The second sex 25 years later

Interview with Simone de Beauvoir 1976

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Gerassi. It’s now about twenty-five years since The Second Sex was published. Many people, especially in America, consider it the beginning of the contemporary feminist movement. Would you ...

Beauvoir. I don’t think so. The current feminist movement, which really started about five or six years ago, did not really know the book. Then, as the movement grew, some of the leaders took from it some of their theoretical basis. But The Second Sex in no way launched the feminist movement. Most of the women who became very active in the movement were much too young in 1949-50, when the book came out, to be influenced by it. What pleases me, of course, is that they did discover it later. Sure, some of the older women – Betty Friedan, for example, who dedicated The Feminine Mystique to me – had read it and were perhaps influenced by it somewhat. But others, not at all. Kate Millet, for example, does not cite me a single time in her work. They may
have become feminists for the reasons I explain in *The Second Sex*; but they discovered those reasons in their life experiences, not in my book.

**Gerassi.** You have said that your own feminist consciousness grew out of the experience of writing *The Second Sex*. In what way, and how do you see the development of the movement after it was published in terms of your own trajectory?

**Beauvoir.** In writing *The Second Sex* I became aware, for the first time, that I myself was leading a false life, or rather, that I was profiting from this male-oriented society without even knowing it. What had happened is that quite early in my life I had accepted the male values, and was living accordingly. Of course, I was quite successful, and that reinforced in me the belief that man and woman could be equal if the woman wanted such equality. In other words, I was an intellectual. I had the luck to come from a sector of society, the bourgeoisie, which could afford not only to send me to the best schools but also to allow me to play leisurely with ideas. Because of that I managed to enter the man’s world without too much difficulty. I showed that I could discuss philosophy, art, literature, etc., on “man’s level.” I kept whatever was particular to womanhood to myself. I was then reinforced by my success to continue. As I did, I saw I could earn as good a living as any male intellectual and that I was taken as seriously as any of my male peers. Being who I was, I then found that I could travel by myself if I wanted to, that I could sit in cafés and write and be as respected as any male writer, and so on. Each stage fortified my sense of independence and equality. It became, therefore, very easy for me to forget that a secretary could in no way enjoy the same privileges. She could not sit in a café and read a book without being molested. She was rarely invited to parties for “her mind.” She could not establish credit or own property. I could. More importantly still, I tended to scorn the kind of woman who felt incapable, financially or spiritually, to show her
independence from men. In effect, I was thinking, without even saying it to myself, “if I can, so can they.” In researching and writing *The Second Sex* I did come to realize that my privileges were the result of my having abdicated, in some crucial respects at least, my womanhood. If we put it in class economic terms, you would understand it easily: I had become a class collaborationist. Well, I was sort of the equivalent in terms of the sex struggle. Through *The Second Sex* I became aware of the struggle needed. I understood that the vast majority of women simply did not have the choices that I had had, that women are, in fact, defined and treated as a second sex by a male-oriented society whose structure would totally collapse if that orientation was genuinely destroyed. But like economically and politically dominated peoples anywhere, it is very hard and very slow for rebellion to develop. First, such peoples have to become aware of that domination. Then they have to believe in their own strength to change it. Those who profit from their “collaboration” have to understand the nature of their betrayal. And finally, those who have the most to lose from taking a stand, that is, women like me who have carved out a successful sinecure or career, have to be willing to risk insecurity – be it merely ridicule – in order to gain self-respect. And they have to understand that those of their sisters who are most exploited will be the last to join them. A worker’s wife, for example, is least free to join the movement. She knows that her husband is more exploited than most feminist leaders and that he depends on her role as the housewife-mother to survive himself. Anyway, for all these reasons, women did not move. Oh yes, there were some very nice, very wise little movements which struggled for political promotions, for women’s participation in politics, in government. I could not relate to such groups. Then came 1968, and everything changed. I know that some important events happened before that. Betty Friedan’s book for one, was published before ’68. In fact, the American women were well on the move by then. They, more than any other women, and for obvious
