

**BREAKING
FEMINIST
WAVES**

Further Adventures of
The Dialectic of Sex

*CRITICAL ESSAYS ON SHULAMITH
FIRESTONE*

EDITED BY
MANDY MERCK AND STELLA SANDFORD



FURTHER ADVENTURES OF
THE DIALECTIC OF SEX

BREAKING FEMINIST WAVES

Series Editors:

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For the last twenty years, feminist theory has been presented as a series of ascending waves. This picture has had the effect of deemphasizing the diversity of past scholarship as well as constraining the way we understand and frame new work. The aim of this series is to attract original scholars who will offer unique interpretations of past scholarship and unearth neglected contributions to feminist theory. By breaking free from the constraints of the image of waves, this series will be able to provide a wider forum for dialogue and engage historical and interdisciplinary work to open up feminist theory to new audiences and markets.

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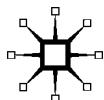
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SERIES FOREWORD

Breaking Feminist Waves is a series designed to rethink the conventional models of what feminism is today, its past and future trajectories. For more than a quarter of a century, feminist theory has been presented as a series of ascending waves, and this has come to represent generational divides and differences of political orientation as well as different formulations of goals. The imagery of waves, while connoting continuous movement, implies a singular trajectory with an inevitably progressive teleology. As such, it constrains the way we understand what feminism has been and where feminist thought has appeared, while simplifying the rich and nuanced political and philosophical diversity that has been characteristic of feminism throughout. Most disturbingly, it restricts the way we understand and frame new work.

This series provides a forum to reassess established constructions of feminism and of feminist theory. It provides a starting point to redefine feminism as a configuration of intersecting movements and concerns, with political commitment but, perhaps, without a singular centre or primary track. The generational divisions among women do not actually correlate to common interpretive frameworks shaped by shared historical circumstances, but rather to a diverse set of arguments, problems, and interests affected by differing historical contexts and locations. Often excluded from cultural access to dominant modes of communication and dissemination, feminisms have never been uniform nor yet in a comprehensive conversation. The generational division, then, cannot represent the dominant divide within feminism, nor a division between essentially coherent moments; there are always multiple conflicts and contradictions, as well as differences about the goals, strategies, founding concepts, and starting premises.

Nonetheless, the problems facing women, feminists, and feminisms are as acute and pressing today as ever. Featuring a variety of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, *Breaking Feminist Waves* provides a forum for comparative, historical, and interdisciplinary work, with special attention to the problems of cultural differences,

language and representation, embodiment, rights, violence, sexual economies, and political action. By rethinking feminisms' history as well as its present, and by unearthing neglected contributions to feminist theory, this series intends to unlock conversations between feminists and feminisms and to open up feminist theory and practice to new audiences.

—Linda Martín Alcoff and Gillian Howie

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Introduction

Mandy Merck and Stella Sandford

The end goal of feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just the elimination of male privilege but of the sex distinction itself: genital difference between human beings would no longer matter culturally.¹

The best way to raise a child is to LAY OFF.²

Feminists need not get so pious in their efforts that they feel they must flatly deny the beauty of the face on the cover of Vogue. For this is not the point. The real question is: is the face beautiful in a human way—does it allow for growth and flux and decay, does it express negative as well as positive emotions, does it fall apart without artificial props—or does it falsely imitate the very different beauty of an inanimate object, like wood trying to be metal?³

Pregnancy is the temporary deformation of the body of the individual for the sake of the species. Moreover, childbirth hurts. And it isn't good for you.⁴

In the forty years since these words were first published, *The Dialectic of Sex* has had a strange history. Written by the then twenty-five-year-old Shulamith Firestone, it first appeared in the autumn of 1970, the same year as Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and Germaine Greer's *The Sexual Eunuch*. Like those other founding texts of Women's Liberation, *The Dialectic of Sex* became a bestseller, but unlike them it became the object of attack and misrepresentation from both conservatives and feminists. Moreover, despite its pioneering critique of binary gender, *The Dialectic of Sex* is also missing from the bibliographies of Queer Theory. This volume is the first sustained discussion of its contents and their implications for the politics of another age.

The use of the broad term "politics" here is deliberate. Firestone wrote as a very radical feminist, arguing that the division of human

beings by reproductive function into two “sexes” is the origin of women’s subordination, but she was also a socialist, an ecologist, and an early advocate of children’s rights. In its opening fourteen-page chapter, *The Dialectic of Sex* takes in Engels, Marx, Fourier, Owen, Bebel, Newton, Beauvoir, Sartre, Hegel, and Freud. If this sounds ambitious, even for 1970, it is. Yet, unlike *Sexual Politics*, which was originally written as Millett’s doctoral dissertation, Firestone’s book is not an academic study. Instead, in a long feminist tradition ranging from the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft to Valerie Solanas to Donna Haraway, it is a *manifesto*—a fierce, funny, and outrageous exhortation to political change.

Ann Snitow was in the same women’s group as Firestone when the book was first published. A quarter century later she remembered her as the “sort of person . . . at the beginning of movements. Magnificent and stunned by insight, they tell us we must change our lives; the way we live is intolerable. Then they stagger off, leaving the less moonstruck but considerably brightened to try to live the insight out.”⁵ As Snitow concluded, a book arguing against pregnancy and for the rearing of children in communal collectives was bound to be demonized, brandished by conservatives as proof that the early women’s movement was crazy “(They refuse to be mothers! They want babies from test tubes!)” or—in the view of later feminists—male-identified “(They didn’t like mothers! They wanted babies from test tubes!).”⁶ And if these positions were not liabilities enough, *The Dialectic of Sex* is by far the most utopian of feminist manifestos, proclaiming “love alone” as the basis of human relations. “We are allergic to utopia just now,” Snitow wrote,

often seeing any sweeping refigurative thinking as falsely universalizing, naïve, out of touch with the hardness of power Those who came after have had to work at a slower pace, to take greater care. We police ourselves and each other more, while Firestone was shamelessly willing to generalize, speculate, make mistakes. To re-experience this unapologetic voice now is a tonic.⁷

Firestone’s voice fell silent when she withdrew from active politics in 1970, just before her manifesto came out. When it was reissued in 1993, feminist historian Alice Echols pronounced her withdrawal

a tragedy for the movement. There was nothing like *The Dialectic of Sex*. Kate Millett’s pioneering *Sexual Politics* was a sober tome. Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* was provocative but annoyingly coy. From its opening line—“Sex class is so deep as to be

invisible”—*The Dialectic of Sex* is a passionate, brilliant and uncompromising book.⁸

As Echols points out, for many “woman-identified” feminists Firestone was the “bad girl” who “provoked and revealed an enormous cultural anxiety about who would provide the caretaking were women to stop being ‘women.’”⁹ But for Echols, the appeal of *The Dialectic of Sex* lay precisely in this refusal of femininity: “No one practiced this better than Firestone, whose ‘dream’ action for women’s liberation was a ‘smile boycott,’ in which ‘all women would instantly abandon their “pleasing” smiles, henceforth smiling only when something pleased them’.”¹⁰

Predictably, Firestone’s reissued book did not please the Women’s Studies culture of the 1990s, and it was again out of print when Riot Grrrl Kathleen Hanna and *Bitch* magazine editor Lisa Miya-Jervis were enlisted to recommend it to readers of a new series of Feminist Classics in 2003.¹¹ Getting this series off the ground took editor Jennifer Baumgardner years, during which Firestone returned to print in what Baumgardner describes as “a lovely, tiny book of disturbing vignettes about people with mental illnesses called *Airless Spaces*.”¹² In a terse explanation for the long years of silence, the cover blurb reads “Refusing a career as a professional feminist, Shulamith Firestone found herself in an airless space.” Meanwhile, a young graduate of Firestone’s alma mater, the Art Institute of Chicago, had discovered a 1967 documentary—*Shulie*—made about Firestone by four male Chicago art students. At Firestone’s request, the original film was never distributed, so video artist Elisabeth Subrin shot a remake, also titled *Shulie* (1997). The widespread notice achieved by this intricately simulated documentary brought the writing of its subject back into public discussion.

The essays that open and close this book were inspired not only by *The Dialectic of Sex* but also by Subrin’s *Shulie*. The original *Shulie* featured Firestone in her final year at the Institute, filmed as part of a portrait of the “Now Generation” of the 1960s. The second *Shulie* is, in Mandy Merck’s description in the Prologue to this collection, a “prosthetic documentary,” a shot-by-shot reenactment substituting for the one we cannot see a subtly inflected reconsideration of what has, and has not, changed in the lives of similar young women across the decades. Merck focuses on the political circumstances that led Firestone to propose prosthetic gestation and their aftermath, tracing her manifesto’s influence on writers as different as the psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell (who attacked its rationalization of Freud in her 1974

Psychoanalysis and Feminism) and the novelist Marge Piercy (who imagined a utopia based on its premises in her 1976 science fiction novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*). Ultimately, these circumstances also led to Subrin's *Shulie*, through which another generation encounters the translated trauma of Firestone's incipiently feminist "now."

In the Epilogue, Elizabeth Freeman begins her thoughts on *Shulie* in the classroom, where a misunderstanding with a young woman student prompts her reconsideration of identification, and its foreclosure, across age groups. As Freeman points out, *The Dialectic of Sex* consistently challenges the belief in an uncomplicated legacy of feminist values, despite its dedication to Simone de Beauvoir. When Subrin takes over the male interviewer's voice from the original documentary to interrogate Shulie's affiliation to the "Now Generation," the resistance with which Firestone replied to the original question of her identification with that trendy designation now reverberates in an accusatory distance between the profeminism of 1967 and the post-feminism of today. Yet, despite their profound differences, these two moments are united by *Shulie*, a portrait of the young woman on the edge of her own time.

Between Merck's Prologue and Freeman's Epilogue nine writers engage with *The Dialectic of Sex* under the rubrics of Technology, Sex and the Family, and Dialectics. Sarah Franklin opens the first section with a challenge to the widespread misreading of Firestone as a technological determinist. Instead, as she sets out to demonstrate, Firestone views technology as both a drive and a symptom of historical unfolding, contradictory and dynamic. A convinced critic of the scientific "progress" represented by nuclear weapons, she can be seen as a latter day exponent of the Marxist-inspired biofuturism of British writers such as H.G. Wells and Julian Huxley, who also extolled the possibilities of artificial reproduction and cybernation to improve social conditions. Like many of her 1960s contemporaries, Firestone saw uncontrolled population growth as ecologically disastrous, but in a feminist tradition stretching back through Marie Stopes and Margaret Sanger she drew an explicit analogy between the threat to the species and the status of women. Forty years later, as Franklin reminds us, access to contraception and safe abortion is still denied to most women, a catastrophe that Firestone herself predicted in her prescient attack on their exclusion from control of reproductive technologies.

Looking forward, Susanna Paasonen considers the relation of *The Dialectic of Sex* to the cyberfeminism of the 1990s. Firestone's views derived from socialist cybernetics, a theory of communications and control that posited computer technology as an agent of economic

planning and extended human embodiment. Her successors, notably Donna Haraway and Sadie Plant, reflect changing conceptions of cybernetics, embodiment, materiality, and feminism since the 1970s. Although Haraway shares Firestone's anticipation of postgender technological embodiment, her figure of the cybernetic organism confounds the separation of the organic and inorganic to assert their fundamental imbrication. And in contrast to Firestone's conditional belief in the transformative potential of technology, Sadie Plant argues for the spontaneous feminization of culture via the "organic" mutation of machines. Where Firestone sought to overcome the limitations of biology, both Haraway and Plant celebrate its irreducible complexity. Their differing politics have inspired a plurality of cyberfeminisms, which share an ironic indifference to definition.

Addressing the contemporary distrust of utopia, Caroline Bassett reminds us that Firestone herself described her proposals as "dangerously utopian." Writing in an era of technologically inspired dreams and anxieties, she was all too aware of the lost hopes and disappointments of feminist politics. Lamenting the ground lost to the myth of women's emancipation after the winning of suffrage, *The Dialectic of Sex* traces the history of betrayal and backlash. Against this past, new technological developments are proposed as the possible agents of a utopian future in the imaginary as well as in the real. In contrast to Adorno and Bloch, who posit technology's tendency to extinguish utopian consciousness, Firestone projects its survival beyond the technology that would enable it. And unlike Haraway's cyborg, her utopia has a temporal location, within a history transformed, but not determined, by technology.

The second part of this volume examines Firestone's critique of sex and the family. Stevi Jackson argues that *The Dialectic of Sex* remains exceptional in connecting heterosexual relations to the oppression of children. Unlike most feminists, who have been preoccupied by motherhood, Firestone considers children as subjects—stunted by their schooling, fitted into the social hierarchy and subordinated to adults. The historical prolongation of childhood has led to an elaboration of maternal obligations and the commodification of their care. Yet, as legal minors in privatized families, children remain vulnerable to physical abuse, extreme economic dependence and enforced asexuality. And since the 1960s, increasing anxieties about children's safety and development have only intensified their surveillance and control. Similarly, Firestone criticizes the possessive relations of romantic love. But, although *The Dialectic of Sex* ruthlessly exposes the failings (for both sexes) of eroticized inequality, its own preoccupation with

heterosexual passion renders its recipe for future relations markedly contradictory.

Nina Power sounds a further cautionary note when considering Firestone's anticipation of a "cybernetic communism" in which—regardless of age or gender—human beings would enjoy complete social equality and sexual freedom in the aftermath of their technological emancipation from manual labor and childbirth. In effect Firestone predicts the replacement of one naturally produced phenomenon (the inequality created by asymmetrical reproductive function) by another—the pansexuality manifested by the "polymorphously perverse" infant. Appealing as this diffused eroticism may seem, would it exercise a greater force than the libidinal bonds of motherhood and family? Power also questions the role of technological change in this process, at times the apparent cause and at others the effect of social transformation. Here *The Dialectic of Sex* is bedeviled by the perennial problem of twentieth century revolutionary politics, the priority of economic versus sexual reform. And now, in the twenty-first, we are confronted by the increased workplace alienation and family privatization furthered by cybernation itself.

Tracing Firestone's proposal for the elimination of "the sex distinction," Mandy Merck compares the unisexual ambitions of early radical feminism with the integrationist aims of the American civil rights movement. Although Firestone's attempt to attribute black subordination to the oppressive dynamics of a national "family" has been rightly challenged, the similarities between women's exclusion from many occupations and institutions and racial segregation informs her call for the "merging of the divided sexual, racial and economic classes." Twenty-five years later, this racial analogy would reappear in a successor text that considers the implications of intersex for confounding "the apartheid of sex." Comparing both these manifestos and their intellectual contexts, Merck examines their relevance for the controversy surrounding the athletic achievements of South African runner Caster Semenya.

The final section of this book reflects on Firestone's engagement with dialectical theory. Tim Fisk identifies three different dialectics in *The Dialectic of Sex*—the method of Marxist history; the relation of natural and historical forces in tension with each other; and an epistemological dialectic between human inquiry and the world with which it engages. All three are at work in Firestone's account of the nuclear family as the modern manifestation of a changing relation, which leads Fisk to interpret her contentious idea of the "biological family" in non-essentialist terms. In *The Dialectic of Sex* humanity

and nature are, to quote its epigraph from Engels, “movements, combinations, connections, rather than things that move, combine, connect.” And rather than a theory of domination, Firestone’s socialist cybernetics, continually modified through feedback, is argued to be a technology of reciprocity between interdependent states of imagination and embodiment.

Invoking the political theory of contract and consent, Gillian Howie reads the opening chapter of *The Dialectic of Sex* as a demonstration of the illegitimacy of patriarchal social organization. As a dialectical materialist, Firestone stresses the activity of social production, but her interest in the original relationship between the sexes identifies the reproductive division of labor as the condition for all its subsequent divisions. In Howie’s view, this theory is comparable to the “state of nature” stories of social contract theorists, but unlike them it exposes the sexual oppression on which such contracts are founded. Firestone’s account of the sexual state of nature therefore challenges the legitimacy of the family as a supposedly consensual institution, demonstrating that the enforced dependency of women obviates their free consent to the marriage contract. In so doing, Howie argues, Firestone broadens Marxist political economy and enables it to address the social dynamics at the heart of modern liberalism.

Finally, Stella Sandford identifies the hidden dialectic of *The Dialectic of Sex*: the tension between two contradictory concepts of sex at work in Firestone’s text. On the one hand, Firestone assumes an unchanging natural-biological concept of sex in her account of the origin of women’s oppression. On the other, she implicitly develops a political concept of sex as that which is to be overcome by feminist revolution. The identification of the dialectical tension between these two concepts is made possible by subsequent feminist theory, notably the work of Christine Delphy. But Sandford also argues that this aspect of *The Dialectic of Sex* is instructive for contemporary debates on the nature of “sex.” In Sandford’s reading, Firestone productively stages the complexity of the meaning of “sex” and demonstrates the difficulty of understanding its conceptual operations and ideological effects.

As this preview of our collection makes clear, Firestone’s manifesto is not argued to be innocent of contradiction, misjudgment or affront. There are good reasons for the historical challenges to her ideas, and they are not offered here as foundational or final for sexual politics. “The adventures of the dialectic,” writes Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “are errors through which it must pass, since it is in principle a thought with several centers and several points of entry, and because it needs

time to explore them all.” If ever a text should be read as a work of what Merleau-Ponty calls situated consciousness—both that of the writer and the reader—it is this transmission from the earliest years of second wave feminism. As he writes of its predecessors, so we conclude of *The Dialectic of Sex*: “it is incomplete so long as it does not pass into other perspectives and into the perspectives of others.”¹³

NOTES

1. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (originally New York: William Morrow, 1970; this edition New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 11.
2. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 82.
3. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 139.
4. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 180–181.
5. Ann Snitow, “Returning to the Well,” *Dissent* (Fall 1994), 557–58.
6. Snitow, “Returning to the Well,” 557.
7. Snitow, “Returning to the Well,” 558–59.
8. Alice Echols, “‘Totally Ready To Go’: Shulamith Firestone and The Dialectic of Sex,” reprinted in *Shaky Ground: The Sixties and Its Aftershocks* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2002), 104.
9. Echols, *Shaky Ground*, 105–6.
10. Echols, *Shaky Ground*, 107.
11. At Firestone’s request, the Feminist Classics series returned to the original text of her book for its Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition of 2003. This is the edition used throughout this collection.
12. Jennifer Baumgardner, “That Seventies Show,” *Dissent* (Summer 2002), www.dissentmagazine.org/article.
13. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*. Trans. Joseph Bien (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 204.

Shulamith Firestone and Sexual Difference

Mandy Merck

Sexual difference, according to Jean Baudrillard, disappeared by the 1980s, supplanted by “a new game of sexual indifference.” The sexual revolution had left behind an agnosticism of identity and desire whose emblematic figure was the transsexual, neither masculine nor feminine and invulnerable to *jouissance*. This avatar of artifice was said to embody the destiny of our mutant species, whose anatomy and imago are endlessly subjected to technological and symbolic augmentation, diffraction, hybridization: “to become a prosthesis.”¹ But if the transsexual was the postmodernist’s sequel to the symbolic order of sexual difference, post-structuralism conjured a prosthetic emblem of its own, not as Baudrillard had in the name of trans (or post) politics, but in an explicitly political challenge to “the law . . . which installs gender and kinship.”² Plastic, transferable, expropriable, the lesbian phallus was wielded by Judith Butler to challenge the heterosexist hegemony of sexual difference itself. Theorized as the logical consequence of the Lacanian scheme it undermines, it was held to displace the masculine signification of the phallus and deprive anatomy as the site of power.

