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### **The *Second Sex* in Hungary. Simone de Beauvoir and the (Post)-Socialist Condition**

**Abstract:** *Beauvoir's work was translated in 1969, a period of change in state socialism: the introduction of some elements of market economy in 1968 (called New Economic Mechanism), the publication of Western bourgeois philosophers as Sartre and Beauvoir, and Marxist philosophers' efforts to revise orthodox Marxism. 'The woman question' was declared to be already solved by socialism. The emblematic female identity is of the working mother: free and equal with men by virtue of law, taking part in producing new value as worker and according to her natural role as mother and wife, representing the center of the socialist family. Under these circumstances the reception of *The Second Sex* is highly interesting: a success (two editions in a high number of copies), but only two contemporary reviews (one friendly, one sharply critical). In this paper, I give a reconstruction of socialist women's reading of Beauvoir, given their officially propagated homogeneous identity and their unrecognized double burden. They could have identified themselves with Beauvoir's new, independent woman and at the same time with the traditional woman. Beauvoir's legacy for us post-socialist women can be derived from this past: to face ambiguities in identity and to vindicate individual freedom.*

Since its first publication in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* has become a living classic. In the last decades academic interest has been growing in this work, so that in the last few years, according to Sonia Kruks (2005), a prominent scholar in the field, we can talk about a renaissance of Beauvoir studies, a tendency that has been further intensified with the centenary of Beauvoir's birth in 2008 (Kristeva 2008, Simons 2010, Tidd 2008). Moreover, the recent publication of the long-awaited new English translation of *The Second Sex* by Constance Bord and Sheila Malovany Chevallier (Beauvoir 2010) will be another milestone that will make it possible to get an adequate picture of Beauvoir's philosophical mind, an understanding of which was previously limited in the English-speaking world, due to the serious flaws, including misreadings, omissions etc., in the first translation of her magnum opus by the biologist H.M. Parshley (1953) (see also the critiques of this translation by M. Simons (1983), T. Moi (2004), and Bauer (2004)). In contrast to Parshley's translation, the 1969 Hungarian translation by Lívía Görög and Vera Somló, is of fairly good quality, if this can be said of a text that has been reduced to half of its original length (see further in the Appendix, where I provide an outline of this version).

My paper concentrates on the concept of ambiguity in ethics and identity on the basis of Beauvoir's work, problems that I consider still highly relevant in our post-socialist situation. I have been working for approximately 15 years on introducing and establishing feminist theory and gender studies in Hungarian higher education. As a philosopher I find *The Second Sex* extremely useful as a comprehensive introduction into these new disciplines, more viable for us than, for example, Judith Butler, an author often recommended as 'mandatory' reading by feminist visitors from the US. Only a comprehensive philosophical work of groundbreaking power such as Beauvoir's can provide us a chance to cope with our former gender-blindness – recovering and reflecting on our new and/or old gendered identity – constructed under socialism and deconstructed after the transition (for further elaboration on

the issue of Hungarian post-socialist identity see Joó 2002, 2005, and Nancy Fraser's pivotal book from 1997 on the concept of the "post-socialist condition" in the global world). The theoretical operation of reconstructing identities concerns the personal and theoretical relations between Eastern European women (and men), feminists or not, and Western feminists (women and men). I suggest that Beauvoir could be a meeting point between Western and Eastern European feminists for a number of reasons, including for instance her moral, political engagement, her phenomenological vein, critical Marxist hopes for women's liberation etc. She has actual legacies for us and provides us a chance to face our Marxist or humanist/socialist past. After all, she was and still is a paradigmatic figure of a free and politically engaged creative intellectual woman – not an old fashioned feminist, as she is still radical enough for the twenty-first century. See the work of leading Beauvoir scholars like S. Kruks, K. Vintges, or Simons who, like myself, are equally convinced of Beauvoir's utmost importance and relevance for today's feminists.