reasons, were most aware of the contradictions between the new technology and the conservative role of keeping women in the kitchen. As technology expands – technology being the power of the brain and not of the brawn – the male rationale that women are the weaker sex and hence must play a secondary role can no longer be logically maintained. Since technological innovations were so widespread in America, American women could not escape the contradictions. It was thus normal that the feminist movement got its biggest impetus in the very heartland of imperial capitalism, even if that impetus was strictly one of economics, that is, the demand for equal pay for equal work. But it was within the anti-imperialist movement itself that real feminist consciousness developed. Whether in the anti-Vietnam War movement in America or in the aftermath of the 1968 rebellion in France and other European countries, women began to feel their power. Having understood that capitalism leads necessarily to domination of poor peoples all over the world, masses of women began to join the class struggle – even if they did not accept the term “class struggle.” They became activists. They joined the marches, the demonstrations, the campaigns, the underground groups, the militant left. They fought, as much as any man, for a nonexploiting, nonalienating future. But what happened? In the groups or organizations they joined, they discovered that they were just as much a second sex as in the society they wanted to overturn. Here in France, and I dare say in America just as much, they found that the leaders were always the men. Women became the typists, the coffee-makers of these pseudorevolutionary groups. Well, I shouldn’t say pseudo. Many of the movement’s male “heavies” were genuine revolutionaries. But trained, raised, molded in a male-oriented society, these revolutionaries brought that orientation to the movement as well. Understandably, such men were not voluntarily going to relinquish that orientation, just as the bourgeois class isn’t going to voluntarily relinquish its power. So, just as it is up to the poor to take away the power of the
rich, so it is up to women to take away power from the men. And that doesn’t mean dominate men in turn. It means establish equality. As socialism, true socialism, establishes economic equality among all peoples, the feminist movement learned it had to establish equality between the sexes by taking power away from the ruling class within the movement, that is, from men. Put another way: once inside the class struggle, women understood that the class struggle did not eliminate the sex struggle. It’s at that point that I myself became aware of what I have just said. Before that I was convinced that equality of the sexes can only be possible once capitalism is destroyed and therefore – and it’s this “therefore” which is the fallacy – we must first fight the class struggle. It is true that equality of the sexes is impossible under capitalism. If all women work as much as men, what will happen to those institutions on which capitalism depends, such institutions as churches, marriage, armies, and the millions of factories, shops, stores, etc.. which are dependent on piece work, part-time work. and cheap labor? But it is not true that a socialist revolution necessarily establishes sexual equality. Just look at Soviet Russia or Czechoslovakia, where (even if we are willing to call those countries “socialist”, which I am not) there is a profound confusion between emancipation of the proletariat and emancipation of women. Somehow, the proletariat always end up being made up of men. The patriarchal values have remained intact there as well as here. And that – this consciousness among women that the class struggle does not embody the sex struggle – is what is new. Yet most women in the struggle know that now. That’s the greatest achievement of the feminist movement. It’s one which will alter history in the years to come.

**Gerassi.** But such a consciousness is limited to the women who are in the left, that is, women who are committed to the restructuring of the whole society.

**Beauvoir.** Well, of course, since the rest are conservative,
meaning they want to conserve what has been or what is. Women on the right do not want revolution. They are mothers, wives, devoted to their men. Or, if they are agitators at all, they want a bigger piece of the pie. They want to earn more, elect more women to parliaments, see a woman become president. They fundamentally believe in inequality, except they want to be on top rather than on the bottom. But they will fit fine into the system as it is or as it will change a bit to accommodate such demands. Capitalism can certainly afford to allow women to join an army, allow women to join a police force. Capitalism is certainly intelligent enough to let more women join the government. Pseudosocialism can certainly allow a woman to become secretary-general of its party. Those are just reforms, like social security or paid vacations. Did the institutionalization of paid vacations change the inequality of capitalism? Did the right of women to work in factories at equal pay to the men change the male orientation of the Czech society? But to change the whole value system of either society, to destroy the concept of motherhood: that is revolutionary.

