

Evolutionary Theory and the Recent History of Feminism



by Celeste Newbrough

The Critique of Feminism from Evolutionary Theorists

Evolution displays compelling evidence that there is such a thing as sex and it is not merely socially constructed, e.g., gender. Since the dawn of eukaryotic organisms, sex has been with us. Further, biological differences between the sexes evolved in all creatures including mammals, primates, and homosapiens, wide-reaching differences based on differential reproductive roles.

Recent offshoots of evolutionary theory such as sociobiology and evolutionary psychology have been full of writers who criticize feminism is as a conceptual model that has ignored sex, substituting the wholly social category of gender. Many evolutionary feminists adopting this view have attacked what they see as established feminism with such vigor that one wonders about the "feminist" in evolutionary feminism.

But such criticism is valid and necessary, right? With ostrich-like

disregard for biological reality, say these critics, feminism constructs the human male and female as the products of society, gendered but not sexual. Therefore, it is a false ideology. Right?

In Fact: Feminism Was and Is All About Biology

Wrong! The fact is, feminism is all about biology. Two of the most important sectors of the movement address the concerns of women as biological organisms. The reproductive rights movement fights to enable women to control pregnancy, childbearing, and the conditions of motherhood. These biological issues are crucial to the feminist agenda. Women's health advocates, like the authors of *Our Bodies Ourselves*¹, who have fought for better breast cancer treatments, who promote the rights of nursing mothers in work places and in public, are concerned with women's biology.

The critique of evolutionists against feminism is based on first, an

ignorance of feminist history and second, an exaggerated emphasis on the importance of the what passes today as "feminist theory." Current "feminist theory" is the brainchild of academic departments and has little or nothing to do with the change-oriented theories of activists.

The most revolutionary phase of modern feminism was the period of the mid-1960s to the mid 1970's. I ask you to briefly examine with me this crucial epoch of change. Did women during this time propose that society ignore the differences between women and men, or suggest that women's oppression would be erased if we just forgot the whole idea of sex, and focused on gender?

Quite the opposite was the case! Feminists of this radical period focused on the embodied sexuality of women, and men, with the clarity of rage. How biology affected the status of women and the relationship between men and women, was the primary subject matter of the women who forged the second wave of the feminist revolution.

If you read founding feminist documents from 1965 through the early 1970s, you will be hard-pressed to even find the term "gender". Major second wave theorists were little interested in the word. Instead, they talked a whole lot about sex in these founding documents, about the ways in which men and women differ, and how biological expressions and demands of reproduction have carved out the

identities and behaviors of human women and men.

Has Success Spoiled the Second Wave?

These game-changing feminists were preoccupied with biological sex, so why is it that today do so many believe feminism ignores biology? At the heart of this misconception is ignorance of the dynamic nature of feminism and the passionate debates among women about the best way to change and improve the human condition. In a very real sense we are talking about female-female competition related to reproductive fitness of the individual and the collective. This competition challenged and utilized a high level of specifically human capacity, which is why feminist debates have seldom been placed in an evolutionary context. Yet, just as patriarchal power influenced the phenotypes of both sexes, and over millennia, genotypes as well, feminism has greatly affected the phenotypes of male and female children and youth, and if it survives, promises to genetically alter the human species over time.

One of the greatest problems of modern feminism has been its success. Because of this success every academic and historian rushes to define and record the women's liberation movement in ways that will further her or his own agenda; every woman who went out into the streets even once between 1965 and 1980 is keen to relate what a key role she played; every liberal who

writes a tome is anxious to express themselves in ways that are not offensive to what they construe as the feminist establishment (to the extent that in discussions of animals the term gender is often used); and every ineffectual male sets up feminism as a colossus reigning over his mediocracy. Many young women see feminism as old hat and think very little about how different their lives would be without it. Add to this the pernicious tendency to ignore the importance of women's relationships and ideas.

Because feminism in our society has made the oppression of women a so-called non-issue (which it isn't), the deep exploration of feminist history is viewed as an unnecessary pursuit. Everyone thinks they already know what feminism is. The fact is, they don't.