First of all, to provide a better understanding of the present post-socialist situation in Hungary, let me first outline the political situation at the time when Beauvoir's book first arrived here. In 1968 certain economical reforms were introduced (the *New Economical Mechanism*) which had a strong influence on critical thinking in Hungary (Berend 1996). *The Second Sex* was translated into Hungarian in 1969, with a second edition appearing as early as 1971, which indicates that it was apparently widely read, which, however, did not mean that it did not receive a somewhat hostile review from a leading literary journal *Nagyvilág*, written by István Benedek, a psychiatrist (Benedek 1970). Around these years in Hungary, a few critical philosophers attempted to revise Marxist philosophy, integrating into it some elements of existentialist philosophy, although in 1946 George Lukács, the period's leading Marxist philosopher, protested in an essay against the combination of Marxism and existentialism (Lukács 1971). These thinkers were called 'revisionists' in a pejorative sense in the language of official party ideology. An indication of changing times in the sixties was the publication and discussion of Sartre's works and of the three volumes of Beauvoir's memoirs (the fourth one has not been translated into Hungarian). One of the critical Marxist philosophers, Zádor Tordai, known as a Sartre scholar, was the controlling editor of *The Second Sex*. Looking at women's issues under socialism - by now a slowly establishing scholarly field in Hungary - in 1973 two years after the second edition of *The Second Sex* some intellectual women launched a petition campaign to promote legal abortion (see Szalai, 1988), a campaign that was one of the first political actions of the Hungarian opposition still in the making, and as such quite a private one with organizers taking the petition personally to each of the potential signatories, they knew (including myself). The initiative, however, was illegal resulting in retorsions for the organizers, many of whom eventually emigrated. One of the organisers published the story in emigration (Körösi 1984).

The year 1973 was a milestone in Hungarian politics in terms of the attitude of the Communist Party to the critical philosophers, a group of whom, the so-called Budapest-School and mostly former students of Lukács, were dismissed from their positions and compelled to emigrate. Among the group were two women, Mária Márkus, a social scientist, and Ágnes Heller, a philosopher. While after her emigration to Australia, Márkus was able to publish her research on Hungarian women's situation in the sixties (Márkus 1986), the philosopher Heller's relationship to feminism has been more ambivalent. Although her paper, *The Emotional Division of Labor between the Sexes* from 1990, shows that she may have had some feminist sympathies, by the middle of the nineties she voiced her political objections to American feminism in various articles in Hungarian periodicals and in newspaper interviews, such as, *World Economy Weekly (HVG)* and *Népszabadság*. Her theoretical objections in cooperation with her then husband F. Fehér to feminism as biopolitics, a kind of racism directed against men can be found in her Hungarian books published in the nineties. Earlier,

from 1977 on, she was living and teaching in emigration and hence was not familiar enough with Hungarian women's everyday experience of still existing remains of patriarchy. More recently, however, maybe as a result of the fact that she has moved back from New York to Hungary and thus is now able to see more reason for encouraging women to vindicate personal freedom and equal opportunities, she seems once again to have become supportive of feminism in Hungary and to acknowledge its importance for Hungarian women.

There is a striking coincidence between the French pro-choice movement, in which Beauvoir herself took part, and the above-mentioned Hungarian petition to promote legal abortion. The French action took place in the public space while our so-called 'second public sphere' had just started to take shape as a result of similar kind of actions. I would assume that there is a connection between publishing *The Second Sex* and organizing the petition campaign for abortion in Hungary given that the organizers of the Hungarian campaign were women, even though there did not exist any women's movement, or any larger political movement behind the petition, which was merely a civil act of intellectual opposition. Below, in my analysis of socialist identity in the sixties and seventies I shall further explore how women in the Eastern Block could have read Beauvoir's book, relying partly on philological evidence of two published reviews of the Hungarian edition of Beauvoir's *Second Sex*.

Let me first turn to our old, so-called 'socialist' identity, immensely studied in the last two decades after the Hungarian transition by both sociologists and historians. In the socialist era sex/gender was considered an ideologically inessential part of identity for both women and men. However, while socialist identity was (in)famously gender-blind, two positive features can be attributed to socialist women's identity. It was based, on the one hand, on equality, while on the other hand, on caring for the family. Let me first provide a summary of these two attributes of socialist women's identity and then point out their inherent ambivalences.

During the decades of the Hungarian socialist era, women lived in a socially constructed 'reality' of equality with men. The Marxist task had supposedly been realized by socialism, that is, women had been liberated from their oppressed status and from the fifties on women lived in our self-consciousness as equals to, and as free as men. Therefore, we were supposedly just 'writers' and 'philosophers' and did not want to be called a 'woman writer' or 'woman philosopher', with famous woman writers like Magda Szabó and woman intellectuals like Heller refusing the label 'woman'. Despite the regime change, with the exception of some feminists, this attitude has remained the same up to this day.