A feminist, whether she calls herself leftist or not, is a leftist by definition. She is struggling for total equality, for the right to be as important, as relevant, as any man. Therefore, embodied in her revolt for sexual equality is the demand for class equality. In a society where the male can be the mother, where, say, to push the argument on values so it becomes clear, the so-called “female intuition” is as important as the “male’s knowledge” – to use today’s absurd language – where to be gentle or soft is better than to be hard and tough, in other words, in a society where each person’s experiences are equivalent to any other, you have automatically set up equality, which means economic and political equality and much more. Thus, the sex struggle embodies the class struggle, but the class struggle does not embody the sex struggle. Feminists are, therefore, genuine leftists. In fact, they are to the
Gerassi. But in the meantime, by waging the sex struggle only within the left – since, as you’ve said, the sex struggle is, temporarily at least, irrelevant within other political sectors – aren’t feminists weakening the left, hence fortifying those who exploit both their women and the poor everywhere?

Beauvoir. No, and in the long run it can only fortify the left.

For one thing, by being confronted as leftists, that is, as opponents of exploitation, leftist men are forced to start watering their wine. More and more groups feel compelled to keep their macho male leaders in check. That’s progress. Here in our newspaper, Libération, the male-oriented majority felt obliged to let a woman become its director.

That’s progress. Leftist men are beginning to watch their language, are...

Gerassi. But is it real? I mean. I’ve learned. for example, never to use the word “chick.” to pay attention to women in any group discussion, to wash dishes, clean the house, do the shopping. But am I any less sexist in my thoughts? Have I rejected the male values?

Beauvoir. You mean inside you? To be blunt, who cares? Think for a minute. You know a racist Southerner. You know he’s racist because you’ve known him all his life. But now he never says “nigger.” He listens to all black men’s complaints and tries to do his best to deal with them. He goes out of his way to put down other racists. He insists that black children be given a better-than-average education to offset the years of no education. He gives references for black men’s loan applications. He backs the black candidates in his district both with money and his vote. Do you think the blacks give a damn that he’s just as much a racist now as before “in his soul”? A lot of the objective exploitation is habit. If you can check your habits, make it so that it’s “natural” to have
counterhabits, that’s a big step. If you wash dishes, clean house, and take the attitude that you don’t feel any less “a man” for doing it, you’re helping to set up new habits. A couple of generations feeling that they have to appear non-racist at all times, and the third generation will grow up non-racist in fact. So play at being non-sexist, and keep playing. Think of it as a game. In your private thoughts, go ahead and think of yourself as superior to women. But as long as you play convincingly – that you keep washing dishes, shopping, cleaning the house, taking care of children – you’re setting precedents, especially men like you who have a certain macho “pose.” The trouble is, I don’t believe it. I don’t think you really keep doing what you say. It’s one thing to wash dishes; it’s another to change diapers day in, day out.

Gerassi. Well. I don’t have any children...

Beauvoir. Why not? You chose not to. Do you think the mothers you know chose to have children? Or were they intimidated into having them? Or, more subtly, were they raised into thinking that it’s natural and normal and womanly to have children and therefore chose to have them? But who made that choice inevitable? Those are the values that have to be changed.

Gerassi. Fine. And that’s why, and I understand it that many feminists have insisted on being separatists. But in terms of the revolution, theirs as well as mine, can we win if we break up into totally separate groups? Can the feminist movement achieve its ends by excluding men from its struggle? Yet the dominant part of the women’s movement today, here in France at least, and it’s also quite true for America, is separatist.

