Beauvoir's ideas seemed to fit with an American conception of modernity. American responses to de Beauvoir's book were often articulated in the language of women's 'evolution', 'progress', 'change', and, at more ecstatic moments, in the language of 'emancipation' and of a 'forward rush'.⁵¹ A reviewer in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* attested, 'The traditional role is not enough. Modern woman will not abide by the three K's of Nazi Kultur: Kinder, Küche, Kirche. The whole world is beckoning.'⁵²

From the point of view of American commentators, however, there were two problems with de Beauvoir's views on working women. First, those ideas had often been expressed in terms of implicit or explicit criticism of America. De Beauvoir suggested that the limited numbers of 'career women' in America 'do not become passionate about the content of their tasks' and sooner or later 'the American woman, trying to be an idol, makes herself the slave of her admirers, does not dress, live or breathe other than through the man and for him'.⁵³ American critics were often offended by what they took to be this condescending attitude. Even Parshley in his translator's introduction implied that de Beauvoir had understated the extent of women's emancipation in the American workforce:

In the United States ... more frequently than in some other countries, a good many women do succeed in attaining positions of professional independence, and some of them nevertheless marry sooner or later – and even have children – without lessening their competence or disrupting their careers ... some twenty millions of women – half of them married and many with children – are gainfully employed outside of the home.⁵⁴

The US representative to the UN Commission on the Status of Women, Olive Goldman, writing in the *Saturday Review* also argued that many women worked in America, and contradicted de Beauvoir's view that they were limited to jobs of lower status and pay: 'many distinguished women serve on the bench in America, on the faculties of schools, and in government and business positions

⁵⁰ Mike Wallace and Pearl Buck, *The Mike Wallace Interview*, ABC (8 Feb. 1958), transcript accessed on the Harry Ransom Center website, 27 June 2012. Pearl Buck recognized that women may have to suspend other professions while they had young children, but still agreed that women should be able to enter both worlds of motherhood and career in their lives.

⁵¹ *Saturday Review*, 21 Feb. 1953.

⁵² *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 1 Mar. 1953.

⁵³ De Beauvoir, *The second sex*, p. 697–8.

⁵⁴ Howard Parshley, 'Translator's preface', in de Beauvoir, *The second sex*, pp. 9–10.

of authority'.⁵⁵ Satirist Phylis McGinley put forward a similar argument, with laboured irony:

Men in America have done their job too well; their propaganda is irresistible. Millions of deluded women believe themselves to be ennobled by the mere fact of being women . . . by and large they have been convinced by their overlords that they are the luckier sex. They have the vote. They've gained the right to hold jobs if they like and in acquiring these dubious blessings they have given up very little . . . Who'd want to settle for simply being a man?⁵⁶

The potential for flexibility and choice in a woman's social role was often equated with modernity. Critics' defence of the prestige of the working woman in America often went hand in hand with their opinion that America was leading the world in terms of women's social empowerment, and that women in the country were on the verge of some sort of social revolution. Margaret Mead, psychiatrist Clara Thompson, and the author of several books on women and society, Philip Wylie, all depicted de Beauvoir's notions about the lack of opportunities for women to achieve professional and intellectual independence as indicative of the backwardness of sex relations in France. In his review, Wylie wrote, 'If humanity is soon to enjoy the forward rush which a real understanding of sexuality would assure, the sturdiest first steps will probably be made by Americans "pioneering" as bravely as ever—indeed more courageously as ever'.⁵⁷ Clara Thompson said it more succinctly: 'If her picture is true of present day France, then France is about fifty years behind us'.⁵⁸

As well as having reservations about de Beauvoir's condescending attitude to middle-class women, American writers were concerned about de Beauvoir's conception of the nature of women's work. De Beauvoir's ideal situation was one in which women should work on the same terms as men. In the United States, however, large numbers of women combined work with marriage and children. Furthermore, the image of modernity in 1950s America was intimately tied to notions of the family. American authors, therefore, tended to be hostile to anything that seemed to suggest that women's work might provide an alternative to conventional 'homemaking'. One sociologist asked what would happen to family life if all women possessed de Beauvoir's 'low estimation of homemaking, of wifehood and of motherhood'.⁵⁹ In his preface, Parshley, after having established that many women in America pursued careers, moved swiftly on to outline the 'social and psychological problems involved' when although so many women were working 'the traditional belief that man should be provider has remained strong' as did 'the strength and persistence of the traditional feeling that if a woman has a home then her place is in it'.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ *Saturday Review*, 21 Feb. 1953.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Clara Thompson to William Cole, 16 Mar. 1953, Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin, Alfred A. Knopf Inc. Records, 1177/21.

