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Sandra Reineke, *Beauvoir and Her Sisters: The Politics of Women's Bodies in France*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011. xxii + 76 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 (cl). ISBN 9780252036194.

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In this short book, Sandra Reineke explores what she calls a “perennial political question: are women citizens, and if so, how can they speak and act together politically” (p. xi)? She uses the concept of “imagined sisterhood” to examine how “women used reading and writing about women’s sexuality and reproductive rights as a vehicle to promote the idea of communities of women, characterized by collective feminine identity and likely common political interests” (p. xi). The book is organized into four short chapters with an introduction and conclusion. The introduction situates Reineke’s work within feminist political theory and the literature on new social movements. She uses the campaign for legalized abortion as a case study to exemplify the “potential for collective political agency” that women exercised via three kinds of writing: “high feminist literature, mass popular women’s magazines, and feminist reviews,” with each of these types of women’s writing constructing a different type of citizenship (p. xii).

Reineke situates the campaign for legalized abortion in the context of a longer struggle around issues of female embodiment, noting that French women’s exclusion from full participation in public life was often justified with reference to their bodily difference. Reineke asserts that the “bourgeois public sphere offered women a medium for challenging the idea of republican citizenship,” which excluded women. For her, the paradox of French feminism that Joan Scott discussed in *Only Paradoxes to Offer* made the “female body a focus in the struggle against women’s political marginalization” (p. 7). Chapter one, therefore, provides an overview of the historical literature on women, gender and the public sphere in France.

Chapter two discusses Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxième sexe* and *Les Belles images*. Reineke reads these texts as critiques of the emerging consumer culture and its negative impact on women. As the only examples of book-length philosophical and literary works Reineke includes, these two texts are taken as exemplary of high feminist literature. Reineke offers an insightful close reading of *Les Belles images* that highlights the central character Laurence’s quest for empowerment and de Beauvoir’s use of Laurence as an illustration of her “theory of gendered embodiment” (p. 27). Reineke cites literary criticism of the book, as well as offering her own reading of the ways that Laurence “feels trapped in a body that repulses her” and suffers from “overconsumption” of disempowering images of femininity in women’s magazines and advertising (p. 28). Reineke suggests that de Beauvoir’s later influence on the MLF came from the ways her texts revealed “the ‘lived experience’ [women] share in patriarchal society” (p. 34). Thus, de Beauvoir’s works describe and contest a kind of secondary citizenship that women occupied by virtue of their female bodies.

In chapter three, Reineke argues that the women’s magazines, *Elle* and *Marie-Claire*, offered models of a citizen consumer that promoted women’s empowerment within a consumerist framework. The more controversial claim in this chapter concerns the precise roles women’s magazines played in relationship to the feminist movement. While recognizing that their sleek appearance and emphasis on beautification existed in tension with feminism, Reineke maintains that “*Elle* moved from contributing to an ‘imagined’

sisterhood to advocating ‘real’ collective action by women” (p. 46). This claim is supported with reference to the magazine’s publication of several reports on the abortion issue from 1972 to 1979 and its continued defense of the right to choose in the 1980s when anti-abortion groups stepped up efforts to repeal the 1979 Pelletier law (p. 47). However, Reineke cites several articles that address the birth control pill rather than the more controversial issue of abortion and she does not develop detailed textual analysis of the articles to reveal how *Elle* journalists conceived the issue of reproductive rights. A more detailed discussion of how *Elle*’s coverage of the abortion debate compared to reports in the alternative feminist press would have allowed a more systematic analysis of what vision of collective female agency each type of publication promoted.

Most scholars agree that women’s magazines did shift their content to reflect the popularity of feminism in the late 1970s, and Reineke cites such studies. The question is *how* did they integrate feminism?[1] And, most importantly, what avenues for collective action did this integration open? Announcing a parliamentary debate’s occurrence, as *Elle* did in relationship to the debate on the Veil law, is not the same thing as rallying feminist militants to demonstrate in the streets. This distinction is lost in the discussion of *Elle*’s contribution to sisterhood. Did the magazine invite readers to events and demonstrations *before* they happened, as was the case in the feminist press, or did the women’s magazines treat the feminist movement like an object to be passively viewed and consumed? Without answers to these questions, it is difficult to situate such magazines within the “alternative social space” Reineke emphasizes as being the key to women’s collective political agency.