Neither Butler nor Baudrillard were being entirely literal. As the former points out, the lesbian phallus (like any other) is a theoretical fiction, if one that derives a good deal of its notoriety from its resemblance to the plastic and transferable strap-ons previously unmentioned in academic discourse. As for Baudrillard, he is writing from his usual standpoint of avowed delirium, declaring the disappearance of art, politics and economics, as well as sexual difference, in terms

more hyperbolic than hyperreal. Yet it is difficult to see past these two exponents of the “*post*”-*prosthetic* to an earlier, less ironic, age. And perhaps we shouldn’t try, since what we will discover there is no less inflected by the ontological conundra with which we now so deftly engage. If anything, the story of Shulamith Firestone can be said to intensify the complexities of reproduction and representation both produced and signified by the prosthesis: reality and artifice, the original and the copy, the subject and her uncanny double. As she warned in *The Dialectic of Sex*, “no matter how many levels of consciousness one reaches, the problem always goes deeper.”³ Returning to Firestone’s polemic forty years after its original publication, these remarks are an exercise in the deferred revision now familiarly known by the Freudian term *Nachträglichkeit*. Written as science announces the imminence of the cybernetic pregnancy so scandalously predicted by Firestone, they will reexamine her writing and the context of its emergence, as well as the twice-made film portrait of its author which suggests a time, and indeed a sexual order, “that hasn’t necessarily passed.”

RADICAL FEMINISM AND THE MOVEMENT

The author’s note to *The Dialectic of Sex* declares that Shulamith Firestone was born in Canada “toward the end of World War II” and grew up in the Midwestern United States. At the age of twelve, she later recalled, she experienced doubts about the existence of God which made her feel so guilty that she welcomed being sent away to an orthodox Jewish school. Firestone attended Washington University in St. Louis and then the Art Institute of Chicago, majoring in painting and drawing. In her graduation year, 1967, the twenty-two-year-old was chosen as the subject of a half-hour film documentary, one of a series on the “Now Generation” shot by four male students from Northwestern University. In it she was filmed around Chicago, photographing people in the street, taking in Warhol’s *Chelsea Girls* with a woman friend, working part-time in the Post Office. She is also shown enduring a fairly brutal critique of her painting by her male instructors from the Art Institute, who call her canvasses “dreary,” dismiss her attempt to explain why she paints male nudes, accuse her of evading their questions, and finally inform her that she should switch from painting to another medium, possibly film, to better express the only merit they note in her work, her “feeling for people.” In the filmed interview which comprises much of this portrait, Firestone complains that four years at the Art Institute has made her

“completely inarticulate” and observes that any intellectual or artistic woman is “going to have problems with men.” She also declares her identification with minority groups and outsiders, and discusses the subordination of the “Negroes” she works with at the post office.

By that summer Firestone was one of the 2,000 attending the radical National Convention for a New Politics held in Chicago. There she co-drafted a resolution condemning the media “for perpetuating the stereotype of women as always in an auxiliary position to men [and as] sex objects,” calling for “the revamping of marriage, divorce, and property laws” and demanding “complete control by women of their own bodies, the dissemination of birth control information to all women regardless of their age and marital status, and the removal of all prohibitions against abortion.” But when the time came to debate this resolution, the chairman refused to call on its authors, despite protests in the hall. As one witness remembered, the chair “patted Shulie on the head and said, ‘Move on little girl; we have more important issues to talk about here than women’s liberation.’”⁴ In the following week the first Chicago women’s group was formed.

To understand the founding politics of Second Wave feminism in the United States, it is important to grasp its roots in the Movement, as the loose coalition of anti-Vietnam War, anti-racist, anti-capitalist “radicals” was described at the time. Several of the original Chicago women’s group had also been members of Students for a Democratic Society, where the term “women’s liberation” was first employed to label a conference workshop, and many founding feminists had come from the civil rights movement. The Chicago group’s first manifesto, advising women to avoid making “the same mistake the blacks did at first of allowing others (whites in their case, men in ours) to define our issues, methods, goals,” was addressed “To the Women of the Left.”⁵ And, although the early American women’s movement (c.1967–69) would divide between those who regarded it as a wing of the struggle against the “military-industrial complex” and those who increasingly targeted male supremacy (including that on the Left), both factions identified with the radical politics of the period.

Indeed, when Firestone moved to New York that autumn and co-founded (with Pam Allen) its first women’s liberation group, it was called New York Radical Women. Not until spring 1968 did “women’s liberation” achieve wide currency. And “feminism”—doubly disadvantaged by its association with the bourgeois reformists of the suffrage movement as well as their paradoxically “unfeminine” image (which Firestone later parodied as “George Sand in cigar and bloomers”⁶)—was an even more problematic term for a group of

young women as avowedly feminine (and heterosexual) as they were leftwing. It is in this context that “radical feminism” and Firestone’s unique theorization of this tendency, was to develop—highly conscious of economic and racial inequality, but concerned to oppose those forces which most oppressed women as women.

The evolution of this theory can be traced from the June 1968 publication of New York Radical Women’s *Notes from the First Year* (“\$.50 to women, \$1.00 to men”) which includes an early version of Anne Koedt’s “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm” as well as three articles by Firestone. Reporting on the January 1968 women’s march on Congress to oppose the Vietnam War, Firestone explains her group’s disagreement with the “traditional female role” adopted by the other marchers: “They came as wives, mothers and mourners; that is, tearful and passive reactors to the actions of men rather than organizing as women to change that definition of femininity to something other than a synonym for weakness, political impotence, and tears.”⁷ And, in a piece reflecting on the history of feminism, she challenges the caricature of the “granite-faced spinster obsessed with the vote” to argue that the then widespread demeaning of the early women’s movement neglects the “revolutionary potential” of its attempt to organize women workers, oppose slavery and expose “the white male power structure in all its hypocrisy.” The movement died, she argues, not because it won its objectives with the suffrage, but because it was defeated on the terrain of legal rights, economic equality, and sex: “For though women may strive for a ‘natural’ look, they do indeed strive. Girls today are as concerned about ‘image’ as ever. . . . As for sex itself, I would argue that any changes were as a result of male interests and not female. Any benefits for women were accidental.”⁸

Initially these were the views of a minority, even inside New York Radical Women. But as they gained acceptance in successor groups (New York Radical Feminists and Redstockings, co-founded again by Firestone and others in 1969) Firestone remained stubbornly non-conformist, particularly in her attitude to maternity. Although early Women’s Liberation expressed what her New York feminist contemporary Ann Snitow has called “a harsh self-questioning about motherhood” in demands that “women go beyond justifying themselves in terms of their wombs and breasts and housekeeping,”⁹ there were many mothers and no anti-natalist consensus in its ranks. The report of a conference held in Illinois in 1968 to commemorate the 120th anniversary of the first Women’s Rights Convention at Seneca Falls records “‘heated reactions’ to the suggestion—probably Firestone’s—that pregnancy is physically debilitating and inevitably oppressive.”¹⁰

One mother of several children replied to Firestone's description of pregnancy as "barbaric" with the claim that many women thrived on it. But Firestone was adamant, reportedly arguing that such conferences should not provide childcare but instead require mothers to leave their offspring at home.

Such remarks were consistent with her public stance in the movement, which was as provocative as it was innovative. Although Firestone supported the internal democracy of women's liberation, contrasting it with the failures of other revolutionary movements "to practice among themselves what they preach," she would write that its anti-leadership line put its members in the "peculiar position of having to eradicate, at the same time, not only their submissive natures, but their dominant natures as well, thus burning the candle at both ends."¹¹ And although she would stress her opposition to making "women . . . become like men, crippled in the identical way," the masculine identification implicit in her later description of the pre-pubescent girl's "body . . . as limber and functional as her brother's"¹² was evident in her accusation that those feminists who criticized her domineering style were "trying to castrate me."¹³

Meanwhile, the rapidly growing movement was increasingly torn between commitments to consciousness-raising and public activism, between small affinity groups and mass participation, between the radicalism of its founders and the mainstreaming impetus of its dissemination. And when theorists like Firestone, Ann Snitow, and Ellen Willis gained increasing public prominence, the result was criticism from other feminists for monopolizing the creative role. By October 1970, when *The Dialectic of Sex* was published, its frustrated author had left the movement she had helped to found.

"ABOLISH IT"

Firestone's retirement from public politics is one reason why her polemic is read less today than contemporary works like Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and Millett's *Sexual Politics* (both also published in 1970, a remarkable year which also saw the launch of Eva Figes's *Patriarchal Attitudes*). Another is its status as what Snitow calls a "demon text" of women's liberation, which she defines as books "apologized for, endlessly quoted out of context, to prove that the feminism of the early seventies was, in [Betty] Friedan's words of recantation, 'strangely blind'."¹⁴ And while defending *The Dialectic's* utopian ambitions, Snitow herself apologizes both for its abjection of the pregnant body and its "undertheorized" advocacy of a cybernetic

solution to female oppression. Subsequently, my own attempt to assign it for a graduate seminar on theories of sexual difference evoked antagonism and bewilderment, eventually leading one former student to request this article. Perhaps this was because, unlike other works assigned in that seminar, *The Dialectic* takes a very simple position on the question of sexual difference: abolish it. Or perhaps it was because Firestone's polemic, reaching for the anthropological scope of Bachofen and Morgan, the nineteenth-century scholars who influenced Engels, never eschews the grand narrative students are now taught to abhor. To take only one example, the twenty-one-page chapter "Dialectics of Cultural History" attempts to supersede C. P. Snow's two cultures and their gendered division of technology and aesthetics in a meta-history complete with charts labeled "Merging of Art and Reality" and "Realization of the Conceivable in the Actual." And that was how it was marketed, as "the missing link between Marx and Freud." Forty years after I first read it, in a Bantam mass paperback blurb "Chapter 6 Might Change Your Life," it seems absurdly grandiose, deeply contradictory, dubiously dialectical, and still urgently relevant to sexual politics.

Subtitled "The Case for Feminist Revolution," *The Dialectic of Sex* opens with a dedication to Simone de Beauvoir "who kept her integrity" and a Heraclitean epigraph from Engels concluding "everything is and is not, for everything is fluid, is constantly changing, constantly coming into being and passing away." It is my contention that sexual difference remains, for feminism and psychoanalysis, the test of this proposition. Although the problematic itself—anatomical dimorphism? social division? symbolic difference? social construction? performative materialization? or (in the most recent Lacanian position) sexuation?—has certainly mutated in the past forty years, it is arguable that the problem has not. And that problem, as articulated in *The Dialectic of Sex*, is that "genital differences between human beings...matter culturally."¹⁵ It's worth noting here that Firestone's formulation, "the sexual distinction," is neither quite the biological reduction so often described, since her concern is how bodies matter culturally, yet nor is it an early anticipation of Butler, who emphasizes how culture materializes bodies. What one could say is that, like most ambitious theory of early women's liberation, Firestone's is a highly eclectic formulation, concerned at once with the biological, the social and—if not the psychoanalytic—the psychological. And, as the opening of her book suggests, the main sources for this synthesis are Engels and Beauvoir.

In common with many of her radical feminist contemporaries and the "social reproduction" feminists who followed them—including

Butler in a debate with Nancy Fraser¹⁶—Firestone seizes on Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, and its argument that the first division of labor is that constituted by reproductive differences between the sexes. But critiquing the limits of a purely “economic diagnosis traced to ownership of the means of production, even of the means of reproduction,”¹⁷ Firestone moves on to Beauvoir’s observations on the gendering of the distinction between Same and Other in *The Second Sex*. Challenging the Hegelian abstraction of this dualism into a priori categories, she argues instead for its origin in procreation. Human biology, according to Firestone, is responsible for an “inherently unequal power distribution”¹⁸ between the sexes. Pregnancy, painful childbirth, lactation and the consequent responsibilities of infant care enforce mothers’ as well as children’s dependency. But this situation, although “material,” is not inevitable. Citing Beauvoir on human society’s refusal to submit to nature, as well as the Communist admonition to seize the means of production, Firestone declares that women must take control of reproduction, from their own fertility to the social institutions of childbearing and childrearing.

Spurred by late-1960s developments in oral contraception, artificial insemination and, incipiently, in vitro fertilization and artificial placentas, as well as industrial automation—technologies whose oppressive as well as beneficial capacities she acknowledges—Firestone sketches a quasi-dialectical sequence in which automated service-sector employment (computer programming, for example) is initially offered to working-class women, eroding the dominance of male heads of households and upsetting familial hierarchies. Meanwhile, related developments in reproductive technology offer the possibility of “cybernating” reproduction as well as production. But with the rapid obsolescence of industrial technologies, unemployment becomes endemic, control is consolidated by an engineering elite and social unrest increases. Although the transformation of that unrest into revolution, and the means by which it might succeed, are not specified (undermining any claim to a “dialectic” of sex) the polemic concludes with an evocation of a future in which not only the class system, but sexual distinction would be eliminated: “genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally.” This utopia is projected to provide for (optional) extra-uterine gestation, the consequent withdrawal of ego investments from reproduction, the socialization of childrearing in collective households, an end to the incest taboo, and the practice of a polymorphously perverse sexuality.

It is typical of the eccentric character of Firestone’s polemic that it invokes Freud as an important ally in this project without mentioning

any of his writings on sexual difference. Neither his observations on the impossibility of establishing a psychological meaning for “maleness” and “femaleness” in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* nor the complaint (in “A Case of Homosexuality in a Woman”) that our understanding of masculinity and femininity inevitably “vanishes” into activity and passivity, nor the statement (in *Civilization and Its Discontents*) of the “fact that each individual seeks to satisfy both male and female wishes in his sexual life”¹⁹ are cited against the sexual distinction. And while we know that Freud was inconsistent in these views, returning periodically to the assumption of a more stable sexual dichotomy—that too Firestone ignores. Instead, she appropriates “Freudianism” not as psychoanalysis, but as social critique. As late Victorian contemporaries, Freudianism and feminism are said to be “responses to centuries of increasing privatization of family life, its extreme subjugation of women, and the sex repressions and subsequent neuroses this caused.”²⁰ And one by one, she works through the central tenets of psychoanalysis—Oedipality, fetishism, penis envy, and so on—to ascribe them to social forces. Thus, the male Oedipus complex, to cite her most extensive example, is entirely about social power: the father’s ideological influence, physical dominance and access to law, culture and adventure versus the mother’s confinement by pregnancy, child care and the father’s bullying; and the consequent transformation of the little boy’s initial love and sympathy for his primary caregiver into identification with her oppressor.

This sort of social reductionism was widespread in the women’s movement at the time of *The Dialectic*’s publication, and it is the main target of Juliet Mitchell’s 1974 *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. Like Millett and Greer, Firestone is accused by Mitchell of denying infantile sexuality and replacing the unconscious with the subject’s rational negotiation of the familial realities. (As Mitchell points out, Firestone’s claim that “most children aren’t fools” requires an updating of the Oedipus complex to about age 6.) As for *The Dialectic*’s call to eliminate “the sex distinction itself,” this is consigned to a millenarian fantasy “that differences can be annihilated in the interests of harmony,”²¹ that (as in Reich’s dialectical precursor to Firestone) the contradictions of unconscious desire and social repression will be reconciled under socialism. Arguing from the Lacanian standpoint which her study did so much to propagate, Mitchell insists instead on the foundational importance of difference (difference as separation, absence, lack) to the constitution of human subjectivity. And, in the argument of the period, Freud’s phylogenetic myth of origins in *Totem and Taboo* is linked to Levi-Strauss’s structuralist account of

the incest prohibition and female exchange between kin groups to make a gender system organized by paternal interdiction co-extensive with human culture. It is patriarchy, not procreation, and indeed not men's economic and political power, that Mitchell's psychoanalytic feminism targets for "overthrow."

That the term "overthrow" could even be used in 1974 seems striking from the perspective of contemporary Lacanian accounts of sexual difference, which have withdrawn it from a historicized symbolic order to insist instead on its liminal situation "neither as biological fact nor as a specific cultural formation, but as the articulation of a certain deadlock that pertains to the most elementary relationship between the human animal and the symbolic order."²² As developed in Lacan's formulas of sexuation, this deadlock is one of signification, which offers speaking beings two points of orientation in regard to castration—submission and accession to phallic jouissance, or not. While Lacanians stress the non-physicality of the two categories, the autonomy of our official and erogenous identifications, and the historical contingency of their symbolization, there are nonetheless only two positions available and they are mutually exclusive. In this logic of non-contradiction, the choice of "both" comes at the price of psychosis—the price, Lacanians confidently assert, paid by transsexuals, accused of claiming exemption from the bar of castration, of thinking they can have it all. Moreover, the gendering of each position (submission to castration as masculine, nonsubmission as feminine) creates, as Colette Soler observes, a "strange homology"²³ between the binary classification of speaking beings and sexed organisms.

Within this formulation, there is no call to overthrow anything, certainly not patriarchy, since sexuation, like the (admittedly) prosthetic phallus around which it is organized, is said to be both virtual—fraudulent, failing, empty—and transcendent—founded in drives which are literally unspeakable, "a real and not a symbolic difference."²⁴ Unlike ethnic or class differences, sexual difference in this theory is the default difference, the difference that guarantees "difference in general," that defends each subject's particularity against cultural determination.

This was not quite the view of those who first attempted to graft Lacanian psychoanalysis onto feminism. Although that theory adopts structural anthropology to suture sexual difference into subjectivity at the dawn of culture, Mitchell herself concludes her remarks on the subject thus: "Some way of establishing distinctions will always be crucial; that it should be this way is another question."²⁵ And, despite her argument with Firestone, that question is—for both theorists—posed

by the conflicts of contemporary kinship. For Firestone, citing Durkheim, the exogamy and incest taboos prescribed by early human societies survive in the patriarchal structure of the contemporary family, whose archaic nature is obscured by the romanticization of marriage and the limited economic support, social intimacy and sexual satisfaction that it offers. For Mitchell (in one of the most dialectical, and least remembered, chapters of her study) the exchange of women between kin groups said to inaugurate early economic relations is rendered obsolete by capitalist exchange, even as patriarchal authority is reinforced by the capitalist family. To Mitchell, the modern family is inherently unstable, doomed to surrender its functions to social production and its gendered subjectivities to “new structures...in the unconscious.”²⁶ To Firestone, its oppressive nature, together with new technological opportunities, will result in its replacement by contractual collectivities raising their non-genetic children.

THE PROPHEPIC PROSTHETIC?