Our strong presumption of equality turned into an obstacle in the way of accepting feminism during the socialist era and in the beginning of the transition period as well. Feminist theory and a feminist movement presumably no longer seemed to be useful, considering that we supposedly had already achieved the goals of feminism (see further N. Funk, M. Muller eds. 1993, B. Einhorn 1993, C. Corrin 1997, Feischmidt, Magyari-Vincze, Zentai eds. 1997, S. Gal, N. Kligman 2000, Jahnert, Gohrisch, Hahn eds. 2001). In one of my papers presented at a conference in 1990 in Vienna, the first meeting between women philosophers from Austria and its neighboring countries, organized by the Vienna Circle of Women Philosophers and the Department of Philosophy of the University of Vienna, I also argued that we, women grown up in socialism seem to be actually more free than Austrian or German women I knew (see my opinion later confirmed by Eva Fodor's comparative research on Hungarian and Austrian women's life from 1994, Fodor 2004). Even today, the idea of post-feminism continues to be quite popular not only in Hungary but also in the countries of the former Soviet Bloc. Later on, however, prompted by the conference in Vienna in 1990, my opinion has changed and I have started to see myself as a woman philosopher in the post-socialist situation. This new recognition meant that I became aware of my position as one of the 'second sex' and started to protest against it through becoming a feminist and a *woman*

philosopher. Nowadays the story of my emerging consciousness is typical among some feminists in Eastern Europe, as it used to be in the West as well. The process constructed my feminist identity as a narrative identity, with the process of “becoming” making up its essential feature.

I would risk universalizing the above-described process of becoming conscious of the androcentrism in Western culture as theoretically endless in so far as it is always unfinished because consciousness cannot be made transparent for itself. Beauvoir’s thesis can be seen as proven sixty years after its birth and after forty years of feminist research on it. Compare Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of the seemingly never ending reproduction of patriarchy in our time, which has come to a similar conclusion as mine (Bourdieu 1999).

Beauvoir, who saw herself as a writer, an intellectual equal to her male friends and colleagues, and who claimed that she never felt personal discrimination or disadvantages based on her sex, nevertheless also experienced the same process of recognition that many women in Central and Eastern Europe experience today, and when prompted by a challenge by Sartre to examine her life and education to see what difference it made to be born a woman, she started her research on the situation of women. The problem Beauvoir was facing was of course one of theoretical importance: how far can one individual woman’s freedom reach in a period, when most women do not have it? Her theoretical answer was that freedom cannot be attained individually, only socially. Does this mean, however, that her individual statement of freedom was refuted by her own theory? This is a question which has led many of her spiritual daughters, like Michèle Le Doeuff (1991) and Toril Moi (1994), to investigate Beauvoir’s personal life and career, but the obvious solution to this problem is still ambiguous. For Beauvoir, the outcome of her personal journey of recognizing the inherent androcentrism of our culture is *The Second Sex* in 1949, the four volumes of her memoirs in the sixties and her joining and taking active part in the women’s movement at the beginning of the seventies. All her life and memoirs give testimony to the independence and freedom of a creative intellectual woman whose radical thoughts were provocative in her time in Paris, and during the socialist era and in our time in Hungary as well.

In addition to equality, let me now turn to the other essential and traditional attribute of the identity of a socialist woman, the caring and responsibility for the family as her ‘natural’ role, which according to the Marxist view was founded on her biological difference. In public opinion during the socialist period to be a married working mother represented an emblematic homogeneous identity, where the tension between equality and unshared family responsibility along with the resulting ‘double burden’ on women, however, was never publicly problematized. Although, some social scientists like Márkus analyzed the latter, such research was not published, unless we count the private letters written by readers in some magazines (such as the very popular *Nők Lapja [Women’s Magazine]*) as public publishing.

Beauvoir was never married, had no children, but had a life-companion, Sartre, numerous lovers of both sexes, and friends to care for like a ‘family’. In *The Second Sex* she sharply criticized the institution of traditional marriage, monogamy and the idealized concept of marital love, exposing and emphasizing the boring repetition of household chores, the burdens of motherhood and unwanted pregnancy. Similarly, theoretically speaking, the situation of a dependent, traditional wife and mother in bourgeois society, in capitalism seemingly was left behind by socialist women, who were supposedly financially independent from their husbands, but most women, unlike Beauvoir, who lived an extraordinarily exceptional and privileged life, must have recognized in their own lives the burdens of the household and parenting, both of which remained their exclusively “feminine” duties in socialism as well as in capitalism. So reading Beauvoir’s sharp critique of these “feminine” duties must have been a revelation of liberating force for socialist women and maybe one of the reasons for the great success of Beauvoir’s work in socialist Hungary, i.e., for a second