Beauvoir. Just a minute. We have to investigate why they’re separatist. I can’t speak for America, but here in France there are many groups, consciousness groups, which do exclude men because they find it very important to rediscover their identity as women to understand themselves as women. They can only do this
by speaking among themselves, telling each other things they would never dare in front of husbands, lovers, brothers, fathers, or any other masculine power. Their need to speak with the intensity and honesty required can only be fulfilled this way. And they have managed to communicate with a profundity that I never thought possible or imaginable when I was 25. When I was among even the most intimate of my women friends then, truly feminine problems were never discussed. So now, for the first time, because of these consciousness groups and because of the toughness of the desire to genuinely confront women’s problems within these groups, real friendships among women have developed. I mean, in the past, in my youth, until very recently, women tended never to become genuine friends with other women. They saw each other as rivals, enemies even, or at least competitors. Now, mostly as a result of these consciousness groups, not only are women capable of being true friends, they have learned to be warm, open, deeply tender with each other: they are turning sisterhood and fraternity into realities – and without making that relationship dependent on lesbian sexuality. Of course, there are many battles, even strictly feminist battles with social impact, in which the women do expect men to join, and many have. I’m thinking, for example, of the struggle here to legalize abortion. When we staged the first massive demonstration on that issue, three or four years ago, I remember well the great quantity of men present. This doesn’t mean that they were not sexist: to uproot what has been anchored in one’s behavior pattern and value system from the earliest days of childhood takes years, decades. But these were men who were, at least, conscious of that sexism in society and took a political stand against it. On such occasions men are welcome, indeed encouraged, to join the struggle.

*Gerassi.* But there are also a great many groups, at least here in France, which proudly proclaim their separatism and define their struggle as strictly lesbian.
Beauvoir. Let’s be precise. Within the MLF [Women’s Liberation Movement] there are many groups, yes, which call themselves lesbians. Many of these women, thanks to the MLF and the consciousness groups, are now capable of saying openly that they are lesbian, and that’s great. It didn’t used to be that way at all. There are other women who have become lesbian out of a sort of political commitment: that is, they feel that it is a political act to be lesbian, the equivalent somewhat within the sex struggle of the black power advocates within the racial struggle. And, true, these women tend to be more dogmatic about the exclusion of men from their struggle. But that does not mean that they ignore the numerous struggles being waged everywhere against oppression. For example, when Pierre Overney, the young Maoist organizer, was killed in cold blood by a Renault factory policeman for failing to disperse during a demonstration, and the whole left staged a protest march across Paris, all of these so-called radical lesbian separatists joined the demonstration and carried flowers to his grave. This, on the other hand, did not mean that they expressed their solidarity with Overney the male, but that they identified with the protest against the state which exploits and abuses the people – women and men.

Gerassi. One of the consequences of women’s liberation, according to recent surveys carried out on American campuses, is that male impotence has vastly increased, especially among those young men trying to confront their sexism ...

Beauvoir. It’s their own fault. They try to play roles ...

Gerassi. But precisely, it is that they have become aware that they used to play roles, that it was easy to be macho and make believe that they were selfish, virile types when in fact, they now realize they often felt they had to make love or had to make an attempt to seduce the woman because that was what was expected, while now ...
Beauvoir. Having become aware of the role they played, which, nevertheless satisfied them – in both respects, that is, it was easy and it satisfied them sexually – while now they must worry about satisfying the woman, they can’t satisfy themselves. Too bad. I mean that. If they felt genuine affection for the women they were with, if they are honest with themselves and with their partners, they would automatically think of satisfying both. Now they’re worried about being judged sexist if they don’t satisfy the woman, so they can’t perform at all. But it’s still a performance, isn’t it? Such men are impotent because of the contradiction they live. It is too bad that it is this group of men, who are at least conscious of sexism, which suffers most from the women’s movement. while the vast majority of men profit from it, making life more intolerable for women ...

Gerassi. Profit?

