

Introduction

Why the title *Property, Women and Politics: Subjects or Objects?* The subtitle clearly harkens back to one of Simone de Beauvoir's dualisms, the one which I think has best withstood the test of time and the interrogation of contemporary feminist writers who justifiably suspect all dualisms.¹ In *The Second Sex* Beauvoir writes,

Now what marks the specificity of woman's situation is that while she, like any other human being, is an autonomous freedom, she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as the Other: they claim to fix her as an object and to doom her to immanence, since her transcendence is to be perpetually transcended by another essential and sovereign consciousness.²

The notion of woman as object has worked its way into popular thought: the outcry against women as mere sexual objects in advertising, for example, uses Beauvoir's terminology. But in this book I want to do something different from what prevails in popular speech at the end of the century, something more akin to what Beauvoir originally had in mind, I think.

In *The Second Sex* Beauvoir offers three uses of the subject/object distinction. First, there is the 'despotic subject', who views others as an object: the position corresponding to what Beauvoir calls 'male sovereignty'. In this dualistic formulation, the sovereign existence of a subject requires the presence of an object. To apply this split to property-holding, men's status as property-holders would require the objectification or commodification of women: as sexual objects in pornography, for example, or as wives who could be 'owned' (communally or privately).