edition of 29,500 copies within a short period of two years after the first one. I hope to find evidence about the success of Beauvoir's work in *Nők Lapja* which was the single popular women's magazine for decades and hence had the most potential influence.<sup>1</sup> There is only one friendly review of *The Second Sex* by a Mrs. Robert Angelusz (1971) I could find in a Hungarian semi-scholarly literary journal *Alföld*. Apart from its recognition and moderately positive reception, Beauvoir's radical views on marriage and the family also evoked sharp criticism in the official party and in the reviewers as well. Even the cover of the 1971 edition of the *Second Sex* shows the ambivalence of its reception, because although the very fact of a second edition shows recognition, its cover suggests that it should be read from a certain critical distance since as the cover blurb states, "we cannot agree with her [Beauvoir] on marriage and family." The only long review was written by Benedek (1970), who became famous in the sixties with his description of a psychiatric institute (Benedek 1957), one of the intellectuals in the period who did not follow the official ideology, but unfortunately he completely misunderstood the work, seeing Beauvoir's critical portrayal of women as hateful, misogynist, hence against women<sup>2</sup>.

But where is the written evidence for its supposed success? I have to admit that as a matter of fact besides the *Alföld* review I have the only material evidence of the huge number of copies published in two editions.

As I have already implied above, the everyday life of socialist women was far less charming and far more ambiguous than the idealized picture of the financially independent free woman of the future described in Beauvoir's work. Some of their lived experiences, hardly spoken of before, were revealed in reading *The Second Sex*, resulting in a similar enlightening experience to that of American women when reading Betty Friedan. The power and validity of Beauvoir's description of the situation of women in an androcentric society have remained valid, just as women's workload in the family has remained virtually unchanged to date (see volumes published on the situation of Hungarian women by TÁRKI and Ministry of Social Affairs from 1997, 1999, 2001 etc., edited by K. Lévai, Ildikó Nagy, I. Gy. Tóth, and others). There was, however, a significant difference between socialist women and the Beauvoirian housewife, preventing a complete identification between the two. Unlike the Beauvoirian housewife the socialist woman had a job and was theoretically financially and legally equal to men. Hence, I think most socialist women must have identified themselves more with the picture of the independent woman in the last short chapter of the book, which could give them reassurance and self-confidence, precisely because it was similar to the idealized identity propagated by the official ideology as the Socialist Reality. Yet, at the same time, reading the reader's letters of *Nők Lapja* one can only conclude that socialist women must have nevertheless become partially aware of the old burdens of their private lives as housewives described in the largest part of Beauvoir's book (J. Kádár 2002). Although socialist women were not trapped nor bored at home as the Beauvoirian housewife was, the work done at home remained as hard, unpaid and unrecognized as in the capitalist, bourgeois society of the past and present. Neither capitalist nor socialist society acknowledged

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<sup>1</sup> Judit Kádár (2002) in her analysis gives some evidence to the magazine's liberal mentality in the seventies. that I can take for an indirect evidence for my thesis.

<sup>2</sup>Benedek did not understand Beauvoir's claims as philosophical ones and gave straightforward refutations to her statements, conceding, however, to be some grain of truth in them. He wanted women's valuable contributions to the happiness of family and home to be appreciated - in his view in opposition to Beauvoir! Her descriptions were outdated anyhow, not valid in socialism according to Benedek and the Party. His review is the only serious analysis of Beauvoir's argumentation, although it is rather a refutation without understanding her position. It is a common mistake to take Beauvoir's reports of the accepted views on women to be her personal opinions: traditional misogyny for Beauvoir's own misogyny! The next step on this line of misunderstanding is to turn it into a generalized charge against feminists or feminism as 'mother murderers' as Gyula Fekete has done around the transition (Fekete 1990).

traditional female work, nor intended to encourage men to share these burdens with women in the name of equality. Marxist theory made a distinction in value between productive and reproductive work, between material production and reproduction of life and its vital conditions. In traditional Marxism, reproduction, including women's work at home, is not considered to be productive of new values. That is, women's social evaluation as equal members of society depended on having a productive position. For some theoretical reason Beauvoir took over the distinction between productive and reproductive work, incorporating it into her philosophical anthropology in *The Second Sex* (Gothlin 1996, 83, 167). Later in the fifties and sixties during her visits to socialist countries Beauvoir realized that socialist men remained similar to their capitalist counterparts in respect to women's work at home<sup>3</sup>.