⁵⁹ Magnus, 'The second sex', p. 277. Magnus was a sociologist at Ohio State University.

⁶⁰ Parshley 'Translator's preface', in de Beauvoir, *The second sex*, p. 10.

In the USA in 1949, 46 per cent of women still thought college education in the USA should be tailored to training for wifehood.⁶¹ Margaret Mead in her *Male and female* (1949) encouraged women to enter the workforce, particularly the profession of psychiatry because of their 'innate' female intuition, but also warned of disharmony should women try to secure the same jobs as men. Olive Goldman expressed satisfaction that American women were entering the professions in increasing numbers, nonetheless in her review of *The second sex* she maintained :

as long as the family exists someone must give birth to children, rear them, keep house and care for the aged and infirm. Men might take a larger share in the last three duties, but they cannot relieve woman of her maternal obligations. Consequently she must still be home-maker.⁶²

Sociologist Mirra Komarovsky, in her 1953 *Women in the modern world: their education and their dilemmas*, which was often reviewed alongside *The second sex*⁶³ used William Ogburn's notion of 'cultural lag' to articulate what Parshley had flagged up as the conflict between what women were actually increasingly doing (working) and what was socially expected of them (looking after children and staying in the home). Komarovsky concluded that the esteem and central importance of both home life and career for women, as well as a stress on the potentially special contribution of women in the professions, needed to be emphasized in a liberal education for women and men.⁶⁴ Pearl Buck advanced a similar argument when she was interviewed on ABC in 1958 :

I don't think any women really want to usurp the place of men. I think we do have a peculiar circumstance in our country, in that we educate our boys and girls exactly the same, and so that the fields of success are the same, and I think that women have the obligation and the right to do anything that they wish, but to do it as women and not as men, but having exactly the same education sometimes they don't know how to do it as women ... they don't know what their contribution is.⁶⁵

Buck and Komarovsky felt that a 'balanced' education would reconcile women to their identity – particularly to the fact that they would have to spend at least part of their life raising children.

⁶¹ Sheila Rowbotham, *A century of women: a history of women in Britain and the United States* (London, 1997), p. 274.

⁶² *Saturday Review*, 21 Feb. 1953.

⁶³ These books are discussed together in Rudikoff, 'Feminism reconsidered'; Bierstedt, 'The women books'; Norman Kell, 'Culture lag and housewifemanship: the role of the married female college graduate', *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 31 (1957) pp. 87–95.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Catherine A. Faver, 'Gender roles and social change: reviewing the sociology of Mirra Komarovsky', *Gender and Society*, 3 (1989), p. 287; Shira Tarrant, 'When sex became gender: Mirra Komarovsky's feminism of the 1950s', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 33 (2005), pp. 337, 341.

⁶⁵ Pearl Buck on Mike Wallace TV show, 8 Feb. 1958, transcript accessed on the Harry Ransom Center website, 27 June 2012.

American writers often favoured careers for married women, but they also recognized the unhappiness that sprang from the contradictory social pressures surrounding the issue. They called for dual expectations that women be mothers and workers to be embedded in education, because women had a dual role. They therefore favoured a very different model of the socialization of women than that proposed by de Beauvoir. It was de Beauvoir's view that if women were to be distinguished from 'courtesans' and were to be 'emancipated', they should work exactly like men and should be educated exactly like them too.