Reineke discusses, in chapter four, a third type of women’s writing, feminist reviews, which promoted “dissident citizenship” (p. 55). Reineke carefully selects reviews that represent all three main strands or tendencies of the MLF, though her characterization of *Féministes révolutionnaires* as liberal egalitarian feminists and of *Psychanalyse et politique* as radical feminists seems an American imposition that does not fit comfortably onto these French feminist groups.[2] She emphasizes that such groups used collective political signatures and first-hand testimonies in printed publications as tools to construct militant sisterhood in the 1970s; however, the radical potential of this practice was undermined amid the subsequent atomization of the movement in the 1980s (pp. 67, 69, 73). She suggests that such “public writing” broke the “social isolation” of women in the 1970s and connected them to the women’s movement (pp. 68-69) though she admittedly does not develop evidence for this claim. At the same time, Reineke does not account for the failure of Suzanne Blaise’s *Parti féministe unifié*, which may suggest that the women’s movement’s recourse to print media did not automatically lead to unified collective action.[3] Was the abortion struggle a unique campaign that provided a privileged moment of feminist unity across three different types of written texts?

Concluding that conservative magazines and militant reviews shared “the potential for women’s empowerment in a male-dominated society,” Reineke struggles to illustrate the precise ways that “the power of the printed word” actually created a politicized collective of women (p. 73). She asserts that feminist reviews were intermediaries between “traditional feminine expectations and the promise of consumer culture” (p. 72) although they could not sustain themselves. Reineke links “ambivalence” towards the female body as a source of oppression among feminists, like de Beauvoir, to the oft-cited factors of institutionalization and neo-liberalism when she explains the decline of militant feminism in the 1980s.[4]

Some questions remain about the precise interrelationship between individual women’s writing, women’s print culture and women’s collective action. If a vibrant print culture is essential to women’s collective political agency, as Reineke argues that it is, perhaps the weakening of the MLF should be situated in some process internal to feminist print culture. Reineke does not provide a detailed account of the day-to-day functioning of any of these reviews, which would include information about how the various editorial collectives responsible for their publication struggled to cooperate and prosper amidst

the increased concentration in the publishing industry that put more than only feminist reviews out of business.[5]

A weakness in Reineke's analysis of print culture's political possibilities comes from a lack of attention to the literature on the "intellectual field" of reviews and to the publishing industry as an important causal factor in the decline of militant feminist print culture.[6] For instance, Reineke does not describe either Editions Tierce or Editions des Femmes, the two publishing houses operated by women that emerged out of the MLF. These are odd omissions given her stated purpose, since the success of these two houses, as well as of Colette Audry's collection "Femme" at Denoël, were key to the increased popularity of printed texts related to women's issues and feminism in the 1970s.[7] They were essential parts of a feminist intellectual field that promoted women's collective political actions in the 1970s and early 1980s. The lack of attention to theoretical approaches to print culture, such as reader response theory and intellectual sociology, makes her case for the political implications of women's writing less persuasive than it could be.

An expansion of her category of high feminist literature to include authors beyond Simone de Beauvoir would also allow Reineke to broaden her sources and provide a more thorough review of the diverse range of feminist theory and literature that emerged in the 1970s. *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, for instance, represents one of the dissident reviews that has thus far survived the severe decline in feminist print culture since the 1980s. Similarly, a more detailed analysis of magazines such as *F Magazine*, which occupied a position in between militant feminist reviews and more mainstream women's magazines, like *Elle*, would allow her to be more precise about the contours of women's collective political agency in print. *F Magazine's* evolution over the course of the 1980s would make an excellent case study for her claim that the commodification of feminism exhausted the original militant goal of sisterhood.[8]

The book could also use more careful development of historical causation and context for the phenomena it describes. The broad brushstrokes Reineke uses to characterize the period from the late eighteenth century to the granting of women's suffrage in 1944 raises more questions than it answers. Surely women's writing did not always have the same implications or impacts during these rather different historical periods. Her account of the repression of women's political activism in the early nineteenth century suggests that writing alone does not translate into clear political gains. Why not? What makes the notion of imagined sisterhood powerful in some circumstances and time periods and not in others?