Feminism Is Not Gender Theory

This hodgepodge of ignorance has found encouragement in academic women's studies programs that emphasize abstract philosophy over the ideas forged in blood, sweat and tears by women who changed society. One subset of the movement and a late on at that, gender theory, has been presented to the public eye as the whole of feminism. Yet if we examine the history of the women's movement we find that (to pun on the chess term): sex mates gender.

I don't imply that gender theory is groundless or wrong. Human society has shown itself capable of numerous social arrangements

transcending biology, including sexual differences. Moreover, the gender-perspective has been a powerful tool for consolidating change. I wish not to refute gender feminism but to convince you that ideas about sex and biology form the real foundation of feminist theory and action.

"Gender" was a term seldom used during the heyday of the movement and had little or nothing to do with what inspired a million women to fight a revolution. In fact, the second wave emerged as an explosive assertion that biological differences between men and women were the roots of the oppression of women.

Radical Feminism and the Feminist Revolution

Having both lived and taught the history of feminism's second wave, I well remember the rupture of this movement on the public scene and the ideas and debates among those women whose actions set society on a new course of thought and behavior. For those who never lived in the fifties and early sixties, it is impossible to impart how thinking and behavior changed during this brief period, and of the before and after differences marking the average mentality and the average daily life of men and women.

What were the ideas that brought women *en masse* into the streets? A very compressed period of action brought women across the country into consciousness raising "rap"

sessions; destabilized workplaces and public institutions; ushered in an climate in which reproductive rights could be forged in the courts; removed prohibitions against hardhat work for women; placed the spotlight on women's bodies and reproductive health; caused men to start changing diapers, roll baby carts and assist in birthing; sparked a national dialogue on rape; created shelters for abused women and children, etc.?

Did all of this social upheaval, struggle and change occur because feminists said there was no such thing as sex or sexual differences? Not in a million years! Women began to reexamine the history of the world from the perspective of sex. Not gender. Sex.

The Sex War

The front of the second wave was forged by a cohort of radical feminists, women whose names are seldom uttered today, like Katie Sarachild, Jo Freeman, Naomi Weisstein, Patricia Mainardi, and a host of others, one of whom (Shulamith Firestone) I will have a lot to say about in the discussion that follows. These radical feminists who led the women's revolution had nothing in common with the current fringe element who label themselves "radfems".

At that time many people believed (and still believe) that social factors and inadequate laws are the source of women 's inequality; that to set things right required only the

appropriate economic, social and legal adjustments. To this idea, radical feminists took to the streets to roar out a resounding "NO"! They defined the root of women's oppression as arising from sexual biology. In a different context and with different inferences, these women held just what evolutionary feminists now hold: that in human societies, biology and biological roles have determined the differential power of men and women.

Their argument was *not* that we must accept biological differences or celebrate them. 'Viva la difference' meant nothing to radical feminists, who raged against the social consequences of sex difference. As every evolutionist worth their salt knows, just because evolution formed an organism or species does not mean the design is perfect. Perfect creatures live in the realm of creationist "science". As Elias Khalil observes, evolution ensures not so much the survival of the fittest (as Spencer had proposed), but " the survival of the least foolish of fools."². What second wave feminists maintained was that all previous history was a history of oppression based on the differential roles (and consequent socio-behavioral expressions) of females and males in biological reproduction.

Shulamith Firestone

The greatest theorist the second wave proposed what was essentially a Darwinist view. In [The Dialectics of Sex \(1970\)](#) Shulamith Firestone insisted that "sex class" sprang

directly from "a biological reality". She argued that the sexual dichotomy in reproduction is the root cause of male domination, that over the course of human existence, reproductive anatomy and roles led inevitably to the oppression of women.³ She proposed "a materialist view of history based on sex itself." She boldly stated to women, "To grant that the sexual imbalance of power is biologically based is not to lose our case."