V

If attitudes about de Beauvoir's views on work were tepid, connected responses to her apparent denigration of motherhood, which are considered in this section, were positively icy. Dwight Macdonald, a political commentator who was close to Albert Camus, argued that de Beauvoir was attempting to 'de-feminize' women. Bypassing de Beauvoir's existential argument about the body as situation, Macdonald argued that childbearing, far from being something that alienates women, is actually a deep part of themselves that reconciles them to their natural function,

It does not occur to Mme de. Beauvoir – though, fortunately, it does occur to most other women – that since a woman's body is indeed 'adapted for the perpetuation of the species', this function is not something externally imposed on and in contradiction to her individual self, but is a very deep and fulfilling expression of that self.⁶⁶

It was also on the issue of maternity that de Beauvoir ran into most criticism from social scientists. The levels of interaction between biology and culture in the creation of women's identity had been reassessed by gender theorists in England and America since the interwar period, at which time a kind of social constructivism that emphasized society as the determining influence on a person's identity formation animated Margaret Mead's *Sex and temperament in three primitive societies* (1935).⁶⁷ By the 1950s, de Beauvoir presented her similarly non-biologically determinist view that female biology was a 'situation' which could be freely interpreted. She argued that women's sense of their own inferiority and dependence on man stemmed only from society's interpretation of woman's biology and maternity, not from any fixed part of the biology itself. Repeating her earlier arguments in her conclusion, de Beauvoir wrote that 'woman is determined not by her hormones or by mysterious instincts but by the manner in which her body and relation to the world are modified through the action of others than herself'.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ *Reporter*, 14 Apr. 1953.

⁶⁷ Tarrant, *When sex became gender*, p. 83.

⁶⁸ De Beauvoir, *The second sex*, p. 734.

Although social constructivism had prevailed in the academy in the 1930s, by the 1950s, while elements of it remained, Mary Jo Buhle has shown that its influence was diluted. Social scientists, and in particular anthropologists who interacted with psychologists and were now influenced by Helene Deutsch's ideas of 'gestation' and Freudian 'ego-psychology'. Though, as sociologist Komarovskiy argued in 1953 in *Women in the modern world*, much confusion still prevailed in debates about differences and similarities between men and women, social scientists were most inclined to suggest that due to their biological make-up, instincts, intuitions and drives, women were fundamentally different from men.⁶⁹ As a consequence, critics in America, including the two popular anthropologists, Margaret Mead and Ashley Montagu, who will be considered in this section, agreed with de Beauvoir that women had been interpreted as socially inferior to men. In contrast to de Beauvoir, however, they argued that the problem of inferiority should be rectified with a transformation of society that facilitated greater public respect for maternity and femininity. They sought to employ social constructivist means (i.e. changing culture) to biologically determinist ends (i.e. reaffirming women's biological destiny as mothers).

De Beauvoir was not an unconditional opponent of maternity, rather her emphasis was on the need for female freedom and on the ways that current social circumstances might limit the expression of that freedom.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, she wrote things that seemed hostile or antipathetic to maternity in the context of 1950s America.⁷¹ She claimed that women who saw childbearing as an expression of the deep self were 'not so much mothers as fertile organisms, like fowls with high egg production who seek eagerly to sacrifice their liberty of action to the functioning of their flesh'.⁷² She suggested mothers were 'almost always' dangerously discontented women who lacked independence and who damaged their children by taking out their sexual, professional, and intellectual frustrations on them.⁷³ She therefore advanced a model of successful motherhood, suggesting that the woman who had not worked or reached intellectual independence made the very worst type of mother. Her discussion of motherhood, however, was an area in which Parshley's translation seems to have generated particular problems – making de Beauvoir's concerns about the possibility of women being fulfilled by motherhood in 'current circumstances' (*actuellement*) seem like an expression of hostility to maternity in any circumstances.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Mari Jo Buhle, *Feminism and its discontents: a century of struggle with psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

⁷⁰ De Beauvoir speaks fondly of motherhood in *The second sex*, p. 526.

⁷¹ Moi, *The making of an intellectual woman*, p. 206; de Beauvoir, *The second sex*, p. 501.

⁷² De Beauvoir, *The second sex*, pp. 501–42.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 528.

⁷⁴ Moi, 'While we wait', p. 57. Moi argues that a key issue of translation lies in the meaning of the word 'actuellement', which Parshley translates as 'actually' but which means 'today' or 'in the present circumstances'.