Since this debate took place in the 1970s, there have been vast developments in reproductive technologies, but surprisingly few attempts to theorize their effect on sexual subjectivity. The most obvious exception to this silence are lesbians, for whom artificial insemination is now a long-established and widespread practice and for whom the potential to combine the chromosomal material of two different donors’ eggs would offer female couples the prospect of genetic reproduction. Writing in defense of homosexual parenting, Judith Butler has reexamined the structuralist tradition in psychoanalysis to question whether it continues to mobilize “the theorization of a primary sexual difference” in order to taboo new kinship relations. In particular, she notes the opposition of a number of French psychoanalysts to the legalization of non-marital “contracts of alliance” in the fear that these would eventually lead to homosexual marriage and parenting and the consequent threat of their children’s psychosis, “as if some structure, necessarily named ‘Mother’ and necessarily named ‘Father’ and established at the level of the symbolic, was a necessary psychic support against engorgement by the Real.”²⁷ (Among the opponents of this measure was Lacan’s son-in-law and executor, Jacques-Alain Miller, who argued that homosexual men should not be allowed to marry, because their unions would be deprived of feminine fidelity.) Against the psychoanalytic exposition of an inviolable law regulating kinship and sexual identity, Butler counterposes “a socially alterable set of arrangements” confounding the “normative

heterosexual family structure”—not only lesbian and gay parenting, but the black urban families headed by groups of mothers, aunts and grandmothers, other parenting arrangements shared by more than two adults, or voluntary single parenting—arrangements that have attracted increasing state opposition in recent times. If these family forms constitute *de facto* challenges to the structuralist norm, should the same be said of the possibilities now offered by the new reproductive technologies?

Another lesbian theorist, Camilla Griggers, thinks not. Reflecting on the development of new technologies including artificial insemination, *in vitro* fertilization, surrogate pregnancy, and embryo transfer, she argues that such innovations can both challenge and confirm “biological relations to gendered social roles,” since the prospect of lesbian maternity is conferred by “a repressive straight economy of material production, body management, and a class-privileged division of labor.”²⁸ But neither the radical kin groups defended by Butler nor the technically assisted lesbian pregnancy exempted by Griggers from the “repressive straight economy” would obviate the psychopathologies which Firestone perceived in even the most “alternative” families of her era: “the attempted extension of ego through one’s children . . . the ‘immortalizing’ of name, property, class and ethnic identification . . . child-as-project,”²⁹ and the consequent continuation of maternal and child dependency and subordination. The scandals of the new reproductive technology—such as the French brother and sister, aged fifty-two and sixty-two, who obtained IVF treatment in the United States in 2001 while posing as husband and wife, or the forty-seven-year-old infertile woman who sought implantation with an egg from an anonymous donor fertilized by her own brother at a London clinic in August that year—have been defended on the presumptive benefit of the biological family’s genetic perpetuation. As the spokesman from the London clinic involved put it, fertilization by one’s brother is no more incestuous in this context than egg donation from one’s sister (thereby underlining the persistence of a sexual differentiation whereby impregnation via a sibling of the opposite sex somehow requires more justification). Although such procedures may present ethical problems for regulatory bodies like Britain’s Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, they clearly conform to traditions of surrogacy and adoption dating back to the Old Testament, as well as contemporary norms of maternal fulfillment, familial narcissism, and sexual difference.

Firestone’s prosthetic womb is proposed precisely against such norms, since its artifice would be employed to distance gestation from

any human parent, and therefore facilitate the infant's bonding with a group whose biological connection to the child would be irrelevant. (Interestingly, *The Dialectic* makes no stipulations about the circumstances of the child's conception, despite noting the then looming possibility of *in vitro* fertilization. Although Firestone's conviction that a relaxation of familial taboos would encourage polymorphous sexuality leads her to speculate about a future without exclusive couples or an over-emphasis on genitality, heterosexuality is not seen as the root of gendered dominance and submission, à la Dworkin and MacKinnon. Firestone's polemic is not aimed at conventional intercourse, which she describes in passing as offering a better "physical fit" than its homosexual counterparts, but at the feminization of childbearing and rearing.)

Does this have any resonance in an era in which postmenopausal women desperately seek fertility treatment? One only has to read the discussion of pregnancy stimulated by the publication of Naomi Wolf³⁰ and Rachel Cusk's³¹ maternal memoirs to conclude that it may well do. Not only do the two mothers complain of trauma, exhaustion, depression, isolation, and social subordination, they do so in classic Firestonian prose. But where *The Dialectic* shocked its 1970s readers by announcing that "pregnancy is the temporary deformation of the body of the individual for the sake of the species,"³² in 2001 Rachel Cusk could observe that "childbirth and motherhood are the anvils upon which sexual inequality was forged" and be accused of stating the obvious.³³ Commenting in the London *Evening Standard*, Zoe Williams replied that bourgeois literati like Cusk and Wolf could easily have taken evasive action, the increasing option of young, middle-class women in the West: fewer pregnancies, decreasing birth-rates. If the technology for external gestation was available for this generation might there be a significant change?

Although duplicating the functions of the uterus and placenta has proved far more daunting than simpler interventions in cellular biology, researchers at Cornell University's Centre for Reproductive Medicine and Infertility predict that artificial wombs capable of sustaining the full nine months gestation of a human infant may be only ten to fifty years away. Again, this research—creating an artificial womb lining at Cornell and earlier an oxygenated amniotic tank at Tokyo's Juntendo University—is aimed at enabling traditional maternity for women prone to miscarriage or with damaged or excised uteruses. And when such cybernetic pregnancy becomes available, it need not lead to the dialectical outcome foreseen by Firestone. Setting aside the sheer cost of such procedures, as well as the largely

non-feminist regime which still controls them, the consequences of prosthetic gestation would not necessarily differ from those of surrogacy or adoption, if the child is reared by a primary caregiver without equally engaged co-parents and the appropriate institutional support. Whether the possibility of release from the physical burdens, or the dyadic bonds, of traditional motherhood would make group parenting appear a potentially less consuming, and thus more appealing, enterprise remains to be seen—as does its effects on the cultural significance of genital difference.

Nevertheless, as the prospect of artificial pregnancy looms, science ethicists have convened conferences like the February 2002 event at Oklahoma State University titled “The End of Natural Motherhood?” Setting out its agenda, organizer Scott Gelfant suggested that the existence of artificial wombs might encourage the Moral Right to insist that all pregnancies proceed to term, but—if combined with cloning technology—could equally enable gay male reproduction.³⁴ Meanwhile, biotechnology commentator Jeremy Rifkind responded to the Cornell and Juntendo research by quoting Firestone’s call for “an honest examination of the ancient value of motherhood” and asking “How will the end of pregnancy affect the way we think about gender and the role of women?”³⁵ Such speculations have outstripped present day feminist theory, which advises us to value gender as an attribute of individual diversity while somehow resisting the rigidities of sexual binarism. Paradoxically, while reproductive technologies develop which could subvert or perpetuate that order, and conventional maternity is increasingly criticized or refused, Firestone’s ungendered utopia is virtually forgotten by the women’s movement, as is the major attempt to give it imaginative expression, the American writer Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976).

Like many of the more provocative attempts to think difference differently, Piercy’s novel is a work of science fiction. And typically of that genre, the future imagined is very much of its writing’s time, a 1970s-style commune of androgynous ecologists with names like Morningstar dressed in down jackets. There, in the Massachusetts of 2137, embryonic children gestate in aquarial brooders until they are delivered into a world of neutral pronouns, communal co-operation and three voluntary parents. The result, one character explains, is that “All coupling, all befriending goes on between biological males, biological females, or both. That’s not a useful set of categories. We tend to divvy up people by what they’re good at and bad at, strengths and weaknesses, gifts and failings.”³⁶ A century and a half from this idyll the novel’s heroine, a poor Chicana woman forcibly committed to a

present-day public mental ward, time travels to this contingent community. It is her story, and not the prosthetic maternity of the state abbreviated MA., that prefigures Firestone's own.

In 1998, the avant-garde publisher Semiotext(e) issued *Airless Spaces*, a collection of Firestone's stories set in and out of mental hospitals, a life she herself had lived for many of the silent years following the publication of *The Dialectic of Sex*. Like Piercy's Connie Ramos, Firestone's characters are desperate inside the hospital and destitute when out. Years of medication and institutional routine have left one unable to read, write or "care about anything, and love was forgotten":

She was lucid, yes, at what price. She sometimes recognized on the faces of others joy and ambition and other emotions she could recall having had once, long ago. But her life was ruined, and she had no salvage plan.³⁷

Who is "she" in this story? *Airless Spaces* contains 51 vignettes, divided into headings such as "Hospitals," "Losers," "Obituaries," and "Suicides I Have Known." So recognizably autobiographical are elements of these that their status as fiction becomes suspect. (One rather vindictive obituary is for an actual feminist, dead at 50, who had helped to overthrow the founding principles of a woman's group that Firestone started in the East Village, the coup that finally provoked her withdrawal from the women's movement.) These romans-à-clef reinforce the question still directed at Firestone's project: is their author's self-described "madness" the fate reserved for those who would contest sexual difference?

If *Airless Spaces* is the tragic sequel to the utopian hopes of *Woman on the Edge of Time*, which ends with its fiercely resistant heroine still captive in the asylum, it was not the only ambiguous biography of Firestone to emerge in the 1990s. Despite its publication, and the re-issuing of *The Dialectic* in 1993, Firestone remains resolutely outside the public arena. At her insistence, the 1967 documentary portraying her as a member of the "Now Generation" has never been released, but in the mid-1990s, while researching the left film collective that some of its makers subsequently formed, another young graduate of the Art Institute of Chicago discovered *Shulie*. Struck by Firestone's onscreen remarks about the voyeuristic pleasures of the cinema ("I always like to feel that I'm peeking into things that I wouldn't otherwise see") versus the ethical responsibilities of the artist ("You can go too far in using people's situations as subject matter"), as well as the historic significance of this portrait of a woman who would become so major a femi-

nist figure, experimental film-maker Elisabeth Subrin decided on a remake. The resulting work, also called *Shulie*, is a prosthetic documentary, a shot-by-shot copy of the original, with certain key differences. Casting look-alike Kim Suss as Shulie, Subrin returned to the Chicago locations of the 1967 film, inserting “a deviation in every frame.”³⁸ Not least is the substitution of Subrin herself, its woman director, for Firestone’s original off-screen interrogator, a man.

Subrin’s own description of her film sees it as another sort of time travel:

a means of forcing viewers to analyze, shot by shot, what constitutes now and then, across social, economic, racial, cultural and aesthetic terms. . . . *Shulie* (1997) is not necessarily about the young Firestone, but about the conditions of a woman’s representation and the recognition that she, and many other women of her generation, survived, or even conquered that representation, often at enormous risk and sacrifice. It is also about the present. The amateur, sexist and self-aggrandising strategies of the original four male filmmakers and their positioning of her in the documentary; how she’s treated by her painting teachers; how she articulates her subjectivity as a white, middle class Jewish woman: these moments represent critical and neglected evidence of a time that hasn’t necessarily passed.³⁹

These changes have not won Firestone’s support for the second *Shulie*, although she has taken no action against its dissemination. Her reputed indignation at her own cinematic redoubling finds support in the film theory which begins with Metz’s observations on the spectator’s discovery of himself as “the double of his double” in “that other mirror, the cinema screen,” and that screen’s “prosthetic” substitution for his “primarily dislocated limbs.”⁴⁰ Here the cinema performs what has been called the “double logic”⁴¹ of the prosthesis, technologically extending the agency of the spectator, while threatening bodily fragmentation and objectification. And as feminist critics have demonstrated since *The Dialectic*, these functions are not innocent of the sexual distinction which genders spectatorship masculine, while traditionally making the female spectacle—from Muybridge’s moving women to *Metropolis*’s false Maria to *The Stepford Wives*—mechanical objects. Against this logic, Subrin’s reanimated *Shulie*—however original in its simulation—may have no defense. As one viewer asked me after a screening, “how amusing might you find an anachronistic puppet show of yourself, I wonder . . . ?”

But perhaps *Shulie*’s spectacularization of its female subject only contributes to the strange sense of *Nachträglichkeit* with which the

spectator subliminally registers its contemporary additions, such as the insertion of a demonstration at the 1996 Democratic Convention for a 1960s be-in, or the Starbucks coffee cup in a postal worker's hand, in its ostensible portrait of the faraway 1960s. For when the spectator discovers that this portrait from the Now Generation really is from now, the deferred temporality of trauma is achieved, confronting us with the original experience of sexual difference which led women like Firestone to become feminists, and which remains—in her life and our own—all too familiar.

NOTES

An earlier version of this article appeared in “The Prosthetic Aesthetic,” *New Formations* 46, (Spring 2002).

1. Jean Baudrillard, “Transpolitics, Transsexuality, Transaesthetics,” in William Stearns and William Chaloupka, eds., *Jean Baudrillard: The Disappearance of Art and Politics* (New York: St Martin's, 1992), 19–20.
2. Judith Butler, “The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary,” *Bodies That Matter* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 72.
3. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (originally New York: William Morrow, 1970; this edition New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 3.
4. Alice Echols, *Daring To Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 49.
5. Echols, *Daring To Be Bad*, 49.
6. Firestone, “The Women's Rights Movement in the U.S.: A New View,” in *Notes from the First Year*, New York Radical Women, June 1968, <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/wlm/notes/> (2).
7. Firestone, “The Jeanette Rankin Brigade: Woman Power?,” in *Notes from the First Year*, 17.
8. Firestone, “The Women's Rights Movement in the U.S.,” 2–7.
9. Ann Snitow, “Feminism and Motherhood: An American Reading,” *Feminist Review* 40 (Spring 1992), 37.
10. Echols, *Daring To Be Bad*, 112.
11. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 37.
12. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 50.
13. Echols, *Daring To Be Bad*, 151.
14. Snitow, “Feminism and Motherhood,” 35.
15. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 11.
16. Judith Butler, “Merely Cultural,” *New Left Review*, 227 (January/February 1998), 33–44; and Nancy Fraser, “Heterosexism, Misrecognition and Capitalism: A Reply to Judith Butler,” *New Left Review* 228 (March/April 1998), 140–150.

17. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 7.
18. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 9.
19. Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents" [1930], in *Civilization, Society and Religion*, Pelican Freud Library Vol. 12 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 296.
20. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 56.
21. Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (London: Allen Lane, 1974), 398.
22. Renata Salecl, "Introduction," in Renata Salecl, ed., *Sexuation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 9.
23. Colette Soler, "The Curse on Sex," in Renata Salecl, ed., *Sexuation*, 42.
24. Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA. and London: MIT Press, 1994), 207.
25. Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, 416.
26. Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, 415.
27. Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 70.
28. Camilla Griggers, *Becoming-Woman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 47.
29. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 205–6.
30. Naomi Woolf, *Misconceptions* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001).
31. Rachel Cusk, *A Life's Work* (London: Fourth Estate, 2001).
32. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 180.
33. Cusk, *A Life's Work*, 8.
34. See Robin McKie, "Men Redundant? Now We Don't Need Women Either," *Observer* February 10, 2002, 7.
35. Jeremy Rifkind, "The End of Pregnancy," *Guardian* January 17, 2002, 17.
36. Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (London: Women's Press, 1979), 116.
37. Shulamith Firestone, *Airless Spaces* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1998), 59.
38. Subrin quoted in Amy Kroin, "Cases of Mistaken Identity," *The Valley Advocate*, 13 August 1998.
39. Elisabeth Subrin, "Shulie," paper for 1999 College Arts Association panel "Trash: Value, Waste and the Politics of Legibility."
40. Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 4.
41. Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 157.

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PART I

Technology

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Revisiting Reprotech: Firestone and the Question of Technology

Sarah Franklin

If any single argument is associated with *The Dialectic of Sex*, it is Firestone's claim that women will only be freed from the tyranny of biology through new reproductive technologies. This is not an inaccurate attribution—artificial reproduction was central to Firestone's manifesto and the first demand of her "alternative system" is "the freeing of women from the tyranny of their reproductive biology by every means available" including the "more distant solutions based on the potentials of modern embryology."¹ She argued that artificial reproduction is necessary to seize control of human fertility and overthrow the tyranny of the nuclear family,

[T]he elimination of sexual classes requires the revolt of the underclass (women) and the seizure of control of *reproduction*: not only the full restoration to women of ownership in their own bodies, but also their (temporary) seizure of control of human fertility—the new population biology as well as all the institutions of childbearing and childrearing. . . . The reproduction of the species by one sex for the benefit of both would be replaced by (at least the option of) artificial reproduction: children would be born to both sexes equally, or independently of either. . . . The tyranny of the biological family would be broken.²

At the same time it is striking how this single aspect of her 245-page "case for feminist revolution" has become almost synonymous with both Firestone and her influence on feminism,³ and it is noticeable how often formulaic summaries of Firestone's argument are offered as

a reproach to other feminists. As Juliet Mitchell writes in one of the more recent critiques of Firestone, published in 2004,

[M]any texts of second wave feminism of which Shulamith Firestone's (1971) *The Dialectics [sic.] of Sex* was, perhaps, only the most far-reaching, proclaimed that women would only be free from oppression when freed from childbirth. Firestone's argument . . . was made entirely within the terms of the ideology [she was critiquing]: women were mothers, women were oppressed, not to be oppressed meant not to be mothers or, at most, only part-time mothers. It was this thinking [that] led to [the feminist] demand for women to be child-free or birth-free as in Firestone's account.⁴

The prominence of her radical take on reproduction in many accounts of Firestone's work reflects, in part, the extensive debate and division among feminists concerning new techniques of assisted conception that have developed over the past fifty years, and the rapid expansion of in-vitro fertilization (IVF) technology. In the 1980s and 1990s an enormous feminist literature was generated in response to the development of IVF—much of it critical of various aspects of what is now known as reproductive biomedicine, but little of it influential in public debate or policy formation. Retrospectively, Firestone is often read as symptomatic of feminist failure, on this and other fronts, as if her attention to reproductive technology was historically prescient, but analytically misguided.⁵ Firestone was famously controversial in her insistence that “*Pregnancy is barbaric*”⁶—even though she prefaced this view (which she shared with Simone de Beauvoir and other prominent feminist activists including Germaine Greer) by stating that childbirth should remain a choice (and that it was the *option to use the technology*, not the technology “itself” that would enable women to participate more equitably in childrearing). Despite her careful qualifications about both maternity and technology, however, the famous Firestone fallacy appears primarily to circulate as a cautionary tale against all manners of theoretical errors—from technological determinism and biological essentialism to 1970s feminist political naiveté.⁷

In the mid-1980s Maria Mies characterized the dangers of the “technocratic illusion many feminists pursue in the wake of Shulamith Firestone” in a typically hyperbolic account of Firestone's argument:

They think the new reproductive technology and genetics could, if they were in the control of women be used for finally abolishing men (by cloning them off). These women not only fail to realize that

economic/political and military power is not in the hands of Lesbians. . . . Ultimately, all these arguments are based on a biologicistic interpretation of a historical and social relationship. They are without doubt going in the direction of racist and fascist thinking.⁸

Like too many other indignant and unscholarly interlocutors, Mies overlooks the care, intelligence, and skepticism with which Firestone repeatedly qualified her arguments about technology, reproduction, and maternity. The famous feminist fallacy version of Firestone also requires that we forget her repeated proviso that without a revolutionary transformation of society's views of gender, kinship, and marriage new reproductive technologies would be more likely to further subordinate women than to liberate them ("to envision it in the hands of the present powers is to envision a nightmare," she cautioned).⁹ As Debora Halbert points out in a more careful reading of *The Dialectic of Sex* on the question of technology,

Firestone clearly articulated [that] the problem is not [reproductive] technology but the underlying sex-roles that it may or may not reproduce. . . . [T]echnology alone will not liberate women and men, instead there must be a transformation in the way sex-roles are understood, a transformation that can only take place if technology is used to give women choices other than childrearing.¹⁰

In the wake of the thirtieth birthday of the first IVF baby, Louise Brown, and the subsequent births of more than 5 million IVF children worldwide, Firestone's invocation of a technological solution to the "barbaric" fact of childbirth and the widespread circulation of this claim as a means of discrediting both her arguments and those of radical feminism more broadly deserve to be carefully reconsidered.¹¹ It is not enough simply to point out that Firestone insisted that technology alone can never "liberate" social relations. Such a response leaves unanswered the question of why she has been so often portrayed as saying that it can.¹² Ironically, the common misreading of Firestone on this point only confirms one of her manifesto's central claims—that the "dialectic of sex" cannot even be fully comprehended in a society in which questioning its a priori status is so counter-intuitive as to appear "insane." It thus remains important to ask what the positioning of Firestone as a naïve technological determinist and the frequent chastisement of (an oversimplified version of) her claim that new reproductive technologies could bring about women's liberation reveals about the evolution of feminist debate over reproduction and technology? What does that debate look like forty years

later? How have feminist understandings of reproduction, liberation, and technology changed, and how might we reflect on these changes?