Reacting with both identification and distancing, socialist women readers of Beauvoir could feel ambivalent about the text, which suggested that women were free and equal on the one hand, but confined to housework, thus unequal on the other. In the course of this ambivalent identification, socialist women readers could live both sides of their own ambiguous identity. The unavoidable additional question not only of how female but also of how male readers might have read *The Second Sex* remains not entirely answered even today. There are clues, however, about what men readers thought about Beauvoir, such as in the above-mentioned review by Benedek, in which his gendered opinion infiltrated his interpretation insofar as he defended women's 'essential' role in making a home and criticized Beauvoir's alleged misrecognition of women and her own 'female misogyny'. He was astonished by what he interpreted as Beauvoir's hateful contempt for women, leading him to the conclusion that she was much more misogynistic than any man. This seemingly patronizing standpoint of Benedek was followed by the open antifeminism of Gyula Fekete, who in one of his writings from 1989, openly attacked Beauvoir and more generally feminism, arguing that they despise 'real women' namely women whose only vocation is to have children as much as they happen to have. Fekete's writing was the first indication of the first paradoxically powerful backlash against a non-existing Hungarian feminism, which resulted in an endless circle of popular counter-attacks anti-feminist counter-attacks against feminism in spite of the fact that there did not exist any developed or aggressive feminism in Hungary. (Cf. Szilágyi 2010 on recent counter-attacks on gender studies before any basic understanding of gender studies could reach the mainstream Hungarian culture, and Antoni on a feminist response to the problem).

The enormous importance of Beauvoir's text for the socialist woman was that it provided her the only opportunity for self-reflection, given that no public political discussion of women's situation existed where she could have applied her reading. The public or political identity of women as married working mothers was represented in all media as unambiguously positive, homogeneous and powerful, furnished by the assumed historical privilege of socialism due to their liberation from oppression. Socialism gave evidence to the truth of Beauvoir's basic principle, which states that it is not woman's nature, nor her fate to be the second sex. Beauvoir based her views on the Marxist philosophy of history's conception about the historical evolution of humankind. According to it women's liberation becomes a milestone of this evolution, as Beauvoir indicates with a quotation from Marx on the last page of *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir 2010, 782).

At this point a further important comparison has to be made regarding the theoretical justification of motherhood in *The Second Sex* and in socialism. Beauvoir relies on Hegel when she attributes a crucial relevance to the biological fact that women's specific difference from men is their ability to give birth, which made "woman" the "slave of the species" (Beauvoir 2010, 37, 77). In Beauvoir's account the individual interests and pleasure of women and those of the Human race seem to be in conflict with each other, while the

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<sup>3</sup> Beauvoir said to Alice Schwarzer in an interview in 1976 „They are real socialist pashas” (Schwarzer 1984).

individual interests and pleasure of men and the Human race coincide, producing a biologically determined inequality, in which women and men are not equally free to follow their goals and engage in projects. Beauvoir seems to reinforce motherhood as a natural identity that makes women disadvantaged in comparison to men, but only under specific historical circumstances, as I discuss below.

Although according to some scholars Beauvoir's theoretical stance on motherhood seems to be a form of biological determinism, I shall disagree (cf. Vintges 1995). A careful reading of Beauvoir's chapter on biology makes clear that biological facts, including the female ability to give birth, acquire their significance and their meaning according to the particular socio-historical circumstances (Beauvoir 2010, 48, 50). Beauvoir is explicit in her theoretical claim that all her statements should be understood as valid only under the given particular circumstances of her time (Beauvoir 2010, 63). Back in the middle of the twentieth century childbearing made women, in a sense, slaves to the reproduction of the human species, because no safe and reliable methods of contraception or any legal possibility of abortion were available. By now, changing socio-historical circumstances of reproduction liberated women almost completely from unwanted pregnancies, but not from the social norm and moral duty to become mothers. In post-socialist Hungary, especially after the second conservative turn in 1998, social and individual recognition of a woman to be accepted as a "real woman" (*igazi nõ*) still depends on being a mother even if she has a career and marriage<sup>4</sup>.