Mead and Montagu were in favour of improvement in women's social position and disliked what they took to be de Beauvoir's deprecation of motherhood. They had both published best-selling books from 1949 to 1952, in advance of the translation of de Beauvoir's work, which argued that woman's social identity was largely determined by her biology.⁷⁵ They agreed that one deterrent to social harmony was the fact that male characteristics were being increasingly identified by women for emulation. Mead labelled de Beauvoir's discussion of maternity as unscientific and 'impassioned'.⁷⁶ Another anthropologist, Clyde Kluckhohn, labelled it as 'un-factual'.⁷⁷ The very qualities of de Beauvoir's writing that were praised by social scientists when she was discussing sexuality – her emotional insight and intuition – were seen to be a weakness when she was discussed as an apparent denigrator of maternity. Ironically, Mead's criticism of de Beauvoir's treatment of maternity as overly emotional therefore suggests that the idea of maternity was particularly emotive for Americans writing about women's role in the 1950s.

Mead was most critical of de Beauvoir when she felt that she was arguing that women should imitate men. She expressed her reservations about de Beauvoir's attempt to 'masculinize' women in the *Saturday Review of Literature*.

The most curious point in the book is the author's absolute failure to recognize anything creative in maternity. She goes out of her way to stress how alien the fetus is to the body that shelters it, how bad mothers are for their children after they are finally born . . . by refusing to include the structure of the human body in her theory, by denying childhood sexuality, by denigrating maternity she constructs a picture in which the only way a woman can be a full human being is to be as much like a man as possible.⁷⁸

Mead had come to have such a strikingly different view from de Beauvoir partly because she was influenced by ideas of sexual difference popular in psycho-analysis at the time. She was also inspired by Parsonian functionalism which stressed the central importance of family and mother to the stability of society. Her continued adherence to Boasian social constructivism, which had been most popular in the 1930s, also heightened her sense that societies could always be 're-organized' according to different value-systems.⁷⁹ Mead advanced this position in her 1949 *Male and female: a study of the sexes in a changing world*. Here, she called for a reorganization of society so that woman's maternity and the attributes she believed to stem from it – not just men's work in systems of law, government, religion, art, and science – were valorized. By this, she meant that first, motherhood needed to be as celebrated in society as men's professions. Secondly, that women should be encouraged to work when they were not raising children because their temperaments, partly acquired through the

⁷⁵ Ashley Montagu, *The natural superiority of women* (New York, NY, 1952), p. 238; Mead, *Male and female*.

⁷⁶ *Saturday Review*, 21 Feb. 1953.

⁷⁷ *New York Times*, 22 Feb. 1953.

⁷⁸ *Saturday Review* 21 Feb. 1953.

⁷⁹ Tarrant, *When sex became gender*, pp. 80–1.

experience of maternity, could change the overall tone and character of society. For example, she pointed out that with more women in the workforce there may be more emphasis on compromise rather than conflict.⁸⁰

Like Mead, Montagu stressed the central social importance of a woman's maternity, but his parallel and paradoxical sympathy with the idea that women should have choice in constructing identities meant that his views on female identity, and therefore his responses to de Beauvoir, could seem contradictory. In 1952, in his best-selling work, *The natural superiority of women*, Montagu starkly argued that a maternal role was woman's destiny because of her reproductive function: 'Women are mothers of humanity; do not let us ever forget that or underemphasize its importance ... Women must assume the full birthright of motherhood.'⁸¹ However, in a review of *The second sex* in the *New York Tribune*, Montagu contradicted the view in his 1952 book. Far from referring to the 'full birthright of motherhood', he suggested that de Beauvoir was right in arguing that a woman should not be 'enslaved by her reproductive functions':

the author's purpose in this brilliantly written book is to explain women ... She begins commencing with a discussion of woman as an organism, the author shows how woman was originally enslaved by her reproductive functions ... as the author stoutly maintains, woman's biology does not establish for her a fixed and inevitable destiny, nor does it condemn her to remain in a subordinate position forever.⁸²