In this chapter I suggest that the future imagined by Firestone still offers a more viable and credible vision of socially responsible technological development than many of today's pro- and anti-technology prescriptions, and that its sophistication and prescience, along with other parts of her manifesto, can only be properly appreciated when the negative conditions of social and political understanding she anticipated and described are less powerful than they are today. Far from signifying the naïve "[19]70s feminist" utopianism with which they are commonly equated, Firestone's arguments about technology have stood the test of time, and have usefully been developed further in the work of Donna Haraway, Evelyn Fox Keller, Ruth Hubbard, Anne Fausto-Sterling, and many other prominent scholars within feminist science studies.¹³ In the following reading of Firestone on the question of technology I suggest we do read her as flawed and as "failed," but that this is both a necessary condition of the well-known contradictions that inevitably beset the feminist movement more broadly, and that they are what Firestone told us to expect (and why). Taking a cue from Haraway's successor manifesto (for cyborgs, 1985), I propose an ironic and indicative reading of Firestone, pointing out that she is one of the few feminists to take the emerging science of reproductive biology, and its clinical implications for humans, seriously across a range of issues including birth control as well as fertility technologies (which is what she meant by the "new population biology"). I conclude, somewhat speculatively, with some post-Firestone predictions of my own.

THE DIALECTICS OF TECH

In order to reassess Firestone's claims about reproductive technology, it is first necessary to examine her view of science and technology more broadly, and to consider its importance to the overall analytical structure of *The Dialectic of Sex*. Like sex, the question of technology for Firestone was conceived as a series of dialectics at the levels of sex, class, and culture. For Firestone, these dialectics ran "all the way down"—for example, she argued that scientific knowledge production was dialectical in the sense that it contained the seeds of its own transformation (a view of science popularized through the work of Thomas Kuhn), and, like Marx, that science and technology help set the stage for revolution by providing the conditions to make it both

possible and necessary.¹⁴ Many of the best-known arguments about technology in the contemporary era rely on variations of these dialectical models, such as Ulrich Beck's influential argument that because technology produces not only new goods, but new bads, we need a continual supply of newer technologies to help solve the problems created by the previous generation.¹⁵ Such models can be described as dialectical either in the simple sense of presuming a mutually constitutive interaction between "society" and "technology," or in the more formal Hegelian or Marxist sense that both social patterns and technologies contain their own antitheses. Firestone's model can be read as invoking both of these dialectical models as well as others.¹⁶

Despite its central importance to her argument, however, Firestone is not alone in providing a rather vague, and often contradictory, account of the relationship between technology and social change. This criticism applies to many of her contemporaries and predecessors, including her theoretical bellwether, Engels, since "the problem of technology" remains among the most difficult theoretical challenges of modernity. Raymond Williams provides one of the most eloquent diagnoses available of the problem of theorizing the relationship of modern technology to social change in the opening pages of his book *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. In particular Williams emphasizes the problems of terminology and agency that "isolate" the question of technology—reifying it as an independent causal force in the very process of "explaining" its causal (and indeed casual) agency (i.e., garden variety technological determinism). As Williams writes of the problem of theorizing technology's causality,

It is either a self-acting force which creates new ways of life ("technological determinism") or it is a self-acting force which provides materials for a new way of life ("symptomatic technology"). These positions are so deeply established in modern social thought that it is very difficult to think beyond them.¹⁷

The isolation problem, as Williams points out in his opening chapter "The technology and the society," is partly a product of the very ordinary and habitual tendency to speak of technology as independently agentic—a *sui generis* source of the new.

[P]eople often speak of a new world, a new society, a new phase of history, being created—"brought about"—by this or that new technology: the steam engine, the automobile, the atomic bomb. Most of us know what is generally implied when these things are said. But this may be the central difficulty: that we have got so used to statements of

this general kind, in our most ordinary discussions, that we can fail to realise their specific meanings. For behind these statements lie some of the most difficult and most unresolved historical and philosophical questions. Yet the questions are not posed by the statements: indeed they are ordinarily masked by them.¹⁸

As we shall see, although her arguments about technology are in places both determinist and symptomatic (in Williams's senses), Firestone also developed a more complex analysis of "the Technological Mode," as she called it. Indeed, Firestone's dialectical analysis of technology must be read as one of the central features of her manifesto, as it demonstrates "how the history of culture mirrors the sex dichotomy in its very organization and development." Without understanding the complexity of her analysis of the role of technology in establishing the "triplicate set of preconditions for revolution,"¹⁹ it is impossible to appreciate the full dimensions of her arguments about either cybernation or artificial reproduction.²⁰ Nor is it possible to comprehend the full dialectical structure and scope of Firestone's argument, in which she contends that

Culture develops not only out of the underlying economic dialectic, but also out of the deeper sex dialectic. Thus, there is not only a horizontal dynamic, but a vertical one as well: each of these three strata forms one more story of the dialectics of history based on the biological dualism. . . . We shall soon have a triplicate set of preconditions for revolution. . . . The cultural revolution, like the economic revolution, must be predicated on the elimination of the (sex) dualism at the origins of class, but also of cultural division.²¹

In Firestone's "triplicate" historical analysis, then, technology is presented as both a driver and a symptom, imbricated in a wider process of historical unfolding that is driven by the formal, law-like principles of dialectical materialism "forward" through the stages of thesis and antithesis to synthesis (post-revolutionary society).²² Like most theorists of technology, Firestone offers contradictory accounts of technology, defined as the application of pure science. It is at once a means to an end ("Empiricism itself is only a means, a quicker and more effective technique, for achieving technology's ultimate cultural goal: the building of the ideal in the real world")²³ and a "means" that is embedded in and shaped by social forces ("I submit that not only were the arts and humanities corrupted by the sex duality, but that modern science has been determined by it").²⁴ Firestone argues that technology provides the crucial tools for the mastery of nature, that it

is historically cumulative, and that it is directed while she also depicts the forward march of empirical discovery as unbalanced, out of control and dangerous (indeed, “so dangerous that many scientists are wondering whether they shouldn’t put a lid on certain types of research”). Thus, important though “the machine of empiricism” is to “the ultimate goal” of complete mastery over nature, Firestone’s view of what today might be called technoscience is that it is “completely out of control” and barely conscious:

The machine of empiricism has its own momentum, and is...completely out of control. Could one actually decide what to discover or not discover? That is, by definition, antithetical to the whole empirical process that Bacon set in motion. Many of the most important discoveries have been practically laboratory accidents, with social implications barely realised by the scientists who stumbled into them.²⁵

Citing cloning, the atom bomb, and LSD, Firestone depicts scientific and technological innovation as chaotic, arguing that the very same objectivism and mechanism that define its ethos and give it potency leave it ethically rudderless, “deterministic,” and “soulless.”²⁶ This is a far cry from the uncritical stance toward scientific and technological progress with which she is often associated (indeed it is the reverse). Notably, like more contemporary theorists, Firestone’s view of science and technology is both contradictory and dynamic. She both relies on a model of technological innovation as essential to human progress and argues that science and technology are themselves incapable of producing “the imaginative constructions that preceded by several centuries the corresponding technological acumen.”²⁷ In a classically dialectical manner, the strengths of the Baconian empirical project are also its weaknesses, and in turn are symptomatic of the underlying sex polarity that defines empiricism’s primary deficit—its “‘male’ vices”:

The catalogue of scientific vices is familiar: it duplicates, exaggerates, the catalogue of “male” vices in general. This is to be expected: if the technological mode develops from the male principle then it follows that its practitioners would develop the warpings of the male personality in the extreme.²⁸

The metaphors through which Firestone sought to envisage a synthesis of art and science no doubt clumsily showcase her rather hackneyed male and female principles (a fault exacerbated by her excessive fondness for conjugal and procreative imagery in these sections). It is

also debatable to claim that science is completely out of control, has its own momentum, or largely discovers things by accident. Firestone is prone to the twin tendencies described by Williams of attributing to technology at once too much deterministic *sui generis* momentum and agency, while simultaneously arguing it is the product of cultural values, social institutions, and individual ambitions. And readers of much 1970s feminist theory will recognize a familiar matrix of tiresome polarities at work—somewhat tautologically.

However, while it is often all too easy to pull the rug out from under revolutionary zeal, and the grand narratives of history that are less popular in the contemporary era of situated, local, and contextual understandings, it is perhaps just as easy to overlook the insights that lurk in their interstices, and the broad trends they anticipate. For while it shares many of the failings of logic, coherence and consistency common to forays into technofuturology (one thinks here in particular of how well Haraway has characterized the Salvationist ethic of much writing on both the promises and perils of new technology), Firestone also accurately anticipates much of the work by feminist science and technology scholars on the gendering of knowledge and the complex interplay between cultural values, “pure research,” and the translation of knowledge into applications.

BIOFUTURISM

In short, one of the main lessons to emerge from a careful reading of Firestone is that scientific and technological progress was one of her major political and philosophical themes—and arguably much more so than for most other feminist theorists of her era. She might even be said to have as much in common with other theorists of technology of her era as she does with feminism (one thinks, for example, of Baudrillard or Heidegger). As she says herself, her model of culture is fundamentally based on the realization of human potential through technology fused with a Marxist political utopianism.

For our analysis we shall define culture in the following way: *culture is the attempt to realise the conceivable in the possible*. Man’s consciousness of himself within his environment distinguishes him from the lower animals, and turns him into the only animal capable of culture.²⁹

It is consciousness and the imagination that have enabled humans to become makers of things that do not exist, Firestone argues, claiming

that: “This accumulation of skills for controlling the environment, technology, is another means to reaching the same end, the realization of the conceivable in the possible.”³⁰ Technology, “the accumulation of practical skills,” created new possibilities, and these in turn changed society. In particular the power of Baconian empiricism has enabled science to decipher many of the fundamental laws of nature, so that:

Now, in 1970, we are experiencing a major scientific breakthrough. The new physics, relativity, and the astrophysical theories of contemporary science had already been realized by the first part of this century. Now, in the latter part, we are arriving, with the help of the electron microscope and other new tools, at similar achievements in biology, biochemistry, and all the life sciences. Important discoveries are made yearly...of the magnitude of DNA...or the origins of life. Full mastery of the reproductive process is in sight, and there has been significant advance in understanding the basic life and death process. The nature of aging and growth, sleep and hibernation, the chemical functioning of the brain and the development of consciousness and memory are all beginning to be understood in their entirety. This acceleration promises to continue for another century, or however long it takes to understand the goal of Empiricism: total understanding of the laws of nature.³¹

Such a positive view of scientific reason and technological progress was significantly at odds with the skepticism toward them shared by many of Firestone’s contemporaries within the feminist movement and on the Left. However it is a position that is highly consistent with her reliance on the work of Marx and Engels, the latter of whose “final goal” she quotes twice (first, more fully, in the epigraph) in *The Dialectic of Sex*: “The whole sphere of the conditions of life which environ man, and have hitherto ruled him, now comes under the dominion and control of man, who for the first time becomes the real conscious Lord of Nature.”³²

In the same way that Firestone’s embrace of scientific and technological progress as manifest destiny tips its hat to Marx and Engels, so also it resembles (perhaps even more closely) the Marxist-inspired biofuturism of the interwar period, particularly in Britain, in the work of writers such as H. G. Wells, J. B. S. Haldane, J. D. Bernal, Julian Huxley, Conrad Waddington, and their contemporaries (including Gregory Bateson and Joseph Needham, the latter of whose embryological interests led to his enduring fascination with the history of technology in China). Interestingly, it is also in these early twentieth century writings that ideas about artificial reproduction, cybernation,

space travel, genetic modification, and ectogenesis abound. As cultural theorist Susan Squier has demonstrated, debates about ectogenesis were crucial to both the scientific ambitions and futuristic narratives of many of the United Kingdom's most eminent biologists from the 1920s and the 1930s onward. As John Burdon Sanderson ("Jack") Haldane speculated in his famous 1923 paper "Daedalus, or Science and the Future" (originally read to the Heretics society in Cambridge) ectogenesis could provide a more efficient and rational basis for human reproduction in the future:

[W]e can take an ovary from a woman, and keep it growing in a suitable fluid for as long as twenty years, producing a fresh ovum each month, of which 90 per cent can be fertilized, and the embryos grown successfully for nine months, and then brought out into the air.³³

In addition to being prominent and influential scientists, H. G. Wells, Haldane, and the Huxleys were popularizers of scientific ideas. For them science, technological innovation and a progressive human future were virtually synonymous.³⁴ The terms "clone" and "ectogenesis" were coined by Haldane in the 1920s, as was the term "transhumanism" by Huxley. Notably, British biofuturism was influenced by the ideals of scientific socialism (many of its proponents were members of the Communist Party of Great Britain) and a desire to popularize them through both literature and education. H. G. Wells's socialism is evident, for example, both in his advocacy of science and technology as peaceful, rationalizing forces for good, and, in novels such as *The Island of Doctor Moreau* which critique their potential to engender techno-dictatorships. Across all of these works, the theme of *taking control of evolution* was central, and it appears to have influenced Firestone far more than many of her contemporaries, most clearly in her views about reproduction.

REPRODUCTIVE CONTROL

Firestone's comprehensive vision of a future, more progressive era defined by greater reproductive control seems strongly influenced by the tradition that equated technological innovation with social progress through greater mastery of human evolution—a tradition we might call progressive biofuturism. She was also very influenced by the dominant reproductive control issue of her day—the so-called population bomb. In the 1960s the discourse surrounding population control had much in common with earlier eras in its concern

with the necessity of promoting scientific control of reproduction to bring about an improved future for the human race. Firestone was clearly preoccupied with the “future disaster” of “dangerously prolific reproduction” which she saw as one of the most pressing and unifying challenges of her generation. In the Chapter 10 section “Feminism and Ecology,” she elaborates at length on the seriousness of “the population explosion,”³⁵ describing it as the key issue linking feminist concerns to revolutionary ecology (then in its infancy as a social movement). Both movements, she argued, faced the same essential contradiction which she called “animal life within a technology,” as a result of which:

Humanity can no longer afford to remain in the transitional stage between simple animal existence and full control of nature. And we are much closer to a major evolutionary jump, indeed, to *direction of our own evolution*, than we are to a return to the animal kingdom through which we evolved.³⁶

The trajectory depicted in this passage is a familiar one—technologically assisted progress away from a “simple animal existence” toward “full control of nature” based on improved scientific understanding of its internal mechanisms. Technological innovation and application enable this “evolutionary jump” to *direct our own evolution*. The above passage is striking not only because of its similarity to much of the rhetoric today, in the post-cloning, post-stem cells era, concerning what Ian Wilmut calls “the future of biological control,” in which humans are similarly depicted as taking responsibility for “our own evolution.”³⁷ It is also notable as a feminist contribution to a long tradition of literary and polemical works written by (mostly male) scientists—often embryologists—such as Conrad Hal Waddington, whose *The Man-Made Future*, published in 1978, was stimulated by his friendship with Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead and centrally concerned population growth. In essence, Firestone fuses this focus with the feminist emphasis on the “invisible” structures of sex class that limit our understanding of so many basic problems—including population growth. Thus she also adds to the long tradition of (mostly female) activists and novelists, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Margaret Sanger, and Marie Stopes, in her insistence on an explicit analogy between the current threats to the human species (pollution, famine, overcrowding, etc.) and the *degraded status of the female of the species*. Thus, at its very core, in its emphasis on increasing biological control representing a choice between “simple animal

existence” or “full control of nature,” Firestone invokes a familiar developmental model, according to which the female is the biological base, or stock, of the human species. In a nutshell, reproductive control *is* biological control for Firestone—*both for women and the human race*. This also means that the same imperative propelling the liberation of the human race from its brute biological bondage is what will require women to be given the choice to leave the shackles of their animal nature behind them.

It is important to point out that whatever importance artificial gestation may have had in the vision articulated by Firestone in the *Dialectic of Sex*, the overwhelming emphasis within the feminist political world Firestone helped galvanize was on access to abortion and contraception. The critique of the male medical establishment and in particular the medicalization of childbirth were already becoming prominent concerns within the emerging women’s health movement, and engendering its related critiques of biological determinism, sexism in science, and patriarchal epistemology.³⁸ At the same time, the issue of population control dominated the global planning agenda, as well as the family planning one. The intertwined debates about abortion, contraception, planned parenthood, and population growth all concerned access to technology, improvements in basic research on reproduction, and technological innovation, and espoused a linear technological trajectory of increased biological control in which birth control = population control = evolutionary control.

Taking the demographic experts³⁹ at their word, Firestone described the population issue as “a genuine ecological problem which no number of fancy arguments and bogey statistics can erase.” As a problem that “exists independently of traditional politics and economics” it was thus also one that could not be solved “by traditional politics and economics alone.”⁴⁰ Firestone’s concern about population growth was such that she describes having “previously . . . taken copious notes [and] written whole drafts on the population explosion” for her monograph—only to discard them when she realized that since everyone already knows all of the “frightening statistics” the more relevant task is to understand why these facts are “so consistently ignored . . . despite increasingly dire pronouncements from every expert in the field.”⁴¹ Dismissing the anti-science, anti-technology skepticism of the Left as irresponsible, she mocked her fellow radicals for their false priorities, advising they would be “much more effective by concentrating their *full* energies on demands for control of scientific discoveries by and for the people” than “breast-beating about the immorality of scientific research.”⁴²

Firestone's position at such moments is equivalent to that of the scientist, or the objective historical materialist attempting to lay bare the genuine facts and the "historical truth" that will require "new theories and new movements" as well as "the necessary solutions to new problems."⁴³ Like her British bio-socialist predecessors, Firestone invokes a grand plan for a dialectical process of human evolution led by a combination of progressive social ideals and increasing technological sophistication. (This includes the evolution of a non-sexually polarized science, as outlined in the ambitious Chapter 9, which transcends the stagnant "two cultures" division diagnosed by C. P. Snow to produce "an androgynous culture" that "surpasses...even...the sum of their integrations"⁴⁴). In Firestone's dialectic of tech (or specifically reprotech), it is *the revolutionary capacity of technological progress* that establishes the crucial link between feminism, population control, and ecological sustainability. Greater technological control over both production and reproduction is thus the ultimate ethical and political imperative that links the future of the female to the future of the human race, as the rate of population growth eventually becomes a matter of human survival, against which biology can no longer be protected as a "moral" question. "Thus," she argued,

in view of accelerating technology, a revolutionary ecological movement would have the same aim as the feminist movement: control of the new technology for humane purposes, the establishment of a new equilibrium between man and the new artificial environment he is creating, to replace the destroyed "natural" balance.⁴⁵

In this way, Firestone envisaged technology both as an agent of, and a means of salvation from, social and environmental degradation, while constantly reminding her readers that science and technology could not achieve these ends in the absence of radical social change, including a wholesale regendering of scientific knowledge. It was for this reason, in her view, that a feminist revolution was the necessary precondition for "establishing a new ecological balance" by presenting "an alternative to the oppressions of the biological family" and thus enabling "a total redefinition of the economy" by uniting the productive and the reproductive revolutions with the overthrow of sex and class oppression.