The Marxist hierarchical distinction between production and reproduction, applied by Beauvoir as value-producing activity versus biological process (pregnancy), reinforced the primary element of women's identity as worker, just as in the case of men. Therefore, motherhood was supposed to be considered as a socially secondary identity, with pregnancy being understood by both Beauvoir and Marxist thought as a mere biological process, yet under Hungarian socialism motherhood and family, which was still considered to be the basis of any kind of society making women as individuals almost completely disappear behind their roles of mother and wife. Consequently, Beauvoir's skeptical views on marriage had to be compensated on the cover of the Hungarian edition of *The Second Sex*, because according to the official party parroted on the book cover, "[t]he Hungarian audience does not agree, could not agree with her on this point, which provokes controversy,<sup>5</sup> although otherwise she has created an excellent philosophical work." In my opinion Beauvoir's work could have been made compatible with official party ideology, because *The Second Sex* was in line with Marxist philosophy as far as it revealed women's oppression in capitalist society and argued for their liberation. The reason for the relative popularity of Sartre and Beauvoir in socialist regimes was their Marxist inclination, although they often criticized the official party line, which simultaneously also made them acceptable for critical Marxist philosophers. In socialism the similarity between the socialist family and women's role in it and the traditional patriarchal role of women as cultivated in capitalist society was declared to be superficial, because in capitalism women's family responsibility was bound with economic dependency, while a socialist working family was different and seen as better than the "bourgeois" one.

In present-day post-socialist Hungary, under the resurgence of conservative family values there is an increasing pressure on women to return to their 'natural' vocation as fulltime mothers and be able to live solely for their families and be liberated from their 'forced'

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<sup>4</sup> See the interviews with the first 50 successful women in business in *Magyar Hírlap* spec. issue 2003 representing themselves as caring mothers, living in a successful marriage and the usual deprecation of 'egoist' single women (referred to disparagingly as „szingli”) in the public media who refuse to give birth and instead have a career.

<sup>5</sup> The controversy on the family could have been provoked by a paper by Heller and Mihály Vajda inspired by the student's revolt in 1968 in Paris in a leading literary journal *Kortárs* about new communistic forms of private life replacing the traditional family (Heller-Vajda 1970).

breadwinning activities socialism 'imposed' upon them. In this situation in my opinion the existentialist ethics of freedom and the moral responsibility of women for themselves as individuals became once again relevant; one of the most important parts of Beauvoir's legacy for post-socialism is the vindication of individual freedom for women, whether or not they are living in a family. Women as individuals should be recognized in their individuality as persons both inside and outside a family. This legacy seems to be of universal validity under different circumstances and places as well, along with another one encouraging to live ambivalent, ambiguous, even controversial identities instead of a forced homogeneity (Grosholz 2004).

Perhaps the most important and liberating legacy of Beauvoir after socialism, for both men and women, though not in equal measure, is to consciously take up an ambiguous identity. Upon this observation I shall turn to my final point, to the ethics of ambiguity<sup>6</sup> as it appears in *The Second Sex*. As I explained above, the identity of the socialist woman incorporated a new, independent woman, who is equal to man, and a traditional woman having a family as her natural destiny, while Beauvoir drew our attention to ambivalences, contradictions and encouraged us to notice and experience ambiguity rather than to deny it. Beauvoir not only described women's ambivalent behavior in many situations, but also claimed that their experiences and sentiments are ambiguous as well, with their ambivalence manifesting itself in relation to men, to themselves, and to the world (Beauvoir 2010, 653). Beauvoir based her concept of ambiguity on the similar concept of Merleau-Ponty's, whose name is often mentioned in sections of *The Second Sex* dealing with the body. Beauvoir introduced Merleau-Ponty's concept of ambiguity from his *Phenomenology of Perception* in order to get rid of the Cartesian dichotomy of body and soul and make ambiguity the central characteristic of human existence, which characteristic reveals itself in the lived experience of the body, including sexuality, because "sexuality and existence are coextensive" (Beauvoir 2010, 51, Beauvoir 1971, 61). In Beauvoir's discussion of female sexuality and eroticism, we find an even more expressive account of ambiguity of the human condition revealed in sexuality, which takes Beauvoir beyond Merleau-Ponty's account in so far as she declares that female sexual experience is more authentic than the male one, because it lacks man's self-deception, which is due to his aggressive role in sexuality, the very reason why man is less able to live the fundamental ambiguity of human existence revealed in sexual experience (Beauvoir 2010, 427; Beauvoir 1971, 306). Although, unfortunately, the scope of this paper does not allow me to further comment on her views on the difference between male and female sexuality, I still deem it important to emphasize that Beauvoir's standpoint was later taken up both by difference-feminism and even by radical feminism (e.g., Simons 1995).

Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity in *The Second Sex* relates to the main dyads of opposites in existentialism such as transcendence and immanence, activity and passivity, freedom of choice, the Self (Same) and the Other (Different), and concerns other binary oppositions of the philosophical tradition as well, such as nature – society or life – spirit etc. Consequently, for Beauvoir, in conjunction with the conceptual pairs, the dualism of the human sexes has always existed and will always exist, making the human couple incorporating the authentic significance of humankind's division (Beauvoir 2010, 782). The relationship of the human couple, therefore, in the hope of both Beauvoir and Marxist theory, should be based on reciprocity and mutual acknowledgement, which could be realized after the demolition of the slavery of one half of humankind, although Beauvoir later admitted that socialist societies in her opinion did not realize this hope.

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<sup>6</sup> Beauvoir declared in the Foreword her ethical standpoint to be existentialist ethics, which I would rather define as a phenomenological ethics furnished by women's experiences. Her early philosophical work *The Ethics of Ambiguity* written in the beginning of the forties has received increasing attention in last decades in Beauvoir studies (Keltner, Kruks, Daigle, and Arp, among others).



Finally, I would argue that Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity receives its full significance for women once again in the post-socialist condition. After the end of socialism in Hungary, among other conservative and some liberal values as well as negative values, such as a resurgence of open anti-Semitism and antifeminism, we have also witnessed the promotion of the return of the traditional woman. But what kind of female identity and existence has returned, especially after the latest conservative turn in 2010 following eight years of social-liberal government? Ironically, the traditional, criticized identity outlined in *The Second Sex*, that is, the opportunity to stay at home and have children as the only real vocation, because the 'second sex' was only hiding during socialism, has remained with us all the time undercover within our socialist family<sup>7</sup>. One example is that new legal regulation is planned in calculating the amount of pension for women, so that instead of the years of education being taken into account, only the years of child-rearing will be counted.

It seems that while in our socialist reality we lived our lives with the consciousness of equality, this was simultaneously a true and a false consciousness, but more importantly, the situation itself was ambiguous and ambivalent, yet not adequately perceived as such, or as Maria Adamik (1997) put it in the emblematic title of an article: "How can Hungarian women lose what they never had?" However, I would argue in line with Beauvoir that only the assertive homogeneity of the old socialist identity with its two components analyzed above has been lost and the proud consciousness of evolutionary supremacy that made sense only within a Marxist evolutionary philosophy of history has disappeared. The recently re-discovered old identity of the 'second sex' did not replace the other one acquired under socialism, which had supposedly made the second sex equal with the first sex but rather both female identities are living identities, belonging together as two sides of the traditional opposites, constituting an ambiguous identity and being simultaneously the One and the Other, transcendence and immanence, free and confined (see further Joó 2010).

One of the most important lessons Beauvoir has taught us is to realize and accept ambiguity in women's situation as more pressing than in men's. It used to be a drama within women's situation in the past and yet in Beauvoir's time: "Woman's drama lies in the conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject, which always posits itself as essential, and the demands of a situation that constitutes her as inessential" (Beauvoir 2010, 17). The situation is no more dramatic, but there is a conflict, an ambiguity to bear. Post-socialist women may be reluctant to accept the negative side of ambivalence still inherent in their existence because they feel that they were meant to overcome their traditional social subordination. The strange phenomenon of hostility against feminism among Hungarian women so often registered by Western feminists visiting Eastern Europe gives evidence to the significance of this ambiguity. The process of raising our consciousness to discover disadvantages and still suffering from existing discrimination against women turned out to be a hard lesson to learn. During socialism, blindness towards the disadvantages of being a woman was perhaps more agreeable to live with or less difficult to bear than the choice of facing them consciously and to suffer them. The difficulties of experiencing the ambiguous female existence consciously may explain partially the hostility of Eastern European women towards feminism, which, after all, made them aware of discrimination, even though the very same ambiguous experience promotes the rise of feminism as well. I agree with Peggy Watson (1993, 1997) who claims that the rise of feminism goes together with antifeminism, both of which form a part of the democratization in Eastern Europe. In my view this recently regained ambiguous identity evokes a greater passion for freedom than the socialist

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<sup>7</sup> Less paid, hardly in leading positions, less represented in politics, in media, more often victimized of all kinds of violence, etc. The latest survey reveals Hungarian women as among the most conservative ones in Europe, answering questions on motherhood whether being necessary to feel life as making sense, and on household, which here is mainly done only by women. (Pongráczné 2009).

consciousness of equality and freedom which let the passion for freedom lie dormant. That was the historical truth of Beauvoir's analysis in midcentury before the rise of second wave feminism.