In a different response to *The second sex* published in the *Saturday Review*, Montagu arrived at a position between determinism and cultural relativism. He suggested that maternity could not be compatible with careers for women in the way that de Beauvoir hoped, because society was not yet highly enough evolved to take on what had traditionally been the role of the mother. In the *Saturday Review*, he criticized her ideal state of affairs for being utopian:

As for the idea that 'in a properly organised society where children would largely be taken in charge by the community, and the mother cared for and helped, maternity would not be incompatible with careers for women'. I think this a very dangerous suggestion ... the quality of the wisdom it would require in the community is frankly more than we could, as realists expect within the next few hundred years at best – and Mlle. De Beauvoir writes for the present and the immediate future.⁸³

The 1950s could clearly be a confusing time of debate about women. Even when critics agreed with de Beauvoir that motherhood could conceivably be performed by a community and not an individual biological mother, such freely chosen disassociation between the bearer of children and the agents of motherhood was ultimately deemed immoral in the context of the 1950s.

⁸⁰ Mead, *Male and female*, p. 342; Margaret Mead, 'The epilogue' to *Report of the president's commission on the status of women* (New York, NY, 1965), pp. 192, 183.

⁸¹ Ashley Montagu, *The natural superiority of women* (London, 1970 edn), p. 288.

⁸² *New York Tribune*, 22 Feb. 1953.

⁸³ *Saturday Review*, 21 Feb. 1953.

In the case of the critics I assess here, contradictions between opinions were underpinned by contrasting ideologies of social constructivism and biological determinism that could be combined in different formulations and could feed into the development of polar opposite views on women. But the area of overlap between the views of Millicent McIntosh, Olive Goldman, Mirra Komarovsky, Mead, and Montagu, in fact all the critics cited in this article, is as, if not more, striking than differences of opinion. There was clearly an agreement of opinion among critics who aptly synthesized constructivism and determinism within a vision of female identity that they believed suited the context they were in.

In the 1950s, the consensus that emerged in American public debate was an idea that society needed to be restructured in some way in order to improve women's experience of life. The desired revolution was understood by the majority debating this topic to reside not in women's total rejection of past roles and traditions, but rather in a re-evaluation of motherhood and femininity that—whether in the world of work or in the home—raised their prestige as high as, if not higher than, that given to traditionally male roles and attributes. De Beauvoir's attempt to loosen the connection between a woman's identity and her maternity ultimately ran against this prevailing consensus. Her arguments about motherhood therefore could not be reconciled with the views of her American critics in the 1950s.

VI

The second sex has become a canonical feminist text and the subject of ever more rigorous philosophical exegesis.⁸⁴ By contrast, this article has explored how de Beauvoir's work was read in one country when it was first published. Certainly, this requires seeing de Beauvoir in terms of the great philosophical traditions on which she drew and also the feminist body of work that subsequently drew on her. But her book had a range of readers when it was first published in English, including ones who might not normally be seen as feminist, such as Philip Wylie, and ones, such as the satirist Phyllis McGinley, who might not normally be seen as worthy of serious attention at all.

To underline the importance of this American context, it is worth pointing out that an English audience in the 1950s read exactly the same text as the American audience, because Jonathan Cape, who published *The second sex* in Britain, used the Parshley translation. However, the text was discussed differently in the UK. The influential role particular types of American social scientists had in the media in their country meant that, there, de Beauvoir was reviewed predominantly by anthropologists and sociologists and was often seen as a sexologist. Social scientists in Britain did not have as high a profile as their American counterparts during this period, and with the exception of

⁸⁴ See Nancy Bauer, 'Must we read Simone de Beauvoir?', in Grosholz, ed., *The legacy of Simone de Beauvoir*, pp. 115–35, at p. 116.

Viola Klein, they did not seem as interested in discussing a transformation in gender relations.