Firestone made clear that reproductive differences are the basis from which feminists must theorize. She also believed that biological facts cannot be discussed without understanding the flexibility of human nature and the fact that "the kingdom of nature does not reign absolute."

What could be a more powerful anticipation of evolutionary feminism? Yet chances are, as an evolutionary feminist, you haven't even heard of Shulamith Firestone, or read what was essentially the first manifesto of evolutionary feminism, written almost a half century ago.

Her proposals, visionary in 1970 and even today, included legitimating all types of voluntary sexual relationships; organizing and legitimating a variety of child-rearing forms; assigning economic value to tasks of reproduction and nurturance; and using technology to free women from burdens created by childbirth, housekeeping, and the patriarchal family structure.

Though rooted in biology, sex must and can transcend it, Firestone claimed: "The end goal of feminist revolution must be not just the elimination of male privilege but of the sex distinction itself: genital differences between human beings [must] no longer matter culturally." Two observations are germane to this statement: First, Firestone saw a "genderless society" as the final goal of the women's movement, to be attained after biofeminist analysis and action transformed society. She did not see a focus on gender over sex as an immediate tactical strategy but as the result of an arduous struggle by women to successfully gain control over the reproductive realm. Second, her openness to the formation of a genderless society needs to be heard by so-called "radfems" who currently invoke uninformed versions of radical feminism to criticize and abuse transgender and transsexual people, whose efforts to transcend gender are part of the feminist revolution envisioned by Firestone.

The (Second) Wave

The feminist second wave began with scattered ripples of turbulence among various sectors challenging restrictive patriarchal norms. A moderate feminist front discovered a renewed passion for reform, while young men rebelled against rigid rules of male behavior enforced during the late forties and fifties. Beatniks were at the forefront of the youth movements, yet leading the confrontation of an entire generation with mainstream society was the

race movement, comprising a more moderate front (civil rights) and a radical front (black power). The "Playboy generation", the hippies, and the anti-war movement were all spinoffs of an emerging rebellion.

While all of these movements included women, they were led by men. Partially due to their experiences in these male led movements, women began by 1965 to mobilize based on a powerful new analysis. Radical feminists inspired a theory of action that hurled women into and beyond rebellion. Based in a clear parallel with the caste dynamics of race and an indictment of all previous history, their ideas were spread by word of mouth, spontaneous gatherings, mimeographed sheets, pamphlets, and books. The resulting wave of action pulled into its mass both men and women in a complex of sex/gender social movements and transformations.

The second wave gathered strength and focus, crashing to shore in the late sixties through early seventies, flooding mainstream society with its flotsam and jetsam of impacts. The surge struck in multiple waves: radical feminist, black and ethnic feminist movements, lesbian feminist liberation, international feminist movements, etc.

Reproduction as the Core of Feminist Analysis and Action

The course of feminist revolution Firestone proposed was to "seize the means of reproduction."

Reproduction relates not only to sex and childbearing but to the entire realm of life committed to nurturance including childrearing, education, and the cultural environment.

Ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant has more recently built upon Firestone's analysis with a model of human society describing the human axes of production and reproduction. Giving equal weight to these spheres, Merchant develops an ecological analysis of the relationship of human and nonhuman nature. She proposes that sexual partnership is a necessary commitment to the partnership of humans with nature.⁴

Such work could well instruct the dialogue of evolutionary feminism, yet many evolutionary feminists are still engaged in an acrid rebuttal of "feminism", by which they mean gender theory. In fact, gender theory (and the insistence that gender takes precedence over sex as both a term and a concept) was a *secondary strategy* of the second wave, a strategy that replaced radical theory and activism. How and why this came about is not only a topic that should of interest to evolutionary feminists, but it is potentially a subject of paradigmatic analysis.