Another example of this problem emerges in her discussion of consumer culture, where Reineke links an explosion of the mass consumer society in the 1940s and 1950s that impacted women with de Gaulle's granting of women's suffrage in 1944. However, the effects of consumer culture were not widely experienced in France until the late 1950s and early 1960s, while the granting of suffrage to women has often been interpreted as a payment for women's sacrifices in World War II.[9] What she reads as de Gaulle's emphasis on women's traditional roles as mothers, their "sacrifice for others," was also a reference to their roles in the French resistance, an element of the postwar context that she does not explore.

Reineke sets out to explain an important contemporary phenomenon and rightly draws attention to the potential power that imagined sisterhood and women's construction of collective identity exercised in the 1970s struggle to legalize abortion. Moreover, she convincingly situates the various types of citizenship (secondary, consumer, and dissident) in a tradition of French women struggling against their exclusion from the Republic. Her analysis of coverage of the abortion issue in the feminist press would be very useful in the undergraduate classroom, as chapter four not only translates texts often unavailable in English but also situates them in the context of the birth of the MLF in 1970. Moreover,

the book raises crucial questions about the perils and potential benefits of speaking in the name of a collective “we.”

NOTES

[1] Reineke cites Khursheed Wadia, “Women’s Magazines: Coming to Terms with Feminism Post-May 1968,” *French Cultural Studies*, 2:6(October 1991): 261-74 and Colombe Pringle, *Telles qu’Elle: Cinquante ans d’histoire des femmes à travers le journal Elle* (Paris: Grasset, 1995).

[2] See chapter twelve, Sylvie Chaperon, *Les Années Beauvoir, 1945-1970* (Paris: Fayard, 2000); Jane Jenson, “Le Féminisme en France depuis mai 68,” *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire*, 24(October-December 1989): 55-67; and Claire Duchen, *Feminism in France: From May ’68 to Mitterrand* (New York: Routledge, 1986).

[3] See Suzanne Blaise, *Des Femmes de Nulle Part: le Préféminisme politique* (Paris: Presse-Diffusion, 1980).

[4] The decline of militant feminism is explored in Margaret Atack, *May 68 in French Fiction and Film: Rethinking Society, Rethinking Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Nicole Ward-Jouve, “Bliss was it in that dawn...’ Contemporary Women’s Writing in France and the Editions des Femmes,” in Margaret Atack ed., *Contemporary French Fiction by Women: Feminist Perspectives* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp.128-140.

[5] The concentration of the publishing industry is discussed in Jean Marie Bouvaist and Jean Guy Boïn, *Du printemps des éditeurs à l’âge de raison: Les nouveaux éditeurs en France, 1974-1988* (SOFEDIS: La Documentation française, 1989); Pierre Bourdieu, “Une révolution conservatrice dans l’édition,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 126-127(March 1999); Philippe Schuwer, “Nouvelles pratiques et stratégies éditoriales,” in Pascal Fouché ed., *L’Edition Française depuis 1945* (Paris: Editions du Cercle de la Librairie, 1998), pp. 430-431; and Sebastien Bracq, *Les Coulisses de l’édition et les libertés éditoriales* (Paris: Editions des Ecrivains, 1999); while the decline of militant collectively-run reviews is tackled in Kristen Ross, *May ’68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[6] The concept of the “field” is from Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). The concept has been applied to reviews in Niilo Kauppi, *The Making of an Avant-Garde: Tel Quel* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994); Kauppi, *French Intellectual Nobility: Institutional and Symbolic Transformations in the Post-Sartrean Era* (Albany: SUNY, 1996); and Anna Boschetti, *The Intellectual Enterprise: Sartre and Les Temps Modernes* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

[7] See Bibia Pavard, *Les Editions des Femmes: Histoire des premières années, 1972-1979* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2005) and Isabelle Courtivron, “La Politique éditoriale des Editions des femmes,” in Joseph Brami, Madeleine Cottenet-Hage and Pierre Verdaguer, *Regards sur la France des années 1980: Le Roman* (Saratoga: ANMA Libri and Department of French and Italian at Stanford University, 1994), pp. 223-231 for accounts of Editions des Femmes’ role in feminist print culture.

[8] See Margaret Atack, *May 68 in French Fiction and Film: Rethinking Society, Rethinking Representation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) for a discussion of *F Magazine*.

[9] See chapter two of Sylvie Chaperon, *Les Années Beauvoir, 1945-1970* (Paris: Fayard, 2000).

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