Editorial

In the interview with the French historian Michelle Perrot that we publish here, she refers to the successful action of a group of French feminists in halting the use of women as models for lingerie in a Parisian department store. As Michelle Perrot comments, this action can be interpreted as a success for women – and feminism – in that it challenged an offensive sexist practice and brought that practice to an end. But, as Michelle Perrot also remarks, what is demonstrated here is the latent power of feminism.

It is this issue – the agency of women – which provides a core theme to this edition of the European Journal of Women’s Studies. The articles that we publish here all discuss, in a variety of cultures and contexts, the ways in which women act in the social world and the ways in which those actions are structured and organized. What emerges from these articles is the way in which the agency of women is often reactive or protective. Women have to react to structures, events and decisions (like those of the Parisian department store) which clearly offend our sense of self; at the same time women have to defend a particular female condition (most notably that of motherhood) against unacceptable forms of male behaviour. Across Europe what we see is a pattern in which women are very seldom either individual or collective agents of their fate in the same way that men are. Simone de Beauvoir was one of the first women in the 20th century to recognize and to articulate the powerlessness of the female condition: her message at the conclusion of The Second Sex was to exhort women to act for themselves and as themselves in the same way – she argued – that men do.

As Liz Stanley points out in her article, de Beauvoir had begun to explore this issue before the publication of The Second Sex. Les Bouches inutiles was first performed in 1945 (four years before The Second Sex) and it poses the question of how it is that women occupy a social role which is less active than that of men. Throughout de Beauvoir’s life and work there remains the constant sense of the woman – and a woman who has in many ways come to embody a certain aspirational place for women – who both wishes to escape the position of the ‘other’ and is nevertheless unable to escape from it. The paradox – for de Beauvoir and for millions of other women – is that the more we contest the social roles given to us the more we define that social role. Our agency becomes, we might...
surmise, not the means through which we acquire autonomy and self-definition, but the reinforcement of our status as powerless.

In proposing this idea I am aware that I am challenging one of the commonplace readings of 20th-century history – namely that women have become more autonomous and more ‘emancipated’ as the 20th century has progressed. Obviously it is possible to point to all kinds of empirical evidence which suggests that as women we have more control over our circumstances than did women of previous generations. At the same time, we still have to ask the question of how women define themselves: what kinds of models are taken by women as the standards to achieve? I would argue that in many ways the models and standards to which women now aspire are more demonstrably masculine – and drawn from male expectations – than at previous times. The social space for the feminine is arguably less than 50 years ago: this is not an argument about the disappearance of separate spheres but a suggestion that the apparent androgyny of western life at the beginning of the 21st century is the latest form of the dominance of masculine agency.

The demonstration of the way in which agency is gendered is particularly adeptly explored in the articles in this issue by Jeni Harden, Barbara Bagilhole and Jackie Goode. In two distinct contexts – the medical profession in Russia and the British academy – these articles demonstrate the complexities which women face in working within any institutional structure. Institutions – and this has to be said in very large letters – are deeply gendered, not just in terms of the way in which their internal organizations and hierarchies work, but also in terms of the way in which gender affects the nature of institutional work. Over and over again we can detect a pattern in which women protest and women defend. Across cultures and societies, we see women having both to deny the collective label of women and yet at the same time assert it in order to secure a particular position. For women, in fact, institutional culture might well be said to be one in which we are damned if we do (assert a female identity) and damned if we don’t.

Developing an understanding – not to mention a practice – of the understanding of the defining impact of gender on individual and collective agency is a goal to which the EJWS is committed. We would therefore very much welcome contributions to the general discussion of women and agency – discussions which might further explore both the theoretical and the specific implications of this issue.