To further these aims, Firestone advocated progressive social evolution away from the rigid and moralistic biologism nostalgically imagined to underpin the "naturalness" of gender, parenthood, the nuclear family, and reproduction. Thus, while she famously argued,

like Beauvoir, that women's experience of childbirth was "barbaric," so too she abhorred the inhumane and diminishing conditions of factory workers, which she saw legitimated within the naturalizing acquisitive logic of capitalism. For both these and other ills she sought technological, sociological, and philosophical solutions, primarily focusing on control of production ("cybernation") and of reproduction (through artificial means).

CYBERNETIC REPRODUCTION

Although Firestone is most well known for her views on cybernetic reproduction and artificial wombs, her interest in fertility was largely based, like Margaret Sanger's, on a desire to inhibit it. As we have seen, improvements in contraception were the template on which Firestone imagined the technological achievements of *in vitro* fertilization, "inovulation," and gestation. Scientifically, these fields were closely linked. Gregory Pincus, who co-invented the Pill, was also one of the first practitioners of IVF in mammals, succeeding with the rabbit in 1934. His colleagues Min Chueh Chang at the Worcester Institute for Experimental Biology and John Rock at Harvard were also early pioneers of both IVF and contraception. The Ford Foundation, which poured money into population control programs, also funded much of the basic biological research both in the United States and the United Kingdom that yielded many of the most well known discoveries in human medicine, veterinary science, and livestock improvement, including embryo transfer, preimplantation sexing, cryopreservation, sperm capacitation, in-vitro maturation of gametes, and in-vitro fertilization.

In Firestone's view, these developments were "more efficient means" only—they extended human capacities for biological control, and "in themselves" were essentially benevolent, liberating, progressive, and desirable. In relation to scientific progress in the field of human reproduction, Firestone appeared unequivocal: more progress and more efficient devices were liberating for women.

Like atomic energy, fertility control, artificial reproduction, [and] cybernation, in themselves, are liberating.... Already we have more and better contraception than ever before in history... Soon we shall have a complete understanding of the entire reproductive process in all its complexity, including the subtle dynamics of hormones and their full effect on the nervous system. Present oral contraception is at only a primitive (faulty) stage, only one of many types of fertility control

now under experiment. Artificial insemination and artificial inovation are already a reality....⁴⁶

The history of the contraceptive pill in many ways confirms Firestone's argument, developed in Chapter 9, that the outcomes of scientific research "in themselves" are less revealing than the process of discovery, investment, and prioritization that precedes and determines them. Without doubt the combined oral contraceptive pill that is today used by more than 100 million women worldwide could have been developed much more quickly if efforts to establish it as a political, economic, scientific or medical priority had not met with precisely the "cultural lag and sexual bias" described by Firestone as an irrational and morally retrograde anxiety about allowing women more reproductive choice and control.⁴⁷ It was largely the efforts of social activists such as Margaret Sanger in the United States and Marie Stopes in Britain that catalyzed proper ("pure") scientific research into human reproduction by internationally recognized experts such as Pincus. Indeed the birth of a new scientific field—reproductive biology—has been described as particularly indebted to Sanger and her vast international network of colleagues and supporters (including prominent scientists and physicians such as Julian Huxley, Robert Dickenson, and Clarence C. Little⁴⁸). As a report on the activities of the Ford Foundation pointed out in the mid-1970s, the successful initiation of research in the reproductive sciences from the 1930s onward was the result of "more than half a century of concerted effort by interested individuals and private organisations, mainly from outside the mainstreams of the biomedical research community."⁴⁹ As medical historian Merrily Borrell summarizes:

The activities of birth control activists and their supporting agencies, and the financial backing of private contributors and foundations, notably the Rockefeller philanthropies, provided an important new stimulus to the development of research on the biology of reproduction in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Biologists were able to claim an enlarged realm of issues for scientific study through their activities as advocates and as investigators for the birth control movement. At the same time they promised as-yet undiscovered possibilities for regulating human reproduction once its physiology was understood.⁵⁰

These new possibilities for reproductive control could only be pursued as part of an "enlarged realm of issues for scientific study" by being shorn of their moral and political connotations, their

constitution as a proper scientific study of physiological facts and biological principles was entirely made possible by the networking, persuasion, international organizing efforts, and material support provided by the birth control movement and its supporters. This interplay between social activism, global political priorities, the material support of philanthropic institutions, and “pure” scientific research illustrates well the “dialectical” complexities Firestone sought to convey, much as they led her to employ somewhat contradictory models of both technology and society in the process.

Among other things, the history of birth control demonstrates Firestone’s keen awareness that new reproductive technologies were unlikely to be used to benefit women without a struggle of the kind Sanger, Stopes and their allies waged for the better part of half a century to develop a safe, reliable and freely available contraceptive pill (a goal that still today remains unmet anywhere in the world, and not for reasons of technological incapacity). As Firestone noted of the history of birth control, “the kinds of research [for which] money [is] allocated . . . are only incidentally in the interests of women when at all.”⁵¹ The anovulatory effects of steroids were discovered in the 1930s by the Penn State research scientist Russell Marker, who synthesized progesterone from sarsaparilla, and later from Mexican yams. Marker was unable to generate support to research contraception from his corporate sponsor, Parke-Davis, and went on to found the Laboratorios Syntex SA in Mexico, which quickly came to dominate the market for therapeutic steroid products. It was not until a decade later that the eminent reproductive physiologist Gregory Pincus met Margaret Sanger, founder of the Planned Parenthood Foundation of America (PPFA), at a dinner party in New York. The PPFA funded Pincus to undertake hormonal contraceptive research, but he too was unable to attract research funding from his corporate partner, G. D. Searle & Co. Not until Sanger interested the independent corporate philanthropist Katharine Dexter McCormick in Pincus’s research could it move forward on a properly funded basis, which it then quickly did, first in animal trials and later in humans. (The first clinical trials were initiated in 1954 by recruiting infertile women volunteers from John Rock’s Brookline clinic.) The FDA approved the first contraceptive pill in 1960. Within three years more than half a million women had used it. However it was not made legally available to unmarried women in all states until 1972.

As Firestone predicted, both contraceptive and reproductive technology are good places to look for technological “revolutions” that have been constrained in their potential to benefit women as a result

of a variety of social attitudes and a large dose of what she described as biological moralism. This remains a crucial aspect of women's relationship to "reproductive technology" if we include in this phrase (as we should) the ability to restrict fertility as well as its promotion. Access to contraception is still denied to the majority of the world's women despite the fact that control over reproduction is one of the most significant factors contributing to successful health, development and agriculture policies. It also correlates positively with increased literacy and education rates for women, which in turn yield higher rates of economic independence.

In contrast to the oft-repeated characterization of Firestone's argument as having put too much faith in the capacity of new reproductive technologies to liberate women, her assessment of their potential precisely anticipated that they would reinforce gender polarity if their use was not accompanied by a radical redefinition of gender, parenthood, and the family. As she presciently warned, "in the hands of our current society and under the direction of current scientists (few of whom are female or even feminist), any attempt to use technology to 'free' anybody is suspect."⁵² Indeed on the topic of the "revolutionary" consequences of new reproductive technologies Firestone is arguably most accurately prescient in her descriptions of their intransigence, as in the case of birth control. Far from naïve, her argument about technology is as focused on its propensity to fail as its potentially transformative capacities, much as later risk society theorists have argued its "dialectic" is defined.

The lessons from Firestone for today's debates about technology thus remain fully available to the conscientious reader, and may indeed offer some of the most enduring insights from *The Dialectic of Sex*—at the core of which is a dialectical model of what Raymond Williams called "the technology and the society." Keeping in mind that a manifesto is formally characterized by compression, and that its rhetoric is inherently hyperbolic, we can read Firestone most instructively by altering her sense of scale. Scaled down to case studies of particular technologies, the essential mechanics of her argument emerge as both cogent and contemporary. Let us conclude, therefore, with two of the cases that most concerned her.

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS, NEW REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES

As has been documented in the many excellent histories available of the development of birth control,⁵³ the pursuit of a safe, reliable, and

efficient means of contraception based on modern scientific principles represents one of the longest and most important feminist struggles to enable women to exercise greater choice and control over their reproductive biology. This effort has yielded a range of options that have brought a significant number of benefits to women, but human fertility control remains a good example of the limits of technology to bring about social change, as well as the limits of social change to bring about technology. Women still bear the vast brunt of the physical, emotional, and organizational labor involved in contraceptive use—whether any devices are available at all, whether they are safe or not, and when they fail. For the majority of the world’s women modern contraceptive measures such as the pill, condoms, injectibles, or IUDS are simply not an option—a situation that is exacerbated by the matricidal policies toward abortion and family planning by many of the world’s wealthiest countries (only family planning based on abstinence was supported under the “pro-Africa” Bush administration—a policy with extremely deleterious consequences for the ability of anti-retroviral treatment to prevent the spread of AIDS as well as for rates of maternal and child mortality).

Access to safe, affordable, or free abortion is similarly limited. Famously, there is no country in the world where women have the legal right freely to make up their own minds about termination or continuation of pregnancy. Thus, despite the emphasis by many modern democratic nations on the protection of various individual rights and freedoms, women’s reproductive rights remain in an essentially pre-modern condition—a condition decried by both Firestone and Beauvoir as biological feudalism.

As generations of feminists have pointed out, no amount of legislative, regulatory, or technological change is likely to significantly increase women’s reproductive rights until gender inequality is less rigidly enforced and policed by the institutions of marriage, the sexual division of labor, and the nuclear family. So long as naturalized patriarchal authority, the codes of competitive (and violent) masculinity, religiously sanctioned sexism, and the everyday fraternal contract celebrated daily on the sports pages remain so dominant as to appear unquestionable, it will be, as Firestone repeatedly argued, impossible (if not “insane”) even to imagine genuine alternatives.

If we remember that the bulk of Firestone’s manifesto was based on an analysis of what has held a certain gender stratification in place for millennia, and in particular on the difficulties of fully comprehending the consequences of women’s subordination (and the structures that uphold it), the emphasis on one aspect of her views of new reproductive technology seems misplaced. Read as an analysis of why women still

do not have adequate scientific and technological support to control their reproductive health, or to more fully and freely exercise reproductive choice, Firestone's account takes some bettering.

The situation presented by the proliferation of assisted conception techniques is very different from the history of the oral contraceptive pill, but equally telling in terms of the ongoing relevance of Firestone's many accurate predictions about the relationship of reproductive control to feminist politics. The most prominent issue here in relation to *The Dialectic of Sex* is the rapid expansion of IVF from the mid-1980s onward, and the increasing range of options enabled by the IVF platform (such as preimplantation genetic diagnosis [PGD], intracytoplasmic sperm injection [ICSI], gestational surrogacy, egg donation, and sex selection). This expansion raises a wide range of issues that exceed the space available here, but that represent a contrasting point of convergence (from birth control) with Firestone's emphasis on technological control of fertility. One of the most divisive issues for feminists is the tremendous popularity of IVF in spite of its significant failings and considerable health costs to women (and, it increasingly appears, risks to their offspring). From one point of view,⁵⁴ new reproductive technologies (NRTS) such as IVF represent an intensification of the exploitation of women via their reproductive capacity. As in Firestone's day, feminist attitudes toward maternity, reproduction and technology differ to the point of easily becoming polarized, and since much of the demand for IVF comes from women, the technique is not incorrectly recognized to give women options they value and seek to maximize.⁵⁵ Similarly, the media enthusiasm for polarizing women's options, and then "debating" them (work vs. family, care for others vs. "having it all," unattractive vs. too sexual, etc.) has not abated. Thus, feminist positions on NRTS have ranged from outright opposition to critical acceptance.⁵⁶ Yet other feminists, in the tradition of the women's health movement, have written feminist guidebooks to new reproductive technologies aimed at empowering women who use them.⁵⁷ Within the genre of feminist literature that is based on a more ethnographic or sociological analysis of IVF, the best adjective to describe the "position" taken by feminist authors over the past two decades, beginning with a string of early studies in the 1980s and early 1990s might be "ambivalent."⁵⁸ Other empirically based studies of women's experience of IVF are more explicitly critical of the technology—essentially arguing that it is, to use Judith Lorber's phrase, a "patriarchal bargain" through which women are subordinated rather than empowered.⁵⁹

Ultimately it would be difficult to know which "side" Firestone might take in the longstanding, extensive, sophisticated, thorough

and often passionate but ultimately inconclusive feminist literature on NRTS (a literature that of course now also includes a literature about itself).⁶⁰ However, the real lesson from Firestone may be that this is not the most helpful question to ask. Indeed it may be the very form of this question which Firestone's early, prescient and sensible analysis of "the question of technology and society" enables us to reconsider. It might also help us understand the enduring hold of the Firestone feminist fallacy, whereby the question of reproductive technology stands for Firestone, and Firestone stands for feminist folly. So long as feminist debates do not have any serious role in public policy-making concerning the regulation of new reproductive technologies we are returned to the persistent situation concerning women's health and birth control, which is that of basic political exclusion.

In relation to a future in which a differentially sexed biological contribution to the reproduction of the species was likely to remain one of the most intransigent obstacles to "the overthrow of sex polarity," Firestone's vision of prosthetic gestation is fundamentally different from today's increasing range of fertility enhancement options. Indeed they are entirely opposite—while the former seeks to eliminate reproductive difference the latter intensifies it. If there is any take-home lesson from the literature on IVF or surrogacy it is that they are costly, painful and labor intensive procedures in which women are not less defined by sex, gender or biology but more so. As a consequence this highly medicalized and increasingly commercialized—but almost wholly unregulated, undocumented and unmonitored—sector, which is largely orientated toward the production of nuclear families (even, controversially, among lesbians⁶¹), is unlikely to become a force that liberates women. What Firestone provides is a helpful set of insights into precisely how and why this would be exactly what we would expect to happen, much as she might be as unlikely as any of her feminist contemporaries to prescribe a solution (though one suspects she would have told women to abandon the take-home baby aspiration along with the quest for a perfect bustline).

CONCLUSION: REEVOLUTION

If the most common response to *The Dialectic of Sex* is a caricature of her position on technology, reproduction, and social change, it is a highly indicative misreading. Like the smoke that indicates a fire, the obfuscation of Firestone points at the core of the problem she set out to diagnose—the "categories that don't apply," the "painful" problem that is "everywhere," in "the very organisation of culture

itself”⁶²—the problem of the unthinkability of anything outside and beyond the legacies of sexual polarization that limit perception, and above all *the invisibility of this problem*. From this perspective, the wide variation in feminist responses to new reproductive technology would be expected, especially when, as Firestone repeatedly points out, neither the production nor the application of such technologies can occur outside of the currently male-dominated institutions of science, medicine, and engineering. Variation, division, equivocation, confusion, and ambivalence would be politically predictable in response to the scale, and stage, of the problem.

Given her enthusiasm for technological and scientific progress, a bridge Firestone might want to see strengthened would be that between women scientists and technicians and the new biological possibilities opened up, for example, by stem cells, artificial gametes, cloning, and genetic modification. To a certain extent this is already beginning to occur, as certain areas of biology become more feminized, and as the crossover region between basic research and applications in the areas of human, plant and animal reproduction expands. In the past a healthy dose of science-skepticism has been justifiably present within feminism—and so it should be given the male-dominated histories of science, medicine, and engineering. But this skepticism must also be ambivalent: it needs to be accompanied by greater integration of feminist perspectives into science, technology design, clinical medicine, and engineering which in turn must involve a greater integration of women scientists into feminism—something that is likely to become more of a priority within feminist scholarship.⁶³ This integration will be especially difficult for women scientists due to the general taboo that still surrounds mere mention of the F-word in most laboratories. However “the science question in feminism” may well prove an increasingly important priority in what the *Economist* has called “the age of biology.”

Ironically, this would mean that an important legacy of Firestone’s manifesto will today be manifest at the level of what is traditionally called a liberal feminist agenda—the concern with issues such as getting more women into science and engineering. Indeed, on this point Firestone herself is both adamant and strikingly contemporary. In her characteristically blithe and searing manner, she summarizes the situation of women and science (or the “Larry Summers question”) in a single paragraph:

The absence of women at all levels of the scientific disciplines is so commonplace as to lead many (otherwise intelligent) people to attribute

it to some deficiency (logic?) in women themselves. Or to women's own predilections for the emotional and the subjective over the practical and the rational. But the question cannot be so easily dismissed. It is true that women in science are in foreign territory—but how has this situation evolved? Why are there disciplines or branches of inquiry that demand only a “male” mind? Why would a woman, to qualify, have to develop an alien psychology? When and why was the female excluded from this type of mind? How and why has science come to be defined as, and restricted to, the “objective?”⁶⁴

In another ironic twist, the most radical proposal in *The Dialectic of Sex*—of eliminating sexual difference—may also be gaining some traction in the post-Dolly context of sex-as-mix, albeit in ways Firestone did not anticipate.⁶⁵ Now that a skin cell can be made into an artificial gamete, and an artificial egg into an artificial sperm, and an embryoid body into a viable offspring, it is no longer clear what “sexual difference” consists of in “strictly biological” terms.

It is similarly worth remembering that although new reproductive technologies have largely been legitimated through the promotion of normative, heterosexual, nuclear families, they have also, in Marilyn Strathern's words, “travelled back” to denaturalize some of these same traditional idioms—such as biological relatedness, which, as Charis Thompson has pointed out,⁶⁶ is now explicitly constructed, or “strategically naturalised,” in complex exchanges of reproductive substance between siblings, across generations, and through complex, multiparty financial transactions. As a consequence, the very meaning of “biology” and “biological” is changing rapidly, and these terms no longer signify conditional or “given” attributes but something more amorphous, malleable, plastic, and fluid.

The true heir to Firestone is Donna Haraway, who has never allowed science, technology, biology or the search for “solutions” to be oversimplified. Properly, Haraway is not a dutiful daughter and would not share Firestone's over-reliance on either bio-pessimism or techno-optimism. Rather, Haraway has devotedly morphed these very categories through (in)tolerance, persistence, love, labor, and imagination. In her own *Cyborg Manifesto* twenty-five years ago, Haraway rejected the ecological sentimentalism of a return to holistic values in favor of something queerer, less predictable, and more difficult in the form of a situated ethics that is at once principled but uncontrolled. As a way-finding ethics, she has forged a feminist political discipline as a form of companionship within the project of *reevolution*. This is an approach that shares with Firestone an enthusiasm both for biology and the technological means of changing it. Above

all it shares Firestone's distaste for substance-based familialism and blood kinship in all of its forms.

