Simone de Beauvoir would have turned 100 this year. How can one best pay tribute to this great figure of feminism, philosophy, and literature and prominent figure of the twentieth century? In response, the editorial committee of *Travail, Genre, et Sociétés* decided to offer a series of re-readings of her extraordinary work, *The Second Sex (Le Deuxième Sexe)*.

Published in 1949, *The Second Sex* was a work that was simultaneously scholarly and accessible, diverse and open. It was the foundational work for women’s studies and contemporary feminism, and it forms the basis for the very existence, thinking, and personal commitment of many of us.

It was therefore not difficult to convince colleagues from various viewpoints, fields, and of various ages to revisit the book and tell us what it was like to reread it and to show its present as well as past importance. The work, which takes numerous forms, lends itself to this diversity of receptions and interpretations. However, it was difficult to secure a number of contributions, and this difficulty is worth highlighting as it no doubt has to do with the emotional resonance of the proposed task. Eventually, each contributor had to tease out the contributions *The Second Sex* made to him or her personally from those it made to history in general.
Thus, these contributions (from which the personal dimension has not been excluded), help answer in a number of ways some of the following questions. Was the quasi-existential experience that reading *The Second Sex* might have been for the original readers (male and female) reproducible, and was it reproduced in our reviewers? Has this effect dissipated today, and is *The Second Sex* now simply just another book? If so, what is its historical and theoretical context, and in what respect should it be considered a product of its historical context? How has it become outdated? What have been the life and legacy of the book?

Without a doubt, *The Second Sex* still has lively topicality, as attested to by the polemics to which it still gives rise as well as the whiff of scandal that continues to cling to it. Even though it has taken back stage and now assumes the status of a kind of biblical text that is questioned to varying degrees, even though viewpoints have changed on many particulars and the development of gender studies and feminist research have fleshed out a number of hypotheses and issues, Beauvoir’s thinking offers a multitude of insights for answering contemporary empirical and theoretical questions.

Coming from very different approaches, those who participated in this debate were unanimous in recognizing the power and richness of this pioneering work, its enduring appeal, and the sense of familiarity it generates in readers. Simone de Beauvoir’s efforts to write simply made the most complex ideas and explanations accessible to everyone and allowed her to be extremely widely read, by men as well as women, and by people with varying levels of education.

Following in the footsteps of her predecessors, Clémentine Autain attests to this enthusiastically. She shares the way in which the book gave rise to a new awareness in her as well her astonishment at the fact that a book considered one of the great foundational texts of the twentieth century remains a pleasurable read that can still orient thought and the way we live. As early as 1949, Simone de Beauvoir understood everything there was to understand and say about the condition of women, so that generation after generation, women who read it are astonished that *The Second Sex* was in many cases written before they were born. This work continues to surprise and contribute to ongoing reflection, and this is what is so moving about reading it over time.

For her part, Cynthia Kraus examines a specific aspect of the work, and quite a painful one in that it caused major splits between various currents in feminism, namely that of the relationship (or opposition) between psychoanalysis and the materialist approach. *The Second Sex* emerges ahead of its time as a kind of bridge between the ideas of American-influenced feminists and the French perspective, an area on which much research remains to be done. In a 1975 interview, Beauvoir herself said as much when she explained the need to reinvent psychoanalysis. Thus, a reading of much more recent research leads to a rediscovery of
Re-reading *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir

Simone de Beauvoir. On this particular aspect, current – and perhaps future – studies echo this “conceptual space of *The Second Sex* in which feminism, materialism, and psychoanalysis are articulated,” even if this does not preclude criticism in the light of knowledge acquired over more than half a century.

For Bruno Perreau, it is the experience of discrimination as an everyday reality today, particularly in the university context, that points to the relevance of the theses outlined in *The Second Sex*. Examining what Beauvoir wrote about “the lesbian,” Perreau undertakes a critical analysis of this content, highlighting the contributions and originality of Beauvoir’s approach while uncovering the prejudices and cultural shortcomings of the book. He examines the legacy of *The Second Sex*, raising the need to question the theses it puts forward and to rehabilitate it in the field of gender studies at the risk of once again running into dead ends.

While paying homage to Beauvoir, Christine Delphy vehemently defends the legacy of *The Second Sex*. She denounces the exploitation – or misuse – of the work in some circles in an attempt to take the sting out of its scandalousness. She recalls the shock it caused at the time of publication. As she writes, “It changed all of us women.” Explaining her own critical approach to the work, Delphy calls it into question. In re-reading it, she recognizes in *The Second Sex* a number of ideas she thought were her own, which attests to how successful Beauvoir was at spreading and incorporating them. From a historian’s viewpoint, Delphy calls for a re-reading of *The Second Sex* in the light of what the author herself subsequently said about it in interviews, without in any way referring to her views on current issues.

Viewpoints have changed, research has progressed, and gender studies are now a well-established field. However, this debate shows that where necessary, there is still interest in reading or re-reading *The Second Sex*, and how foundational this comprehensive and wide-ranging overview of the condition of women has been. It is therefore highly beneficial to recall, to cite Simone de Beauvoir, how one “becomes” a woman.

*Delphine Gardey and Monique Meron*