The Advance of Gender Theory

At the moment it broke to shore infusing society with an entirely new perspective on women and men, the

radical feminist wave began to recede. Different versions of feminist theory grappled to control a newly empowered women's movement. Cultural and spiritual feminism became foremost in the minds and actions of many women. Lesbians critiqued the male-female relation and proposed it was (or must be) transcended by acting out the concept of the woman identified woman. Some non-lesbian women such as Ti Grace Atkinson urged and practiced "political lesbianism", e.g. refusing sexual relationships with men, as a strategy of rebellion.⁵

As radical feminists spurred a great deal of chaos and resistance in the mainstream, by the early seventies, feminism began to collapse into several segments. Reinspired from the first wave of feminism, reform leaders and organizations like N.O.W. earnestly coopted the radical movement to push for legal and institutional change. Radical feminists developed more specialized approaches in reproductive rights movement and the women's health movement. The antifeminist backlash drew strength to finally (by 1980) reach the highest levels of government. By 1980 all the turbulent actions and reactions of feminism were in place.

History had been made and it began to be rewritten. The hard won gains of the radical second wave reached a tenuous phase. The ideas of radical feminists turned upside down prior comfortable assumptions about the "natural superiority" of men. Many ordinary people whose very lives were based in these constructions

were turned off by these abrasive challenges to the status quo. Women and men most invested in the patriarchal power structure were most threatened.

Gender feminists moved swiftly to put the "excesses" of radical feminism behind them. In emerging women's studies departments, gender theory superseded radical feminist theory. The biological theories of Shulamith Firestone and others were labelled as "essentialist". Over time "essentialism" took on the connotation of an insult and is still used as an epithet of dismissal.

These more moderate leaders emphasized social and legal progress and developed gender theory as a tool of reform. Maleness and femaleness, they argued, is above all socially constructed. By focusing on changing social constructions, gender equality can be attained. The effort to mute sexual differences was conjoined by many humanist men, who found discomfort in the scathing indictments of feminist sexual analysis.

This less abrasive approach consolidated the gains of the women's liberation movement over several decades. However, the feminist revolution as defined by Firestone and other radical was anything but finished, and gender feminism is essentially a static rather than a dynamic approach.

Post-Radical Feminism

To summarize the events of the last decades of the twentieth century, gender theory prevailed. Sociological discourse became increasingly puritanical about biological issues. Role theory and preoccupation with multiple, statistical factors preoccupied women's studies.⁶ Gender became sacrosanct and eventually un-sexed. Academic feminists showed inflexibility in responding to new information from the biosocial theories of Edmund Wilson and his adherents.

Yet these feminists consolidated and defended the massive gains of the second wave, went far toward institutionalizing these gains into the mainstream, and defended them against the antifeminist backlash.

Radical feminist perspectives continued on, as asserted above, through two potent zones of activism: the reproductive rights movement and the women's health movement, retain the essential philosophy of radical feminism.

New applications of evolutionary theory to human beings, especially the fields of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology challenged gender theory, which they wrongly identified as "feminism". As this article points out, what they did not realize nor take the time to find out is that modern feminism as the mover and shaker of human society is rooted in a biologic and proto-evolutionary perspective.

Radical and Gender Feminism as Bio-Sexual Strategies

Viewed through the lens of evolutionary theory, this shift from a conflict-agenda of radical feminists to a cooperative, leveling approach can be understood as a strategic re-direction of the "war of the sexes" toward intersexual cooperation.⁷ Having set society on a tumultuous course of change, women joined with men to restore a more tranquil landscape in which changes between and within women and men could gradually unfold.

The radical feminist strategy was effective but combative, the later preeminence of gender theory, conciliatory and cooperative. Thus, in terms of intersexual conflict, the second wave moved from aggressive, threat behavior to a more conciliatory and cooperative approach.

Individual and Collective Strategies of Sexual Empowerment

In the course of development of an overall sexual strategy, individual female strategies contributed to collective strategies of empowerment. The actions of intellectuals, artists, and political activists arose from diverse motivations and experiences.