Reading Firestone and Haraway together in the first decades of the twenty-first century reminds us of the importance of the constellation of issues they both positioned at the heart of their feminist manifestos, while providing a useful contrast in the way they assembled their arguments. For both Firestone and Haraway the control of biology is inseparable from an evolutionary narrative that is increasingly hybridized with technological Salvationism. Similarly for both theorists the relationship of gender to biology is radically denaturalized in the service of a revolutionary agenda that requires the destruction of familiar categories, identities, and ways of life. In particular the ability to radically reimagine kinship, family, and reproduction is crucial to the liberation of gender categories, and for both theorists a radical rethink of reproduction enables a reimagining of what technological control is in aid of (which is largely the opposite of its normatively presumed function of improving the status quo). Notable too is the extent to which both Firestone and Haraway part company with their feminist contemporaries on "the question of technology" by placing it at the heart of their feminist visions. This is what they have in common, and what sets them apart from their peers, both in their political aspirations (which are revolutionary) and in their theoretical models (which are in some ways more conventional than they seem in their enthusiasm for science and technology). It is also what establishes them as the origin of a tradition of feminist critical engagement with science and technology that is likely to become increasingly more mainstream as the era of reengineered, transgenic, and synthesized biology begins to regender us all.

NOTES

1. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (originally New York: William Morrow, 1970; this edition New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 185 (italics in original).
2. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 11.
3. Indeed this claim is not uncommonly used to represent all of 1970s feminism as a lunatic fringe in what I refer to as the famous Firestone fallacy.
4. Juliet Mitchell, "Procreative Mothers (Sexual Difference) and Child-Free Sisters (Gender): Feminism and Fertility," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 11, no. 4 (2004), 420.
5. Or as if, like Darwin or Mendel, she had accurately predicted the genetic mechanisms of heredity but failed to identify genes (except that this failure was not used to discredit all of evolutionary biology).

6. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 180.
7. This is not to say that Firestone's work has not received more careful critical attention from many leading feminist scholars. See, e.g., Heidi Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," *Capital and Class*, 1979; Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Linda Nicholson, *Gender and History: The Limits of Social Theory in the Age of the Family* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).
8. Maria Mies, "'Why Do We Need All This?': A Call Against Genetic Engineering and Reproductive Technology," *Women's Studies International Forum* 8, no. 6 (1985), 557.
9. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 182.
10. Debora Halbert, "Shulamith Firestone: Radical Feminism and Visions of the Information Society," *Information, Communication and Society* 7, no. 1 (2004), 124–25.
11. Typical feminist dismissals of Firestone include descriptions of her argument as a "technocratic illusion" (Mies) or as "bravely utopian" (Marcus), casting her in the role of naive technological determinist. As Marcus announces with the characteristic indignation of those who have not appreciated the theoretical density of *The Dialectic of Sex*: "It is strikingly and painfully clear that Shulamith Firestone's utopian vision has no purchase among contemporary scholars. Liberation has not come about through contemporary use of reproductive technologies." (Isabel Marcus, "A Sexy New Twist: Reproductive Technologies and Feminism," *Law and Social Inquiry* 15, no. 2 [1990], 268.)
12. The first statement addressed to new reproductive technology in *The Dialectic of Sex* explicitly clarifies that "the new technology, especially fertility control, may be used against [women] to reinforce the entrenched system of exploitation" (11).
13. This chapter builds on two previous publications addressing Firestone's work: Sarah Franklin, *Dolly Mixtures: The Remaking of Genealogy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Sarah Franklin and Celia Roberts, *Born and Made: An Ethnography of Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).
14. What is most important about dialectical models is that they do not propose a simple "impact," or hydraulic, model of technological change—such as those commonly used to describe reproductive technologies by mainstream commentators such as Jürgen Habermas (*The Future of Human Nature* [Cambridge: Polity, 2003]), Frances Fukuyama (*Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* [New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2002]); Bill

- McKibben (*Enough: The Dangers of Being Superhuman* [London: Bloomsbury, 2003]) who (unlike Firestone) posit that society must protect itself against the dangers of runaway technologies such as cloning or preimplantation genetic diagnosis. For further discussion on this issue see Franklin, *Dolly Mixtures*, and Franklin and Roberts, *Born and Made*.
15. See Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1999). Whether it be the carbon economy's costs to the climate, the toxic effects of intensive agriculture on the food chain, or the evolution of multidrug resistant TB, yesterday's technological solutions are inevitably also the source of tomorrow's new risks. However, although Beck's thesis is wrongly described as pessimistic, its optimism does not come from technological potential so much as the possibility of mobilizing it with greater social awareness, specifically different models of risk. Still, Beck's thesis is not wrongly placed in the genealogy of critique of scientific and technological progress associated with the Frankfurt School, the critique of medicalization by figures such as Ivan Illich (*The Limits to Medicine* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975]), and the vein of feminist critique of science extending from Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1979) to Barbara Duden's *The Woman Beneath the Skin: A Doctor's Patients in Eighteenth Century Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).
 16. In contrast to the law-like formalism of Hegelian dialectics, which are based on opposition, it should be remembered that the primary dictionary definition of "dialectic" (according to the Merriam-Webster's) refers to its Greek etymology, from *dialektikos*, meaning "of conversation." Thus, the definition from LOGIC states that: "discussion and reasoning by dialogue as a method of intellectual investigation" as in "the Socratic techniques of exposing false beliefs and eliciting truth" or "the Platonic investigation of the eternal ideas" (Merriam-Webster's). Thus, although Firestone frequently refers to the dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels, which, as in Hegel, describe a developmental sequence from thesis to antithesis to synthesis—and although Firestone makes liberal use of this model—she also uses a wider range of dialectical arguments and strategies, for many of which "dialectical" has the broader meaning of being critical, analytical, or questioning.
 17. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology as Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974), 6.
 18. Williams, *Television*, 1.
 19. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 171.
 20. As the diagrams in the manifesto illustrates, The Technological Mode is the co-parent with the Aesthetic Mode of the "realization of the conceivable in the actual" brought about by a breakdown of

cultural categories and the birth of a new era in which art and science merge, culture disappears, and the “anticulture” revolution begins: “More than a marriage, rather an abolition of the cultural categories themselves, a mutual cancellation—a matter-antimatter explosion, ending with a poof! culture itself” (174).

21. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 171.
22. Firestone’s model of historical change is thus based on the matrix—interestingly a word that means both female progenitor and the “magic square” used for calculation in linear algebra. Matrices have long been used for purposes of prediction and are today increasingly the preferred mathematical modeling device for understanding biological development.
23. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 162–63.
24. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 154.
25. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 164.
26. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 164.
27. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 155.
28. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 165.
29. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 154.
30. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 155.
31. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 162.
32. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 163.
33. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/haldane/works/1920s/daedalus.htm>
34. The 1936 British film production of HG Wells’s “Things to Come” is an excellent example of the optimistic biofuturism of the era. The film begins in war-torn central London and progresses through a barbaric “dark ages” to a future world of peace, order and prosperity. The cast is led by Raymond Massey, who plays visionary scientist John Cabal (1936, and is produced by Alexander Korda and directed by William Cameron Menzies).
35. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 177.
36. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 175–76, emphasis added.
37. Ian Wilmut, Keith Campbell and Colin Tudge, *The Second Creation: The Age of Biological Control by the Scientists who Cloned Dolly* (London: Headline, 2000).
38. Barbara Ehrenreich and Dierdre English, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts’ Advice to Women* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1978); Boston Women’s Health Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves: A Course By and For Women* (Boston: Boston Women’s Health Collective, 1973); and for an overview see Sandra Morgen, *Into Our Own Hands: The Women’s Health Movement in the United States, 1969–1990* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).
39. Among the sources Firestone cites are Lincoln and Alice Day’s *Too Many Americans* (New York: Dell, 1965).
40. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 178.

41. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 176.
42. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 179.
43. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 175.
44. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 174.
45. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 176.
46. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 179. The term “inovation” refers to what is now described as embryo transfer, in other words technologically assisted transfer of a fertilised ovum into the womb to establish a pregnancy.
47. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 180.
48. See for example Lara Marks, *Sexual Chemistry: A History of the Contraceptive Pill* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).
49. See Merriley Borrell, “Biologists and the Promotion of Birth Control Research, 1918–1938,” *Journal of the History of Biology* 20 (1987), 82.
50. Borell “Biologists and the Promotion of Birth Control Research,” 85.
51. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 180.
52. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 185.
53. Lara Marks, *Sexual Chemistry*; Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002); Elizabeth Siegal Watkins, *On the Pill: A Social History of Oral Contraceptives, 1950–1970* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois press, 2002).
54. Although the Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering, founded in the mid-1980s, was defined by a critical feminist perspective on new reproductive technologies, there was never consensus within the network as to the degree of opposition this required. Some favored an all-out ban whereas others favored selective use and some promoted the development of improved services—thus replicating within FINRRAGE much of the same division that characterized the feminist debate over NRTS more broadly. See, e.g., Rita Arditti, Renate Klein, and Shelley Minden, eds., *Test Tube Women: What Future for Motherhood?* (London: Pandora, 1984) and Deborah Steinberg and Patricia Spallone, eds., *Made to Order: The Myth of Reproductive and Genetic Progress* (London: Pergamon 1988).
55. Demand for IVF is widespread globally and cross-culturally. Demand is also often from comparatively well-educated and privileged women, although, as Emily Martin has shown, being middle-class may increase a willingness to conform to both normative and medical expectations. See Emily Martin *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1986).
56. For opposition to NRTS see Gena Corea, *The Mother Machine: Reproductive Technologies From Artificial Insemination to Artificial*

- Wombs* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985); Renate Klein, *Infertility: Women Speak Out About Their Experiences of Reproductive Medicine* (London: Virago, 1989); Barbara Katz Rothman, *Recreating Motherhood: Ideology and Technology in a Patriarchal Society* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989); Jocelynn Scutt, ed., *The Baby Machine: Reproductive Technology and the Commercialisation of Motherhood* (London: Green Print, 1990); Pat Spallone, *Beyond Conception: The New Politics of Reproduction* (London: Macmillan, 1989). For critical acceptance see Michelle Stanworth, ed., *Reproductive Technologies: Gender, Motherhood and Medicine* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987); Barbara Katz Rothman, *The Tentative Pregnancy: How Amniocentesis Changes the Experience of Motherhood* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986); Rayna Rapp, *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus: Amniocentesis in America* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
57. Naomi Pfeffer and Anne Wollett, *The Experience of Infertility* (London: Virago, 1983); Lynda Birke, Susan Himmelweit, and Gail Vines, *Tomorrow's Child: Reproductive Technologies in the 1990s* (London: Virago, 1990).
58. See, e.g., Gay Becker, *The Elusive Embryo: How Men and Women Approach New Reproductive Technologies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Christine Crowe, "‘Women Want It’: In Vitro Fertilization and Women’s Motivations for Participation," *Women’s Studies International Forum* 8, (1985), 547–52; Linda Williams, "‘It’s Going to Work for Me’: Responses to Failures of IVF," *Birth* 15, no. 3 (1988), 153–56; Lene Koch, "IVF: An Irrational Choice?" *Reproductive and Genetic Engineering* 3 (1990), 225–32; Margarete Sandelowski and Christine Pollock, "Women’s Experiences of Infertility," *Journal of Nursing Scholarship* 18, no. 4 (1986), 140–144; Meg Stacey, ed., *Changing Human Reproduction: Social Science Perspectives* (London: Sage, 1990); Maureen McNeil et al., eds., *New Reproductive Technologies* (London: Macmillan, 1991); Sarah Franklin, "Deconstructing ‘Desperateneness’: The Social Construction of Infertility in Popular Media Representations" in M. McNeil, I. Varcoe, and S. Yearley, eds., *The New Reproductive Technologies* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 200–229; "Making Sense of Misconceptions: Anthropological Approaches to Unexplained Infertility," in M. Stacey, ed., *Changing Human Reproduction: Social Science Perspectives* (London: Sage, 1992), 75–91; Marcia Inhorn, *Quest for Conception: Gender, Infertility and Egyptian Medical Traditions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994).
59. Judith Lorber, "Choice, Gift or Patriarchal Bargain?: Women’s Consent to In Vitro Fertilization in Male Infertility," *Hypatia* 4, no. 3 (1989), 31. See also and see Renate Klein *Infertility* and Karen Throsby, *When IVF Fails* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
60. Dion Farquhar, *The Other Machine: Discourse and New Reproductive Technologies* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Karin Lesnik-Oberstein,

- On Having an Own Child: Reproductive Technologies and the Cultural Construction of Childhood* (London: Karnac, 2008).
61. Laura Mamo, *Queering Reproduction: Achieving Pregnancy in the Age of Technoscience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
 62. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 3, 4.
 63. Angela Creager, Elizabeth Lunbeck, and Londa Schiebinger, eds., *Feminism in Twentieth-Century Science, Technology, and Medicine* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
 64. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 154.
 65. For more on the world's most famous clone, Dolly the sheep, see Franklin, *Dolly Mixtures*.
 66. Charis Thompson, *Making Parents: The Ontological Choreography of New Reproductive Technologies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

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From Cybernation to Feminization: Firestone and Cyberfeminism

Susanna Paasonen

The first wave of cyberfeminism—various projects, publications and debates—came in the 1990s. The artist group VNS Matrix, inspired by Donna Haraway's 1985 "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," authored their own cyberfeminist manifesto in 1991;¹ Sadie Plant first theorized the feminization of culture through digital networks and complex connections;² artists, scholars and activists investigated the meanings of bioengineering and technoculture³ and the three biannual Cyberfeminist Internationals (1997–2001) organized by the Old Boys Network (OBN) brought together a mix of people interested in such developments. Combining theoretical speculation, science fiction and artistic experimentation, cyberfeminism became a "brand name" and an umbrella term for a range of practices that did not necessitate identification with feminism. In fact, the cyberfeminists of the 1990s often defined themselves through their differences from and rupture with, rather than connections to or legacies of, the "second wave" as well as the general category of feminism.⁴ With the exception of Haraway, whose manifesto has been well remembered, this tended to involve a certain lack of critical dialogue with the traditions of feminist thought, and feminist investigations into computer cultures and digital technologies in particular.

The cyberfeminist terminology of "internationals," "manifestos" and (digital) "revolutions" might seem to resonate with Shulamith Firestone's theorizations of cybernation (namely, the end of labor brought forth by intelligent machines freeing people to play and create), as outlined in her 1970 *The Dialectic of Sex*—a book animated by

socialist theory and visions of cybernetic feminist revolution. However, on closer inspection both the cyberfeminist irony of the recycling of nineteenth century revolutionary rhetoric, and the articulations of feminist agency (or the impossibility thereof) within cyberfeminist texts, contrast starkly with Firestone's suggestions. Reading *The Dialectic of Sex* in relation to cyberfeminist texts—most notably the work of Sadie Plant, the most widely known and read of the cyberfeminist authors of the 1990s—this chapter considers the different legacies, both implicit and explicit, of Firestone's work in and for cyberfeminism against the backdrop of changing conceptions of cybernetics, embodiment, materiality, computing, and feminism since the 1970s.

ENTER CYBERFEMINISM

Discussing cyberfeminism as a singular entity or movement is admittedly difficult as the term has been used to describe drastically different political positions, practices, and conceptual stances. An interdisciplinary field of investigation, cybernetics is most commonly explained as “the science of control and communication in animal and machine systems.” It was initially developed in the Macy conferences in the 1940s and expanded in the writings of Norbert Wiener,⁵ including the 1943 “cybernetic manifesto” that he co-authored with Julian Bigelow and Arturo Rosenblueth.⁶ As a broad discursive field, cybernetics has enabled the conceptualization of humans, animals and machines as cybernetic systems (characterized by self-organization, performance built on feedback mechanisms, the storage and processing of data) that are analogous to one another in their functions (if not structure). Since the 1940s, cybernetics has influenced a range of disciplines from the computer sciences to robotics, informatics, anthropology, sociology, psychology and media studies, although its legacies are perhaps most evident in theorizations of complexity, in studies of new media, digital culture and biotechnology.

The term “cyberfeminism” refers to “cybernetic feminism,” yet to the degree that the prefix “cyber” was floating rather freely in the early 1990s (most notably in the plethora of references to cyberculture and “cyberspace” in journalism, fiction, advertising and research alike), cyberfeminism can also be seen as referring to feminist activities situated either online or in various immersive electronic environments. Cyberpunk author William Gibson coined the term “cyberspace” in his 1982 short story “Burning Chrome” to describe a disembodied digital parallel reality reached via neural connections where all the world's data is stored. The term was widely adopted as

descriptive of online communications and virtual reality experiences in the course of the 1990s and, as has been the case with cyberfeminism, its definitions have been both broad and diverse.

Jenny Sundén divides cyberfeminism into theoretical and practice-based variations: the former are characterized by philosophical sophistication whereas the latter stand for more hands-on and activist initiatives, with the two coming together in cyberfeminist art projects.⁷ Considering cyberfeminism in terms of the relationship between “cyber” and “feminism,” it can be categorized in at least three overlapping ways. First, I define it as feminist analyses of human-machine relations, embodiment, gender, and agency in a culture saturated with technology. As machines have become increasingly “prosthetic,” both literally and metaphorically, it has become necessary to rethink the categories of the organic and the machine, as well as the implications of conceptualizing human embodiment in terms of genetic data. The use of “cyberfeminism” in this sense, as a broad tactical term, can be found in Haraway’s manifesto, Sadie Plant’s and Rosi Braidotti’s⁸ work, the projects of the VNS Matrix and the Old Boys Network. A second possible definition of cyberfeminism implies critical analyses of cybernetics in relation to feminist thought—that is, cyberfeminism as a critical position that interrogates and intervenes in technoculture. Cyberfeminism understood in this way encompasses Haraway’s writings, Sarah Kember’s work on artificial life, Alison Adam’s historical analyses of artificial intelligence, N. Katherine Hayles’s research on the histories and paradigms of cybernetics,⁹ as well as to the projects of the subRosa (artist and activist) collective that has been working with reproductive technologies, genetics, discourses of race, organ traffic and cell research for the past decade.¹⁰ Third, “cyberfeminism” stands for analyses of the gendered user cultures of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and digital media, their feminist uses, as well as the social hierarchies and divisions involved in their production and ubiquitous presence.¹¹ This is the sense in which cyberfeminism has been most commonly understood in the Anglophone academy, as synonymous with feminist studies of new media. Whereas European (and Australian) articulations of cyberfeminism have tended to be closely connected to media arts and creative practices (workshops, projects and exhibitions), this has perhaps been less evident in North America where cyberfeminism has been appropriated as a scholarly point of identification. In a slightly broader framing, 1990s online riot grrrl projects and bitch manifestos with their politics of parody can be seen as constituting the most public and “popular” of cyberfeminist interfaces.¹²

To the degree that the “cyber-“ prefix remains undefined, it is exceedingly slippery. Standing equally for things computer generated or computer mediated, cybernetic views of the human and postfeminist thought, and seldom explained or contextualized as such, its implications for feminism remain unclear. (Indeed, the manifestos of the Old Boys Network exhort everyone to define their own cyberfeminism, since, according to them, more collective or general definitions are impossible.¹³) Even so, a brief history of the field is possible. According to an often-quoted narrative, cyberfeminism was born in Adelaide, Australia in 1991, as VNS Matrix, a group of four female artists—Virginia Barratt, Julianne Pierce, Francesca di Rimini, and Josephine Starrs—“decided to have some fun with art and French feminist theory.”¹⁴ The VNS Matrix produced “A cyberfeminist manifesto for the twenty-first century” in homage to Haraway’s cyborg manifesto, creatively combining references to Luce Irigaray and cyberpunk fiction in a large billboard that has since become a staple reference in texts on cyberfeminism:

We are the modern cunt
 positive anti-reason
 unbounded unleashed unforgiving
 we see art with our cunt we make art with our cunt
 we believe in jouissance madness holiness and poetry
 we are the virus of the new world disorder
 rupturing the symbolic from within
 saboteurs of the big daddy mainframe
 the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix
 VNS MATRIX
 terminators of the moral code
 mercenaries of slime
 go down on the altar of abjection¹⁵

With their playful appropriation of theorizations of gender difference, the feminist tradition of cunt art and cyberpunk imageries, VSN Matrix’s projects (such as *All New Gen* and *Corpusfantastica MOO*) attracted considerable attention within the digital arts in the early- and mid-1990s. Sadie Plant, who has also been credited with coining the term “cyberfeminism,” used the manifesto’s line “the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix” as the motto for her own cyberfeminist manifesto, “Feminisations: Reflections on Women and Virtual Reality.”¹⁶ In this manifesto and other cyberfeminist texts published mainly between 1995 and 1997, Plant outlined a broad and metaphorical narrative of women and networks from prehistory to the era

of computing. She tied women and machines together as instruments of masculine culture and envisioned complicated and intertwining webs as eventually overturning the current phallogocentric hegemony. Toronto-based media artist Nancy Paterson is the third main figure associated with the term, her 1992 "Cyberfeminism" emphasizing gender diversity and cultural subversion.¹⁷ In fact, Carolyn Guertin sees cyberfeminism as emerging simultaneously in three different (Anglophone) parts of the world: Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada.¹⁸ Such spontaneous co-emergence would certainly be in line with the cybernetic principles of autonomous systems and self-organization.

