



Interview with Professor Karen Vintges¹

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Sapere Aude: Professor Karen Vintges, we are pleased you agreed to concede us this interview for our *special issue*.

Do you still think Beauvoir's analysis in *The Second Sex* is still up to date?

Karen Vintges: "Feminism is outdated and no longer necessary"- this is the average opinion of the 180 young students I talked to last semester, during my classes on political philosophy. Since women's rights are equal to men's in the western world, feminism is merely a thing for poor oppressed women from other cultures who should be rescued and turned into autonomous persons, like women in the West... Are they right, are feminism's aims by and large achieved today?

When Simone de Beauvoir started writing her famous study, *The Second Sex*, often considered the origin of contemporary feminism, she began with the chapter *Myths*. Here she showed how women throughout history have been stereotyped as body, nature, as procreative and passive sexual beings, in sum, as bodily objects in the eyes of the male subject. In further analyses, she demonstrated that women experienced themselves in similar ways, seeing themselves through men's eyes. Today's myths about women have

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certainly taken new forms, or have they? Commercial television shows, music videos, real life soaps etc. day after day, night after night picture women as *active* sexual beings, crawling around male musicians, fighting each other, shopping and dieting, being totally obsessed by their looks and by the impression they make on men. Advertising, pornography, even commercial Hollywood films and book series such as *Twilight*, picture women as totally oriented toward sex and men. And women's plastic surgery nowadays is extending even to their genitals... Dominant myths on women in the West today still convey an old message: whether passive or active, the female sex is stereotyped as s e x.

Beauvoir's critical analysis that women are relegated to a secondary status as human beings is still to the point.

Sapere Aude: What kind of strategy should feminists follow? Does Beauvoir come up with any answers for contemporary women?

Karen Vintges: It is only very recently that some of my female students have started to question once again the dominance of the stereotypical images of women, as feminists did in the seventies and eighties. Beauvoir argued that economic and legal changes are important, but that we should change 'institutions, customs, public opinion and the whole social context, for men and women to become truly equal' (*The Second Sex*, 734). She argued that until these new moral, social, cultural and other changes take place 'the new woman can not appear. At this moment they have been realized nowhere, in Russia no more than in France or the United States.' Feminism's aims, according to Beauvoir, thus entail a whole transformation of society. Instead of the assimilation of women to liberal standards (and, I would like to add: to the current neo-liberal norm of the entrepreneurial self that makes a success out of her life), she demanded a revision of economic production processes in a more socialist direction so as to create institutions which allow for the combination of labor and the upbringing of children. From this perspective, a whole lot of work has yet to be done to thoroughly change culture and society, and to free women from the exhausting double burden of work and domestic duties, which they still face, as well as from the stereotypical images, which are imposed upon them.

Sapere Aude: Do you think Beauvoir's feminism can serve as a model for non-Western feminisms as well?

Karen Vintges: Women all over the world have developed their own strands of feminism, in which they focus on the limits of their own culture and moral system, often through slow-but-steady 'baby steps', the phrasing preferred by many Muslim feminists I know. Whereas in Islamic traditions a public/private space dichotomy has prevailed as a strict gender-based dichotomy, and women were treated as domestic beings, in essence, with limited rights (Sadiqi and Ennaji 2006), Muslim women today are moving beyond these cultural and religious limits in many ways, and are increasingly entering the public sphere.

In my view, feminists, each in their own contexts, are addressing the limits imposed by the patriarchal patterns, which Simone de Beauvoir described in her writing. Feminists worldwide should unite in cross-cultural coalitions and support each other in their various struggles in an effort to transform these still dominant patterns. Feminism nowadays should be cross-cultural, plural and contextual, without being relativist.³

Sapere Aude: Thank you very much for this interview. We're very pleased have you in our *special issue* on Simone de Beauvoir.

³ **Bibliographical reference:** Sadiqi, F. and M.Ennaji. 2006. 'The Feminization of Public Space: Women's Activism, the Family Law, and Social Change in Morocco.' *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 2, 2, 86-114.