In *Lady Lazarus* and other works, the great sixties poet Sylvia Plath, created a heretofore uncharted map of female anger articulated in powerful poetic terms. "...Peel off the

napkin/ O my enemy./ Do I terrify?...I am your opus,/ I am your valuable,/ The pure gold baby/ That melts to a shriek...". While not consciously feminist, her imagery of torturous defiance ("Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air") became an anthem for second wave feminists⁸, for whom her suicide in 1963 was a landmark event. This and other cultural productions during the 1960s⁹ inflamed women to launch the sex war.

Robin Morgan's slogan, "sisterhood is powerful"¹⁰ galvanized women to rally around the cooperative rather than the more competitive aspects of female sociality. As Franz De Waal suggests, the power of female bonding is great among primates¹¹, and this was a period in which female bonding took front center in human affairs. Evolutionary feminists are fond of pointing out that such slogans are blind to female-female competition. Since it is female bonding that empowers women to attain social changes benefitting new generations, the at times contemptuous handling of the topic by evolutionary feminists seems self-destructive.

Evolutionary Feminism: A New Synthesis

Evolutionary feminists of this generation need to stop complaining about "feminism" and to learn the reality and history of a movement that forged for women freedoms never before attained. Evolutionary feminists need to find common

cause with reproductive rights and women's health movements, providing scientific acumen to such activism. By the same token, academic feminists need to stop assailing biologically aware feminists as "essentialists" and practice flexibility in seeking social solutions that better account for biological and evolutionary realities. For example, a nursing mother should not be sent to war. A regulation to this effect would include the gender free term "nursing parent," whether that parent was paternal or maternal. It happens that for the foreseeable future, it is the mother who is nursing, but this does not mean the regulation would be discriminatory against a male parent, for as soon as he took over the biological task of nursing he would not be sent to the front either.

A reexamination of feminism must take into full account the evolutionary foundations of the sexes and of human society. Evolutionary feminists can restore the power and recognition of proto-evolutionist theorists like Shulamith Firestone. Evolutionary feminists must re-institute our own version of radical feminism theory and assert its functional superiority over the notion that societies are best formed based on asexual constructions of gender.

As gender feminists advocate, laws and basic institutional arrangement must proceed on a basis of equality and rather than differences based in sex or ethnicity/race. Yet the inflexibility of social realities to

respond some reforms point toward behaviors deeply rooted in our biological past.

Heuristic applications of evolutionary feminism are potentially unlimited: addressing the root causes of limited resources suffered by single mothers and their children; issues of military deployments around pregnancy, childbearing and nursing; the continued economic discrimination against women for undertaking childbearing tasks necessary for reproductive fitness, and related issues such as maternity and paternity leave. Are special analyses needed of male sexual aggression and of male group behavior, along with distinct educational programs for male youth? How can we address the increasingly early onset of menstruation, which arises, as Hrdy and others point out, from originally adaptive factors? How can we empower every woman and man toward ensuring individual reproductive fitness?

Can we find accurate a model to measure fitness beyond the individual, complex enough to solve for in- and out-migration and other multifaceted variables that could enable an analysis of collective selection over time and space? How can we enlighten transsex/gender strategies in terms of inclusive fitness?

These and other social issues are best viewed and solved from the perspective of human evolution. The core concerns of feminism are in fact based in human biological

needs: reproductive freedom, gender and sexual diversity, strengthening real-world families, and the nurturing and education of children. These issues must serve as the media through which feminist science and technology links with feminist theory and activism.

Pioneer Evolutionary Feminists and Potentials for Feminist Evolutionary Analysis

The pivotal creativity of the feminist evolutionary perspective needs greater exposure in the larger feminist movement.

The work of ovular scientists like Sarah Hrdy¹² and Patricia Gowaty¹³ have placed the condition of women in the larger context of prehistory. Implicit and explicit in the work of Hrdy and Gowaty is the premise that civilization rests on a vast foundation of biology.

Major work in evolutionary science from a woman-oriented perspective includes other authors like Barbara Smuts, Meredith Small, Jane B. Lancaster, Anne Fausto-Sterling, and Meredith F. Small. All of these writers show how the sexual politics of bio-history precedes that of human history.