In 1996, VNS Matrix published their less well known "Bitch Mutant Manifesto," perhaps best remembered for the line "suck my code," reproduced on stickers at the First Cyberfeminist International (held at the Hybrid Workspace of the Documenta X in Kassel) the following year. The First (1997), Next (1999), and Very (2001) Cyberfeminist Internationals provided platforms for artists, activists and theorists to meet, explore and critique digital technologies as well as the discourses in which they have been embedded. In addition to the internationals, there was cyberfeminist activity and networking in different continents, notably Eastern Europe (the Cyber-Femin Club of St. Petersburg, for example, started operating as early as 1994).¹⁹ Similarly, listservs such as the women-only FACES (est. 1997) provided networked forums for the exchange of thoughts and resources.²⁰ These networks were centrally about creative practices: media art projects, provocations, interventions, and (often considerably poetic) manifestos. And while scholars and researchers took part in cyberfeminist activities, their playful nature and ironic rhetoric resisted confinement in academic discourse.

The cyberfeminist projects of the 1990s appropriated the terminology of revolutions, internationals and manifestos with gusto, yet these practices and strategies had very little to do with the cybernetic socialism outlined by Firestone. Cyberfeminists invoked "revolution" as metaphor for the cultural transformations brought forth by digital technologies. Their strategies were ironic and parodic, their emphasis was on differences and complexities, and the revolutions they proposed were conceptual rather than material or structural. And indeed in cyberfeminist texts of varying theoretical, conceptual, and political frameworks, references to Firestone have been notably scarce. Debora Halbert is unusual in conceptualizing Firestone as the precursor to Haraway's cyborg manifesto and contemporary cyberfeminist activities.²¹ Yvonne Volkart notes in passing that "there were feminists

back then [in the 1970s] who strongly believed in the liberating impacts of new technologies,” implicitly acknowledging Firestone;²² Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein, in their introduction to *CyberFeminisms*, see Firestone’s views of reproductive technology as ungrounded in their optimism.²³ Given that cyberfeminist projects—both scholarly and artistic—have been very much concerned with reproductive technologies, biotechnologies and the female body, the omission of Firestone is noteworthy. More specifically, it is telling concerning the paradigmatic shifts that have occurred in ways of thinking about embodiment, gender, and technology since the 1970s.

RATIONAL CYBERNATION

In the 1970s, *The Dialectic of Sex* stood somewhat alone in its faith in the feminist possibilities of technology and cybernetics.²⁴ While radical and cultural feminists (such as Mary Daly) emphasized connections and alliances between women and nature (as opposed to men and technology), Firestone wanted to overcome such distinctions in her model of socialist cybernation. Firestone’s argument was for a cybernetic feminist revolution involving the subversion of work, family structure, gender, and sexuality. This would lead to a cybersociety based on women’s control over technology, ecological responsibility and a radical redefinition of society (labor, family, love, leisure) both on the level of production and reproduction.²⁵ The contemporary work most closely related to Firestone’s book was Marge Piercy’s 1976 science fiction novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*, which depicted a technologically advanced hippie commune of the future. Firestone was writing a year after the launch of ARPANET (the precursor of today’s Internet), a network connecting governmental and research institutions in the United States and before the invention of e-mail or the microcomputer. Her work was more strongly influenced by Marxist theory (and re-readings of Friedrich Engels in particular) and cybernetic discourses of the late 1960s than the emerging discourses on networked communications or prosthetic human-machine relations that became central to later cyberfeminist projects.

The discussion of cybernation and cybernetic socialism in *The Dialectic of Sex* is indebted to the social cybernetic experiments in countries such as the Soviet Union, GDR, and Allende’s Chile.²⁶ In these socialist countries, cybernetics was embraced for its ability to provide a theory for operating, governing, and controlling centrally planned economies.²⁷ Seen as a rational scientific theory of the world

and society, cybernetics—which had initially been a relatively controversial and limited field of investigation—grew in the Soviet Union in the course of the 1960s. Slava Gerovitch points out how cybernetic concepts “acquired the degree of generality characteristic of ultra-flexible categories of dialectical materialism,” and “cybernetics” itself becoming something of a buzzword, a fashionable trend.²⁸ This tendency—combining cybernetics with Soviet Marxism—gained popularity internationally in the social sciences as well as in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s.²⁹

In studies of media and society, cybernetic terminology was employed in discussing not only computer technology or the emerging information society, but also electronic media such as television and video. Marshall McLuhan’s widely read and translated *Understanding Media* (1964) was particularly influential in media studies and contemporary popular discourses.³⁰ Drawing on cybernetics, McLuhan saw an analogy between human nervous systems and electronics, and defined electronic media as “extensions of man” eventually giving rise to the technological simulation of consciousness. David Tomas notes how “it was a short step from invoking a functional analogy between machines and human organisms in the 1940s to the 1960s and Marshall McLuhan’s influential notion of a technology that functioned as an ‘extension or self-amputation of our physical bodies.’”³¹ The extended feedback models employed by McLuhan erased differences between automated machines and living organisms, and helped in disseminating cybernetic principles and vocabulary to a non-specialized general public.³² McLuhan’s influence is evident, for example, in the American video movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which made extensive use of cybernetic metaphors to describe the possibilities of video technology for transforming not only the field of mass media but also forms of human consciousness. In works published in the *Radical Software* journal (1970–1974), people and video technology were seen as forming cybernetic systems, a fundamentally novel, intimate and interactive relationship between the user and the new medium.³³ The semantically flexible use of the “cyber-” prefix began in the 1960s. By the early 1970s, critic David Antin was already referring, in a rather fatigued way, to “cybernetic media” and “cybernation” as “cyberscat.”³⁴ Cyberscat resurfaced three decades later, with some modifications, in the context of computer networking, as the “cyber-” prefix was added to a range of phenomena and practices, (cyber)feminism included.

Writing on the video movement, Deirdre Boyle points out that in the early 1970s there was a general belief in the forthcoming cybernetic

society, as well as in the need for and possibility of human evolution through control over the development of computer technology and electronic media.³⁵ With its vision of an ultra-rationalized, goal-oriented, and automated socialist cybersociety, *The Dialectic of Sex* seems to share these beliefs and to participate in the spread of a generalized cybernetic discourse.³⁶ Firestone's treatment of cybernetics was inspired by contemporary theories of social planning and the reorganization of society with the aid of technology and science, yet her suggestions were speculative and vague at best: domestic work was to be automated, computers were to serve as information reserves, most work was to be carried out by machines and, once traditional nuclear family units were destroyed, people were to live in shared accommodation with collective social spaces for leisure and for learning. In a cybernetic society, electronic media would function as memory and data banks, and learning would shift from remembering facts to learning the skills of programming and media use.³⁷ In other words, Firestone envisioned cybernetic futures broadly, with relatively little attention to nuances.

Firestone's sketchy model of future society is a highly rationalized one in the sense of drawing on centralized planning and advances in the natural sciences. Once the laws of nature have been uncovered and nature has been mastered, humankind can be freed, but only through a feminist revolution that overturns society, eliminates sexual classes (as well as those based on class or race), breaks down biological family structures based on ownership and rigid power relations, and redefines the concept of labor. At the core of this reorganization lie reproductive technologies capable of disrupting familiar practices of procreation and kinship. All in all, technology is crucial to the social transformations envisioned by Firestone: "the new science of cybernetics [develops] machines that may soon equal or surpass man in original thinking and problem-solving."³⁸

In addition to its relation to social cybernetics, *The Dialectic of Sex* connects with cybernetic discourses in its rethinking of "the natural" and the technological, especially in the context of female embodiment and procreation. Firestone's embrace of biotechnology gives rise to hybrid embodiments detached from notions of the natural body. In fact *The Dialectic of Sex* has been mostly remembered (as well as criticized) for its discussion of reproductive technology.³⁹ Kathryn Woodward notes that while studies of information society and communications technology became part of academic debate in the 1970s, this was less the case with the cultural implications of biotechnology. These were taken up mainly by feminist thinkers concerned with

body politics, and Firestone was one of the few writers to address developments such as in vitro fertilization, surrogate mothering, or birth control and their meaning for gendered social relations and the politics of biological reproduction.⁴⁰

FROM CYBERNATION TO FEMINIZATION

Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein, defining their CyberFeminism in a radical feminist paradigm, see Firestone's attitude to technology as similar to Sadie Plant's "uncritical" and "libertarian" approach.⁴¹ This critique is justified in the sense that Firestone saw technology as progressive and liberating unless improperly used, yet misleading inasmuch as hers was certainly a claim for feminist agency, social change, and political struggle. Her faith in the transformative potential of technology was conditional and based on women's ability to gain control over it.⁴² In contrast, Sadie Plant has argued for the impossibility of female agency and seen the process of feminization as both automatic and spontaneous. Plant's theory of feminization assumes an intimate affinity between women and increasingly complex technology, both of which have been instruments and tools for (male-dominated) culture. However, women and machines are growing out of control: "tools mutate into complex machines which began to learn and act for themselves [...] As media, tools and goods mutate, so the women begin to change, escaping their isolation and becoming increasingly interlinked."⁴³ For Plant, feminization is a process parallel to the history of women's liberation, but one foreclosing intentional agency: "*Cybernetics is feminisation*. When intelligent space emerges alongside the history of women's liberation, no one is responsible. That's the point, the fold in the map, where architects get lost in the pattern. *Self-guiding systems were not in the plan*."⁴⁴

According to Plant, increasing cultural complexity and the ubiquity of intelligent machines spell the collapse of the phallogocentric economy.⁴⁵ Since feminization is an organic process independent of any activism, the cyberfeminism surfacing in its course "may not be feminism at all."⁴⁶ In opposition to Firestone's model of cybernation, which frames technology as purely instrumental, facilitating a new kind cybernetic socialism and freeing people from wage labor and the dictates of biology if properly deployed, Plant understands technology as an active agent of cultural transformation, part and parcel of feminization as a tendency toward disorder, rhizomatic connections, and the erosion of tidy systems.⁴⁷ Since feminization assumes the shattering of the ideals of rational subjectivity and human control over nature, its

logic is antithetical to that of the cybernation that assumes rational planning and complete mastery over nature and its secrets. And whereas for Firestone cybernation involves a dialectical process destroying both the “female” aesthetic mode and the “male” technological mode of culture that will result in androgynous existence, feminization implies the victory of the feminine over the masculine. Firestone’s one-sided aesthetic mode, defined as “subjective, intuitive, introverted, wishful, dreamy or fantastic, concerned with the subconscious (the *id*), emotional, even temperamental (hysterical)”⁴⁸ closely resembles the soon-to-be-victorious feminine, celebrated by Plant as unpredictable, multiple and complex.

In the framework of feminist thought, Firestone and Plant represent the different, even opposing, positions of one kind of gender theory versus a certain sexual difference theory. According to Rosi Braidotti, the former sees the feminine as “a morass of metaphysical nonsense” that should be abandoned in favor of androgyny, while the latter celebrates the feminine pole of the sexual dichotomy.⁴⁹ Importantly, the two authors represent opposite stances on the question of embodiment and the materiality of the body. For Firestone, biology is the crux of women’s oppression and can only be overcome with the aid of technology. For her, it is necessary to “free humanity from the tyranny of its biology. Humanity can no longer afford to remain in the transitional stage between simple animal existence and full control of nature.”⁵⁰ Women’s reproductive capacity is the cause of the original division of labor, an “oppression that goes back beyond recorded history to the animal kingdom itself.”⁵¹ However, as science and technology move toward uncovering the laws of nature, it becomes possible to fight back: through control over technology, women can assert the ownership of their own bodies. For Firestone, a socialist feminist future requires the overcoming of the limitations of biology and the materiality of bodies. For Plant, however, the irreducible complexity of the biological represents a way *out* of masculine culture as the feminine finds its equivalent in rhizomatic cybernetic communications.

Reading Firestone and Plant in parallel the differences in their ways of thinking about gender, cybernetics, and cultural transformation are strikingly evident. While Firestone proposes cybernetics as a rational theory of social planning and control, Plant considers self-organizing systems as autonomous becomings and complexities; Firestone considers embodiment primarily as limitation and constraint, while Plant emphasizes bodily pulsations and diverse sensory pleasures; Firestone envisages cultural transformation based on

political action, while Plant imagines automatic, evolutionary developments. These differences are not merely a question of altering theoretical appetites but rather paradigmatic shifts in ways of thinking about materiality and human-machine relations. As cybernetic theory has evolved, considerations of self-organization and complexity in particular have challenged the role (and possibility) of centralized planning, control and organization.⁵² Meanwhile, the view of biology and embodiment as limitations to be overcome remains rather unpopular in feminist theory that has been preoccupied with the possibilities of “thinking through the body” since the 1970s. This is also the case with new materialist thinkers such as Plant who, drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze, are interested in the potentiality of bodies while distancing themselves from a focus on the individual and the subjective. In this framework, people and machines become conceptualized as assemblages in a perpetual stage of becoming. Computer technology is not something one merely uses but something that transforms ways of being in the world and opens up unpredictable forms of experience.

Whereas Firestone’s feminist revolution aimed at changing the material conditions of life, in the 1990s the rhetoric of revolution became circulated in relation to information and communication technology and digital culture. Here it was technology that was seen to revolutionize culture and society. In Plant’s work, information networks are seen as emancipatory in themselves, subversive in terms of gender structures and gendered power relations. Whereas in Firestone’s model, access to computers was enabled by collective computer centers, for Plant the digital revolution is something one buys into (aided by the plummeting prices of hardware and software). This widening access to technology, like feminization in general, is automatic.⁵³ Indeed, revolution, in the sense discussed by Firestone, is plain impossible: change can not be regulated or determined by any single factor or group, as “cultures and the changes they undergo are far too complex to be attributed to attempts to make them happen or hold them back.”⁵⁴ There are no longer centers of operation, defining causes, bases, starting points, reasons, or explanations for cultural change. Ultimately, “revolution has been revolutionized” and women’s liberation has become dependent on digitization rather than political action.

CYBERFEMINIST IRONY

Debora Halbert sees *The Dialectic of Sex* as a precursor to Haraway’s manifesto in its “attempt to move beyond biology,” to break down

traditional gender relations and divisions of labor.⁵⁵ Haraway's cyborg manifesto aims to bridge differences and borderlines drawn within feminist theory concerning sexuality, "race" and class, and suggests irony and alliance as alternatives to celebrations of a "natural" unity and generalizations about the category of women. The cyborg stands as a metaphor for the feminist subject, a boundary figure that moves across the hierarchical categories of the natural and the artificial, the organic and the technological without positioning technology as the masculine other of women and nature, as was the case in some cultural feminist writings. While there are some points of contact between Firestone's and Haraway's articulations of postgender technological embodiment, the latter's understanding of biology as endless variation certainly differs drastically from the former's view of biology as fixed and limiting. Haraway's is a "fleshy world" where "human histories are always and everywhere enmeshed in the tissue of relationship where all relators aren't human" and in which the division of nature and culture represents a form of violence.⁵⁶ The figure of the cyborg does not represent human mastery and control over biology or technology so much as the fundamental intertwining of the organic and the inorganic, and the impossibility of marking nature apart from culture. Haraway proposed the figure of the cyborg to counter stories of fixed origins and natural states. Firestone was equally irreverent concerning things defined as natural, but differs from Haraway in conflating the natural with the biological and seeking mastery over both. According to Haraway, Firestone's lack of a vision of a feminist body politic led to her "reducing social relations to natural objects, with the logical consequence of seeing technical control as a solution. [...] That is, she accepted that there are natural objects (bodies) separate from social relations. In this context, liberation remains subject to supposedly natural determinism, which can be avoided in an escalating logic of counterdomination."⁵⁷ In the end, its emphasis on political agency, socialist planning, rational cybernetics, control over nature and belief in progress do not seem to have made *The Dialectic of Sex* very appealing to subsequent cyberfeminist thought. Haraway's cyborg manifesto, on the other hand, has become something of an iconic reference—even, as Nathalie Magnan put it at the 2001 Very Cyberfeminist International, a "holy text."