Beauvoir. A while ago we were talking about how the MLF has helped women gain sisterhood. affection for each other, and so on. That might have created the impression that I think women are now better off. They’re not. The struggle is just beginning, and in the early phases it makes life much harder. Because of the publicity the word “liberation” is on the tip of the tongue of every male, whether aware of sexual oppression of women or not. The general attitude of males now is that “well, since you’re liberated. Let’s go to bed.” In other words, men are now much more aggressive, vulgar, violent. In my youth we could stroll down Montparnasse or sit in cafés without being molested. Oh, we got smiles, winks, stares, and so on. But now it’s impossible for a woman to sit alone in a café reading a book. And if she’s firm about being left alone when the males accost her, their parting remark is most often salope [bitch] or putain [whore]. There’s much much more rape now. In general, male aggressiveness and hostility has become so common that no woman feels at ease in this town, and from what I hear in any town in America. Unless,
of course, women stay at home. And that’s what lies behind this male aggressiveness: the threat which, in male eyes, women’s liberation represents has brought out their insecurity, hence their anger resulting that they now tend to behave as if only women who stay at home are “clean” while the others are easy marks. When women turn out not to be such easy marks, the men become personally challenged, so to speak. Their one idea is to “get” the woman.

**Gerassi.** So what’s happened to the myth, which every Frenchman upheld but which, of course, was never true, that lovemaking is an art, and that he was the greatest artist of them all?

**Beauvoir.** Except in some very rich parasitical layers of society, the myth is dead. Frenchmen now behave like American or Italian males: they just want “to score,” as the saying goes. And except for a very few number of men who try to cope with their sexism, they take the attitude that the freer a woman claims to be, that is, the more a woman tries to fight it out materially and in terms of her career, in their world, the man’s world, the easier she should be to get to bed.

**Gerassi.** The talk about women being freer puzzles me. In our society, freedom is achieved with money and power. Do women have any more power today, after almost a decade of the women’s movement?

**Beauvoir.** In the sense in which you ask, no. Intellectual women, young women who are willing to risk marginalization, the daughters of the rich when they are willing and capable to discard their parents’ value system: these women, yes, are freer. That is, because of their education, life-style, or financial resources, such women can withdraw from the harsh competitive society, live in communes or on the fringes, and develop relations with other similar women or men sensitive to their problems and feel freer. In other words, as individuals, women who can afford it for
whatever reason can feel freer. But as a class women certainly are not freer, precisely because, as you say, they do not have economic power. There are all sorts of statistics these days to prove that the number of women lawyers, politicians, doctors, advertising executives, etc., is increasing. But such statistics are misleading. The number of powerful women lawyers and executives is not. How many women lawyers can pick up a phone and call a judge or government official to fix anything or demand special favors? Such women must always operate through established male equivalents. Women doctors? How many are surgeons, hospital directors? Women in government? Yes, a few, tokens. In France we have two. One, serious, hardworking, Simone Weil, is Minister of Health. The other, Françoise Giroud, who is the Minister in charge of women is strictly a showpiece, meant to placate bourgeois women’s needs for integration into the system. But how many women control Senate appropriations? How many women control the editorial policy of newspapers? How many are judges? How many are bank presidents, capable of financing enterprises? Just because there are many more women in middle-level positions, as journalists say, in no way means they have power. And even those women must play the male game to succeed. Now, that doesn’t mean that I do not believe that women have not made progress in the struggle. But the progress is the result of mass action. Take the new abortion law proposed by Simone Veil. Despite the fact that abortions will not be covered by the national health program and hence will be more available to the wealthy than to the poor, the law is certainly a great step forward. But for all the seriousness with which Simone Veil fought for such a law, the reason she could present it is because thousands of women have been agitating all over France for such a law, because thousands of women have publicly claimed that they have had abortions (thus forcing the government to either prosecute them or change the law), because hundreds of doctors and midwives have risked prosecution by admitting they have
performed them, because some were tried and fought the issue in the courts, etc. What I’m saying is that, in mass actions, women can have power. The more women become conscious of the need for such mass action, the more progress will be achieved. And, to return to the woman who can afford to seek individual liberation, the more she can influence her friends and sisters, the more that consciousness will spread, which in turn, when frustrated by the system, will stimulate mass action. Of course, the more that consciousness spreads, the more men will be aggressive and violent. But then, the more men are aggressive, the more women will need other women to fight back, that is, the more the need for mass action will be clear. Most workers of the capitalist world today are aware of the class struggle, whether they call themselves Marxists or not, in fact, whether they even heard of Marx or not. And so it must become in the sex struggle. And it will.