Human beings are animals and sexual politics must be analyzed in terms of function and reproductive fitness. As Firestone points out, to discover a biosocial pattern we consider oppressive is not to lose our case, as an enormous capacity

for flexible behavior is built into the human animal.

Social change is flawed only when inspired by ignorance rather than knowledge of the roots of behavior in the human animal.

As a sexual strategy, egalitarianism might alter behavioral and phenotypic expressions of male and female, and has the capacity over multiple generations, even without biotechnological invention, to transform the human genotype.

Another task of evolutionary feminists is an analysis of patriarchy from animal behavior, evidence from the EEA and a careful look at the Stone Age and Bronze Age, as well as from the diversity of human cultures. We must look for not only prototypes in male-male competition, aggression and dominance, or female-female competition, but also behaviors antecedent to cooperative intersexual and intra-sexual relations, and sexual egalitarianism. It is there to be found.

For all feminists, it is also a time to mate sex with gender; to embrace human biology and evolution, learn from it, incorporate this knowledge and in the process recreate an expanded perspective on the human egalitarian project.

Celeste Newbrough taught History of the Second Wave of Feminism at City College of San Francisco and at the Harvey Milk

Institute. She studied evolution and the environment under Dr. Frank J. Sulloway and Dr. Carolyn Merchant at the University of California at Berkeley. She holds an MA from San Francisco State University Department of Human Sexuality based on eminence and a BA from Louisiana State University. She was a contributor to *The Routledge Encyclopedia for Women* (2000) and has authored six books and many articles. As Director of Academic Indexing Service, she composed scholarly indexes for universities and research institutions. She has been a lifelong activist in feminist, civil rights and lesbian rights movements.

ENDNOTES

1. Boston Women's Health Collective, *Our Bodies Ourselves*, collectively published by (1974— 2015 editions).
2. Khalil, Elias (2000). Survival of the least foolish of fools: the limits of evolutionary selection theory. *Journal of Bioeconomics*.
3. Firestone, Shulamith, *The Dialectics of Sex* (1970). All the quotations used in this article are from this book.
4. As a socialist feminist, Merchant goes along with gender-feminist branding of Firestone as 'essentialist', yet in fact her own more developed theory of the realm of reproduction is based in Firestone's ideas. Merchant disagrees in the specifically sexual (or techno-sexual) proposals of Firestone, believing (I think wrongly) that a true socialist society can and will produce egalitarianism without resort to a specifically sexual agenda.
5. Atkinson, Ti Grace, 'The Institution of Sexual Intercourse', *Amazon Odyssey*, others.
6. Academic and civic feminists also were part of the radical feminist movement, making wonderful theoretical contributions. See Weisstein, Naomi, 'Kinde Kirche, Kuche: Psychology Constructs the Female', and Jo Freeman, *The Women 's Liberation Movement*.
7. Carolyn Merchant's concept of ecological and sexual partnership is a good example of late second wave ideology of cooperation. See Merchant, Carol, *Ecological Revolutions and Earthcare: Women and the Environment*.
8. Plath, Sylvia (1965). *Ariel*. Publisher: New York: Harper & Row; and reprints. A universal topic of discourse among second wave founders was "where were you when you heard of Sylvia Plath's death?"
9. Other cultural works included, notably, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères*, both written in 1969, and Plath's *The Bell Jar* published in 1963 but not widely available until 1971.
10. Morgan, Robin, *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970).
11. De Waal, Franz (2005). *Our Inner Ape*. Riverhead Books, New York.
12. Hrdy, Sarah Blaffer (1999). *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection*. Pantheon Books. A summary of Hrdy and her works can be found on the Internet at <http://www.citrona.com/CV.pdf>.
13. Gowaty, P. A., "Sex-Neutral Theoretical Framework for Making Strong Inferences About the Origins of Sex Roles," *Evolution's Empress: Darwinian Perspectives on the Nature of Women*, Edited by Maryanne L. Fisher, Justin R. Garcia, Rosemarie Sokol Chang (Eds.), New York Oxford University Press.