Social anthropology and sexology had been well established in the UK since the turn of the century. The Mass Observation exercise in post-war Britain was also seen as a nationwide anthropological experiment. But the centre of cultural power for both these areas of research seemed to be moving to America at mid-century. Kinsey had become the 'new' Havelock Ellis. Jonathan Cape, had, in striking contrast to Knopf, actually requested that some of de Beauvoir's references to sexual intimacy be cut.⁸⁵ Bronislaw Malinowski, a founding figure in British social anthropology, spent increasing amounts of time in America after 1933, settling in Yale at the end of the decade. Ashley Montagu had actually emigrated to the US from Britain in 1927, preferring a career in America to one in the UK after training in physical anthropology at the University of London in the early 1920s.⁸⁶

In the same period that anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists took centre stage in America, British public intellectuals tended to be economists, like J. M. Keynes, historians, like A. J. P. Taylor or Hugh Trevor Roper, or philosophers, like Bertrand Russell and A. J. Ayer. These figures had no natural affinity with French philosophical thought about women, they were not concerned with reassessing or theorizing women's social role, and they did not review de Beauvoir's work.

In the UK, de Beauvoir's chief reviewers were literary figures such as Naomi Lewis, the poet Stevie Smith, or high-profile liberal Christians, like Kathleen Bliss, who was based at the BBC. Whereas the term 'feminist' was notably absent in American reviews, de Beauvoir was reviewed in the *Times Literary Supplement* alongside veteran feminist Vera Brittain; and in Michael Swan's *Observer* review of *The second sex* he referred to de Beauvoir's work as 'New Feminism'. She was also reviewed in the old feminist journal *Time and Tide*.⁸⁷

In both countries, the critics receiving de Beauvoir acknowledged that there needed to be change in women's social standing. The debate in Britain, though, lacked the drama that it had in America. *Time and Tide* reviewer, Elizabeth Haworth, said that she shared de Beauvoir's vision of the woman of the future, but that because feminism was at such a low ebb in Britain, she did not think that it would be realized any time soon. A *Listener* reviewer admitted that there was a need for some change, but dreaded a potential 'revival' of the 'war between the sexes' that might be a response to de Beauvoir's work.⁸⁸ Both these examples suggest that the connection de Beauvoir's English reviewers made

⁸⁵ Jonathan Cape to William Koshland, 8 May 1952; Howard Parshley to Harold Strauss, referring to Cape's call for references to 'international sexologists' to be cut, 2 July 1952, Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin, Alfred A. Knopf Records, Inc. 689/12.

⁸⁶ *New York Times*, 29 Nov. 1999.

⁸⁷ *Listener*, 11 Jan. 1951; *Time and Tide*, 28 Nov. 1953; *Listener*, 18 Jan. 1954; *New Statesman*, 14 Nov. 1953; *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 Jan. 1954.

⁸⁸ *Listener*, 18 Jan. 1954, p. 309, *New Statesman*, 14 Nov. 1953.

between her work and a kind of feminist activity that was either seen as dead or undesirable, might actually have defused the explosive potential of de Beauvoir's work in 1950s Britain.

By contrast, several high-profile American social scientists, although they did not refer to themselves or de Beauvoir as 'feminist', were opinionated about the role of women in society in the 1950s. Just before they had received her work, a significant proportion of de Beauvoir's American respondents had already published books that set out to provide a blueprint for 'good relations between the sexes' – they were planning a social transformation to achieve this goal.⁸⁹ Thus, whether de Beauvoir's American reviewers feted or criticized her – and they certainly criticized what they believed to be her views of maternity – she was imported into a very live, public, and in some ways self-consciously revolutionary, debate.

De Beauvoir was recast as a political feminist and reinstated as a philosopher by other 'feminist philosophers' in the late 1960s and 1970s. Many of these intellectuals, in sympathy with de Beauvoir's ideas about maternity in ways that her 1950s reviewers had not been, saw gender, the reproduction of children, and marriage as belonging to an unfixed ideological realm. They challenged more traditional concepts of the family and female biology.⁹⁰ When 1970s feminists and later gender theorists responded to *The second sex* they were, in many respects, reading a very different book to their predecessors.

⁸⁹ Montagu, *Natural superiority of women* (1952 edn), p. 238.

⁹⁰ Kate Millett, *Sexual politics* (New York, NY, 1971); Sheila Rowbotham, *Promise of a dream: remembering the sixties* (London, 2001); Betty Friedan, *The feminine mystique* (New York, NY, 1963); Juliet Mitchell, 'The longest revolution', *New Left Review*, 40 (1966), pp. 11–37.

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