**Gerassi.** You told me last year that you were thinking of writing another book on women, a sort of follow-up on *The Second Sex*. Are you?

**Beauvoir.** No. In the first place, such a work would have to be a collective effort. And then it should be rooted in practice rather than in theory. *The Second Sex* went the other way. Now that’s no longer valid. It’s in the practice that one can now see how the class struggle and the sex struggle intertwine, or at least how they can be articulated. But that’s true about all struggles now: we must derive our theory from practice, not the other way around. What really is needed is that a whole group of women, from all sorts of countries, assemble their lived experiences, and that we derive from such experiences the patterns facing women everywhere. What’s more, such information should be amassed from all classes, and that’s doubly hard. After all, the women waging the fight for liberation today are mostly bourgeois intellectuals; by and large, workers’ wives and even female workers remain firmly attached to the society’s middle-class value system. Try, for
example, to talk to women workers about the rights of prostitutes and the respect due them. The idea is shocking to most women workers. To raise the consciousness of women workers is a very slow process needing a great deal of tact. I know that there are MLF extremists who are trying to get workers’ wives to rebel against their husbands as male oppressors. I think that’s a mistake. A worker’s wife, here in France at least, will be quick to answer, “but my enemy is not my husband but my boss.” And this even if she has to wash her husband’s socks and make his soup after she too spends a whole day at some factory. It’s the same in America, where black women refused to listen to the women’s liberation movement proselytizers because they were white. Such black women remained supportive of their black husbands despite the exploitation, simply because the persons trying to make them aware of the exploitation were white. Gradually, however, a bourgeois feminist can reach a worker’s wife, just as in America today there are some black women – very few, I grant you – who say, “no, we do not want to submit to the oppression of our men on the pretext that they are black and that we have to struggle together against the whites; no, that is not a reason for our men to squash us, just because they are our black men.”

In some very concrete ways, however, the class struggle can and does encourage and develop the sex struggle. Over the past few years, for example, there have been many strikes here in France in plants where the workers were almost totally women. I’m thinking of the textile strike in Troyes, in the North, or at the Nouvelles Galeries at Thionville, or the famous strike at Lip. In each case the women workers gained not only a new consciousness but also new or stronger faith in their power, and this faith upset the male system they faced in their homes. At Lip, for example, the women seized the plant and refused to evacuate it despite threats by the police to use force to get them out. At first, the workers’ husbands were very proud of their militant wives. The men brought food,
helped make picket signs, etc. But when the women decided to be totally equal to the few men who also worked at Lip and who were on strike too, then the problems arose. The Lip strikers decided to organize shifts to guard the factory from police invasion. That meant night duty. Oh oh. Now, suddenly, the striking women’s husbands were upset. “You can strike and picket all you want.” they said. “but only in the daytime, not at night. What, night guard duty? Oh no! Sleeping together in large common rooms in shifts? Oh no.” Naturally, the women workers resisted. They had fought for equality, they weren’t going to give it up now. So they became committed to a double struggle: the class struggle against the Lip bosses, the police, the government, etc., on the one hand, and the sex struggle against their own husbands. Union organizers at Lip reported that the women were completely transformed after the strike, saying “one thing I got out of all this is that never again am I going to let my husband play the boss at home. I’m now against all bosses.”

**Gerassi.** Did your consciousness about old age change as you wrote on that, in the way your consciousness about being a woman changed during the writing of *The Second Sex*?