To draw an actual political conclusion, in our post-socialist situation we have to face a period of identity politics, one that involves reflecting on and expressing our ambiguously gendered identity, because without gendered identity we cannot go beyond identity politics. Politics and ethics, acting and reflecting on questions of identity can't be separated as Beauvoir's life and work on *Woman* demonstrates. I do not separate moral and political identities as private and public forms of identity, but I do not see the actual political forms of action within the traditional sense of politics, either. I hope that we will come to a feminist political movement (at present we have numerous women NGO's), and perhaps it will induce some kind of identity politics,<sup>8</sup> especially because recently some forms of identity have emerged in the public sphere, the first one Jewish and homosexual identity, and also Romani identity. I hope women's identity will emerge next in the political arena, although the European policy of gender mainstreaming, in my opinion, failed even to break through in Hungary, never mind to achieve its goal (see also Dombos, Horváth, Krizsán 2007).

## Appendix

The Hungarian editions of *The Second Sex* (1969, 1971) are abridged editions authorized by Beauvoir herself, comprising about half of the original text, with most footnotes being left out. The selection was made by Livia Görög, one of the two translators and the editors of the Gondolat publishing house, and revised by Peter Nagy, an eminent literary scholar and Beauvoir translator. In addition, Tordai, a philosopher specialized in existentialist philosophy served as a controlling editor for the text and provided a short glossary to some philosophical and psychological concepts of the volume. In the sixties, Sartre's works were translated into Hungarian and Tordai wrote a monograph on his philosophy in 1967, and the first three volumes of Beauvoir's *Mémoires* also came out with warm introductory praises concerning their author, a few years after their original publication.

The original French edition of *The Second Sex* had been published in 1949 in 2 volumes by Gallimard, with the first volume "Les faits et les mythes" (Facts and Myths) being about 400 pages-long, which the Hungarian edition reduced to half. The first part of the French volume containing chapters on scientific facts was translated, but the second part on the literary myths of femininity was completely left out, except for the theoretical-philosophical introduction to the concept of myth and reality in about 16 pages. So the Hungarian reader does not know that Beauvoir provided the first literary studies on Montherlant's, D.H. Lawrence's, Claudel's, Breton's and Stendhal's female heroines. The reason for the complete omission of literary analysis may have been that the work was categorized primarily as a sociological survey on the conditions of women where literature has only a secondary role.

To inform the common reader everywhere in the world we find in entries on Beauvoir in encyclopedias the same basic facts: namely, that she was the life-long companion and follower of Sartre and a writer, and in addition it may be noted that she wrote two lengthy sociological studies on women and on old age. However as a writer of an excellent novel (*The Mandarins*) and of memoirs of high intellectual quality Beauvoir earned in Hungary a high

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<sup>8</sup> György Bence (earlier one of the revisionists mentioned above) was the first to announce to Hungarian philosophers that a new concept of politics (namely identity politics) initiated by feminism in the West has emerged in political philosophy, and post-socialism can't afford to ignore it. He was a colleague of mine in the Department of Philosophy at ELTE, and he meant that it could have been even worse for feminism to make its presence in our department. . His remark provided the title of my study on the introduction of gender studies in Hungary "nice feminist"-philosophy (Joó 2006).

reputation in the period of the sixties and seventies. (For example see János Szávai's contribution on Beauvoir to a volume on the French literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in 1974, and the Forewords to the memoir-volumes by Péter Nagy and E. Bajomi Lázár.) Beauvoir, however, was not considered to be a philosopher, which could have been the reason for shortening theoretical explanations within chapters translated and for the omission of philosophical references to Lévinas and others. Meanwhile, Beauvoir's reputation as an original thinker and philosopher and not merely a follower of Sartre is now well established (see Beauvoir 2004, Simons 2006).

As for the second volume of *The Second Sex*, the original French edition is 660 pages-long, while the Hungarian edition, although it reproduces a greater portion of the work than in the case of the first volume, it is still cut down to 370 pages. The French title of the second volume, *expérience vécue* 'lived experience,' is a key concept of phenomenology, but the Hungarian translation *gyakorlat* 'practice' obliterates the original implied philosophical meaning. In addition, the fact that the third part of the second volume, 'Justifications', is missing from the Hungarian edition seriously distorts the philosophical conception of the whole project. Women, according to Beauvoir's argumentation, typically tend to justify their being by narcissism, or by love or religious mysticism. "Justification" belongs to the existentialist terminology as well – we can find it in the text translated, but we are left without knowing about its significance as life-styles, ways of life widespread among women. These parts and the fact that the last chapters on education and about lesbian women are missing reflects the socialist ideology and prudishness of the official Marxist sexual morals.

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