**Beauvoir.** Not really. I discovered many things; I learned a great deal about old folks. But I didn’t really gain a new consciousness because it was the realization that I was old which made me undertake the book in the first place. But now I can much better relate to the old than before. I used to be much more severe. Now I understand that when an old person is too susceptible, too selfish, that he is only protecting himself, throwing up defenses. But, you see, a woman can go through life refusing to face the fact that she is fundamentally, in values, experience, and life-approach, different from men. But it is very hard to avoid becoming aware that one is growing old. There comes a time when you just know that you have to draw the line or that you’ve passed the line. I know today that I shall never be able to go wandering through the
hills on foot, that I shall never again ride a bicycle, that I shall never again have relations with a man. I was very scared or at least very apprehensive about old age before I reached it. Then, when it came, when I knew I had passed the line, well, it was much easier than I expected. Of course, you must stop looking backwards. But I find living from day to day much easier than I thought. But I learned I had passed that line independently of my research for my book on old age. Work on the book simply taught me to understand the old, and to be more tolerant.

Gerassi. What are you working on now?

Beauvoir. Basically, nothing. I’m helping on a scenario on, precisely, old age, for a Swedish director. I’m going to help Sartre with his television project. You know that he has signed a contract with national television to do ten one-hour shows, starting in October, on the seventy-five years of this century, and his relation to its major events. But I have no plans to undertake some particular project. This too is new for me. I used to have in the back of my head all sorts of projects, even while I was working on a specific book.

Gerassi. You have written that you have had a good life and regret nothing. Do you know that there are many couples who look upon your life with Sartre as a model, especially in the sense that you were not jealous of each other, that you had what is called an open relationship, and that it worked for forty-five years?

Beauvoir. But that’s ridiculous to use us as a model. People have to find their own elans, their own structures. Sartre and I were very lucky but also our backgrounds were very particular, very exceptional. We met each other when we were very young. He was 23; I, 20. We weren’t quite formed yet, though we were already molded into intellectuals with similar motivations. To both of us, literature had replaced religion.
Gerassi. Yet you could have been competitive, rivals...

Beauvoir. True, similar personalities with similar ambitions often feel competitive. But we had something else in common: we had been similarly structured in our youth. Both our childhoods were very solid, very secure. This meant that neither of us had to prove something to ourselves or the other. We were sure of ourselves. It was as if everything had been preordained from the very beginning. My parents acted as if nothing in the universe could change the normal course of my life, which was to be a nice little bourgeois intellectual. Sartre’s grandfather, who raised him – you know his father died when he was still a baby – behaved the same way, absolutely convinced that Sartre would grow up to be a professor. And that’s the way it was. So that even when crises occurred, such as when Sartre’s mother remarried when he was 12-13, or such as when I was 14-15 and learned that my father no longer loved me the way I expected it, the solidity of our childhoods made us externalize these crises. It was they who changed, not us. We were too structured to feel insecure. Besides, whatever the little variants, we were fundamentally in accord with our parents’ design for us. They wanted us to be intellectual, to read, to study, to teach, and we agreed and did so. Thus, when Sartre and I met not only did our backgrounds fuse, but also our solidity, our individual conviction that we were what we were made to be. In that framework we could not become rivals. Then, as the relationship between Sartre and me grew, I became convinced that I was irreplaceable in his life, and he in mine. In other words, we were totally secure in the knowledge that our relationship was also totally solid, again preordained, though, of course, we would have laughed at that word then. When you have such security it’s easy not to be jealous. But had I thought that another woman played the same role as I did in Sartre’s life, of course, I would have been jealous.

Gerassi. How do you see the rest of your life?
Beauvoir. I don’t see it at all. I guess I’ll soon start to write something again, that I’ll go back to work, but I have no idea yet what I’ll do. I know that I’ll continue to work with women, within feminist groups, the League of Women, and that I’ll continue to militate in some way, in whatever way I can, within the – let’s call it – the revolutionary struggle. And I know that I’ll remain with Sartre until one of us dies. But, you know, he’s 70 now and I’m 67.

Gerassi. Are you optimistic? Do you think the changes you have been struggling for will take place?

Beauvoir. I don’t know. Not in my lifetime anyway. Maybe in four generations. I don’t know about the revolution. But the changes that women are struggling for, yes, that I am certain of, in the long run women will win.