Cyberfeminist politics has been scattered and practiced on the micro level in networking, women's technology workshops, and various kinds of critical interventions. And while cyberfeminists have tended to share a certain enthusiasm toward new technologies and

their possibilities, there is an equal, if not more prominent emphasis on irony and difference (as already elaborated on in Haraway's manifesto). In her presentation at the first Cyberfeminist international, artist Corrine Petrus explained that she did not identify as feminist "but maybe I want to call myself a cyberfeminist. There is one thing I like very much about Cyberfeminism and this is, that nobody knows what it is exactly. It has no boundaries yet."⁵⁸ Here, the "cyber-" prefix stands for novelty, opposed to a feminism assumed to lack flexibility and semantic openness. And as María Fernandez and Faith Wilding have pointed out, many cyberfeminists have felt ambivalent and uncomfortable toward feminisms.⁵⁹ This may partly be a consequence of an unfamiliarity with feminist histories and paradigms, but it is articulated only in terms of the supposed fixity of second wave feminism. In her introduction to the proceedings of the first Cyberfeminist International, Cornelia Sollfrank defined cyberfeminism as alternative to "same-old feminism" and "traditional feminist theory and practice."⁶⁰ In other words, the diversity and freedom of cyberfeminism was figured at an early stage against a "feminism" seen as inaccessible in its academic forms and monumental, essentialist, anti-technology, and anti-sex in its second wave incarnations. It is perhaps ironic, then, that cyberfeminist practices have involved tactics so familiar from the 1970s, such as separatism or cunt art.⁶¹

The cyberfeminist internationals encouraged cyberfeminists to articulate their own personal agendas and politics. For those drawing on Sadie Plant's work, this meant poetic and "agentless" versions of feminism, whereas for others cyberfeminism was essentially a form of grassroots activism and struggle over technological agency; others still understood it as feminist media studies. Such customized definitions mean that "cyberfeminism" is a term of unusually flexible application. The common nominators of cyberfeminism have been found mainly in irony and opposition to a variety of targets. Cornelia Sollfrank (of the OBN) sees irony as the quintessential cyberfeminist strategy, enabling the coexistence of contradictory views. Suspended in productive tension, ironical cyberfeminism "is not just a rhetorical strategy, but also a political method."⁶² This irony is certainly evident in the cyberfeminist appropriations of nineteenth century socialist terminology, from manifestos to internationals. The First Cyberfeminist International of 1997 agreed not to define cyberfeminism and produced instead "The 100 anti-theses of cyberfeminism" (100 things that cyberfeminism is not). According to these, cyberfeminism is not—among other things—a fragrance, separatism, for sale, abject, a picnic, caffeine-free, anti-male, or a banana.

Irony was also an essential element of Haraway's cyborgs, the art projects of VNS Matrix and OBN's politics. Targeting "old boys networks," male dominance in gaming and cyberpunk imagery (VNS Matrix), as well as stereotypes attached to feminism (as with the French group *Chiennes de garde*), cyberfeminist irony has assumed a critical stance against the social divisions and hierarchies related to new technologies. Irony is a matter of interpretation, of recognizing something as ironic, and there is little guarantee that the views of people producing and reading the texts meet. Indeed, irony involves moments of misunderstanding and messy meaning⁶³ and it may well function as a kind of boomerang if ironic distance is erased and things are read literally. Saying one thing and meaning another is a means of joining contradictory views but it also has the effect of creating distance. In the case of cyberfeminism, this may mean distance toward cyber/technoculture and feminism alike. It may also be that irony functions more efficiently in the context of experimental media art projects than in the genre of academic writing.

The Cyberfeminist Internationals may be history, but cyberfeminists workshops are still being organized at electronic arts events. Cyberfeminist writings are still being published, broadening investigations into specific geographical regions,⁶⁴ daily practices,⁶⁵ and body politics.⁶⁶ Cyberfeminism has an important legacy in media art and activism, and the term continues its viral existence in scholarly writing. As computer technology and networked communications have become increasingly mundane and ubiquitous, cyberfeminism has lost a large part of its utopian and futuristic orientation. Rather than writing manifestos, or investigating virtual spaces or future embodiments, cyberfeminists have become concerned with specific location-based practices, social hierarchies, and global inequalities, a development that was already visible in the last Cyberfeminist International (2001).⁶⁷

IN CONCLUSION: AN AFFECTIVE VOICE

Feminist readings of and references to earlier research often tend to be rather ungenerous. Writing in the late 1980s, Teresa de Lauretis argued that feminist theory had already become narrated as a tale of progress.⁶⁸ As texts are situated in a reductive opposition toward each other, the more recent ones can be posed as the "new and much improved" version of feminist theory—or, as de Lauretis ironically remarked, as the "dark horse and winner of the feminist theory contest."⁶⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank have pointed to

a similar problem in their discussion of “the moralistic hygiene by which any reader of today is unchallengeably entitled to condescend to the thought of any moment in the past”⁷⁰: as theory formation has gone through paradigmatic shifts, earlier work easily appears quaint.

Something of this kind seems to be at play in the ways that numerous cyberfeminist authors have detached themselves from the “second wave” while largely failing to engage in a productive dialogue with previous feminist analyses of nature, culture, gender, and technology. As connections to earlier feminist research are cut or ignored, it may become difficult to see what is meant with “feminism” as well as how exactly it connects with the prefix “cyber.” Pointing out the assumed lack of theoretical sophistication in older texts may be an easy sport but it is not a particularly helpful one in terms of feminist knowledge production and its disciplinary histories.

Reading feminist work on gender and technology produced during the past four decades, *The Dialectic of Sex* continues to stand out. Engaging with the book as an intellectual challenge, one may begin to see “What it was possible to think or do at a certain moment of the past that it no longer is.”⁷¹ For me, this is where the continuing value of the work lies: in an ambitious view of a future society that is not confined to negative critique of existing conditions but tries to think differently about the very fundamentals of society in terms of labor, family, and work.

In comparison with cyberfeminist texts rife with irony, gynocentric metaphors, and poetic references to cultural theory, Firestone’s book has an appeal of its own, something that could, following Melissa Gregg, be conceptualized as Firestone’s affective voice. Gregg refers to a particular contagious affect in the forms of address adopted by an author that has the power and effect of engaging readers and activating them into critical practices—be these textual or other.⁷² Sarah Franklin has suggested that the importance of *The Dialectic of Sex* lies in its analysis and critique of gender and discrimination more than in the concrete solutions that it proposes. The appeal of Firestone’s affective voice could well be added to the list: committed to rethinking culture, technology, gender, and society, it is occasionally blunt, seldom ironic, incessantly passionate, and contagious in its urgency.

NOTES

1. VNS Matrix, “Cyberfeminist manifesto for the 21st century” (1991), OBN Reading Room, http://www.obn.org/reading_room/manifestos/html/cyberfeminist.html; Haraway’s manifesto, originally published in *The Socialist Review*, was reprinted as “A Cyborg Manifesto,”

- in Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), 149–81.
2. Sadie Plant, “The Future Looms: Weaving Women and Cybernetics,” in Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows, eds., *Cyberspace, Cyberbodies, Cyberpunk* (London: Sage, 1995); Sadie Plant, “Feminisations: Reflections on Women and Virtual Reality,” in Lynn Hershman Leeson, ed., *Clicking In: Hot Links to a Digital Culture* (San Francisco: Bay Press, 1996), 37–8; Sadie Plant, “On the Matrix: Cyberfeminist Simulations,” in Rob Shields, ed., *Cultures of Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies* (London: Sage, 1996); Sadie Plant, *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (London: 4th Estate, 1997).
 3. subRosa, <http://www.cyberfeminism.net/>.
 4. See Faith Wilding, “Where’s the Feminism in Cyberfeminism?,” *n. paradoxa, international feminist art journal* 2 (1998); María Fernandez and Faith Wilding, “Situating Cyberfeminism,” in María Fernandez, Faith Wilding, and Michelle M. Wright, eds., *Domain Errors! Cyberfeminist Practices* (New York: Autonomedia, 2003); Susanna Paasonen, *Figures of Fantasy: Internet, Women and Cyberdiscourse* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 200–207.
 5. Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (New York: Da Capo, 1954/1988); Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, second edition (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1948/1999).
 6. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 93–94.
 7. Jenny Sundén, “What Happened to Difference in Cyberspace? The (Re)turn of the She-Cyborg,” *Feminist Media Studies* 2 (2001); also Jenny Sundén and Malin Sveningsson Elm, “Introduction,” in Malin Sveningsson Elm and Jenny Sundén, eds., *Cyberfeminism in Northern Lights: Digital Media and Gender in a Nordic Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 3–8.
 8. Rosi Braidotti, “Cyberfeminism with a Difference” (1996), http://www.let.uu.nl/womens_studies/rosi/cyberfem.htm; Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002).
 9. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*; Donna J. Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Sarah Kember, *Cyberfeminism and Artificial Life* (London: Routledge, 2002); Alison Adam, *Artificial Knowing: Gender and the Thinking Machine* (London: Routledge, 1998); Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*. It should be noted, however, that scholars such as Adam have deliberately distanced themselves from cyberfeminism; see Alison Adam, “What Should We Do with Cyberfeminism?,” in Rachel Lander

- and Alison Adam, eds., *Women in Computing* (Exeter: Intellect Books, 1997). This tentative categorization of the three meanings of cyberfeminism and the writers who exemplify them are therefore my own.
10. On their Web site, subRosa introduce themselves as “a reproducible cyberfeminist cell of cultural researchers committed to combining art, activism, and politics to explore and critique the effects of the intersections of the new information and biotechnologies on women’s bodies, lives, and work.” See also subRosa, María Fernandez, Faith Wilding, and Michelle M. Wright, “Introduction: Practicing Cyberfeminisms,” in María Fernandez, Faith Wilding, and Michelle M. Wright, eds., *Domain Errors! Cyberfeminist Practices* (New York: Autonomedia, 2003).
 11. See, e.g., Judith Squires, “Fabulous Feminist Futures and the Lure of Cyberculture” (1996), in David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, eds., *The Cybercultures Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000); Claudia Springer, *Electronic Eros: Bodies and Desire in the Postindustrial Age* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).
 12. Sundén, “What Happened to Difference in Cyberspace?,” 222–23; Paasonen, *Figures of Fantasy*, 207–25.
 13. Cornelia Sollfrank, “Editorial,” in Cornelia Sollfrank and Old Boys Network, eds., *First Cyberfeminist International* (Hamburg: OBN, 1998), 1; also Claudia Reiche, “Editorial,” in Claudia Reiche and Verena Kuni, eds., *Cyberfeminism: Next Protocols* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), 9.
 14. Julianne Pierce, “Info Heavy Cyber Babe,” in *First Cyberfeminist International*, ed. Cornelia Sollfrank and Old Boys Network (Hamburg: OBN, 1998), 10.
 15. VNS Matrix.
 16. See Plant, “Feminisations.”
 17. Sundén, “What Happened to Difference in Cyberspace?,” 221–22.
 18. Carolyn Guertin, “Gliding Bodies: Cyberfeminism, Interactivity and Slattery’s Collabyrinth” (2003), *Art Women*, <http://www.artwomen.org/cyberfems/guertin/index.htm>.
 19. Alla Mitrofanova, “How to Become a Cyberfeminist?,” in Cornelia Sollfrank and Old Boys Network, eds., *Next Cyberfeminist International* (Hamburg: OBN, 1999), 12.
 20. See Wilding, “Where’s the Feminism in Cyberfeminism?”
 21. Debora Halbert, “Shulamith Firestone: Radical Feminism and Visions of the Information Society,” *Information, Communication & Society* 1 (2004).
 22. Yvonne Volkart, “The Cyberfeminist Fantasy of the Pleasure of the Cyborg,” in Claudia Reiche and Verena Kuni, eds., *Cyberfeminism. Next Protocols* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), 98.
 23. Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein, “CyberFeminism: An Introduction,” in Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein, eds., *CyberFeminism: Connectivity, Critique + Creativity* (Melbourne: Spinifex, 1999), 2–3.

24. Hilary Rose, *Love, Power and Knowledge: Towards a Feminist Transformation of the Sciences* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), 1.
25. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (originally New York: William Morrow, 1970; this edition New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 184–186.
26. Slava Gerovitch, *From Newspeak to Cyberspeak: A History of Soviet Cybernetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Benjamin Robinson, “Socialism’s Other Modernity: Quality, Quantity and the Measure of the Human,” *Modernism/Modernity* 4 (2003); Eden Medina, “Designing Freedom, Regulating a Nation: Socialist Cybernetics in Allende’s Chile,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 3 (2006).
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Impossible, Admirable, *Androgyne*: Firestone, Technology, and Utopia

Caroline Bassett

*The difference between what is almost possible and what exists is
generating revolutionary forces¹*

It may well be, however, that the story has to be told differently...²

A human virgin birth seems increasingly possible.³

As I write this chapter confirmation drifts in from the radio; forty years on Shulamith Firestone's hopes for new forms of automated reproduction have not been realized—but neither have they been abandoned. Despite many developments in reproductive technology, they remain, as they were in her time, “almost possible.” On closer listening it turns out that humans would not be the first of the vertebrates to get their act (un)together: Komodo dragons, whose island living easily isolates them, have been doing it for ages. Afterward, the dragon has sex with its progeny and things return to their usual oviparous state. The *Radio 4* conclusion is that “nature always finds a way.” For dragons, perhaps; for humans the agency enabling various forms of nonstandard reproduction is likely to be techno-science, a means through which we change our sense of what nature is.

Arguments continue around what such interventions might do to the way in which humans understand sex difference and live it out; what they might do to accepted understandings of family structures, long-standing taboos, social organizations and cultures, for instance. Central to these discussions is the question of power and control: in the very old feminist phrase, the question of “who benefits” from techno-science continues to

be disputed. Few make the case for women as potential beneficiaries of coming biotech and computer technologies and for women as the architects of the larger social and cultural transformations they might usher in as ardently, fiercely, or with as much ambition, as Shulamith Firestone, who argued that emerging techniques for artificial reproduction, increasingly freeing women from the work of reproduction, coupled with developments in cybernetics that would automate housework, provided the conditions necessary for feminist revolution. An end could finally be made to the “sex class system,” founded in nature, as the “fundamental biological condition,”⁴ and elaborated endlessly through centuries of male dominated forms of culture.

Firestone wrote *The Dialectic of Sex* with an eye to the past and to the future. She looks to emerging technologies, but also explores the reasons for and the (cultural, political, psycho-sexual) consequences of the fifty-year hiatus in struggles for women’s rights that followed the early gains. Both frame her sense of what feminism should do next. It is also important to understand something of when she wrote. The context of her writing was the anti-war protests and the civil rights struggles of the late 1960s, the Movement in general. This was also an era of rising awareness of the coming social and cultural impacts of technology, of reproductive technology (via the pill) and cybernetics in particular. In the preceding years Kennedy (in the U.S. 1961 inauguration) and Wilson in the United Kingdom (1963) had made speeches about the ultimate power of (nuclear) technology⁵ and the white heat of industrial change, respectively. In the United States (and the United Kingdom) cold war cybernetics were filtering into the wider world. There was a preoccupation with questions of automation and work, and the first stirrings of database anxiety. And, as a part of all this, the space race was on. 1969 was the year of the first moon landings (briefly mentioned by Firestone). Television screens were filled with Houston’s computer terminals, with smart materials waiting to be transferred to the kitchen, and space age clothes. Also figuring, appropriately enough, were space suits: external life support systems, heated off-earth wombs, with their air-tube placentas . . .

There was also action by women themselves. Reawakening after a long period of quiescence, women were beginning to “flee the massacre”⁶ and engage in feminist activity. Firestone’s project was to understand the situation of women through an analysis of the forces contributing to its creation and to produce a revolutionary program with the aim of total transformation. It is easy to see why Firestone is widely understood—and remembered—as a utopian feminist. And yet there is a paradox here, since the *The Dialectic of Sex* begins with

a repudiation of a particular form of utopianism and the adoption instead of what is described, following Engels, as scientific Marxism. So what form of utopia *is* being offered? And of what materials is it made? The question of what is meant by “utopia” is obviously of importance here, but so, if we are interested in the further adventures of *The Dialectic of Sex*, is the question of how utopia travels.

THE CALCULATION OF HOPE: TECHNOLOGY AS A RESPONSE TO NATURE

“The early feminist theorists were to a materialist view of sex what Fourier, Bebel and Owen [utopian socialists] were to a materialist view of class.”²⁷

Firestone’s work is memorable to those who encounter it because of its audacity and its ambition. But this does not alter the fact that little of what she hoped for in terms of the sustained rise of new forms of feminism, in terms of a reproductive and domestic revolution, and in terms of the technologies she envisaged, has materialized. The hindsight provided by the twenty-first century says Firestone was disappointed—or rather it says her hopes were disappointed. But hindsight misses a trick: hope and disappointment, articulated as possibility and its possible fulfillment, were the central themes of *The Dialectic of Sex* from the beginning, since while it did presume certain technological advances were certain, it never argued that the revolution it predicted was secure, stating only that it was possible, desirable, and necessary.

In Firestone’s work the themes of hope and its disappointment emerge as part of a tension between “scientific” strategies for change, avowedly adopted as a method of analysis and as a model for praxis, and the “utopian” forms of thinking that also permeate the work and form a part of its revolutionary project. Technology is bound up with both of these themes and is invoked in the text as an actually existing material force and as a future projection or fantasy. There is no doubt this is a technological revolution. However, there is an afterword. Firestone defines, as the end goal of her revolutionary program, a society where sex difference no longer matters culturally, where both the technological (male) and the aesthetic (female) mode would be outmoded. In other words, a certain *cancellation* of the technological principle is intrinsic to the emergence of the new forms of human culture and human being that constitute the deepest utopian gesture in her work, and that provide its greatest hope. The androgyne culture Firestone seeks to create is at once wildly utopian, radically hopeful,

and (perhaps because of that) not technological at all. In this chapter, I explore some of these themes, focusing on elements of Firestone's work that might shed light on the further adventures of technofeminism, particularly in relation to the continuous production and also continuous deferral of hope that is intrinsic to its investment in technologies that have not yet quite arrived. Is the potential in the "almost there" something that is to be realized positivistically, or can technology crystallize other forms of utopian desire?

The roots of Firestone's thinking are to be found in the Marxist tradition and in radical feminism, but in neither case is her adoption of these traditions orthodox or entirely thoroughgoing. True, Firestone views the biological differences between the sexes as *the* fundamental category, that which stands before and organizes social relations, and this indicates a pretty faithful alignment to radical feminist positions. However, the affiliation has to be qualified since many of the positions taken in the *Dialectic* are anathema to mainstream radical feminism(s), for instance Firestone's distinct aversion(s) to nature and the "natural" condition, her ambivalence toward female bodies and her non-hostile attitude toward technology. Not to mention her troublesome engagement with Marxism.⁸

For Firestone an immediate connection between Marxism and feminism lies in praxis and is found in her rejection of liberal reformism as a strategy for feminism. She is thus a political radical and a feminist, rather than a feminist radical, to use Ginette Castro's distinction.⁹ In the *Dialectic*, this connection, often *ad hoc* in practice, is rethought and becomes systematic. Firestone seeks to synthesize a form of Marxism and a form of feminism to produce a new program that has at its centre the seizure of the means of reproduction by the oppressed (sex) class.

The opening pages of the *Dialectic* are informed by Engels's discussion of historical materialism and it is here that Firestone claims as her own the "scientific" method Engels developed in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. Engels called for a program for revolution placed on a "real basis." He at once acknowledged the work of those forging the Utopian socialist tradition and broke with them decisively, calling for an end to eclectic average socialism, the "muddy" project that arises from forms of "absolute idealism" that are (by virtue of that) "independent of time, space and of the historical development of man."¹⁰ Firestone acknowledges Engels, and breaks with him, criticizing the lack of ambition she perceives in his failure to *extend* the analysis of social relations to cover the primitive stages of history where, she argues, the original division of labor is to be found, and the roots of

the sex class system in the “biological family.” The crux of her argument is that “sex class . . . unlike economic class . . . sprang directly from a biological reality: men and women were created different, and not equal.”¹¹ What was established by nature has now become custom and practice, has had specific psychosexual consequences for both women and men and has also produced a divided culture, a cleavage between technological and aesthetic modes. Sex discrimination is thus rooted in the “oppressive power structures set up by nature and reinforced by man.”¹² Reframing Engels’s account of the history of class struggle in this way, Firestone rereads the famous pronouncement that with the development of industrial capitalism the “whole sphere of the conditions of life . . . now comes under the dominion and control of man, who for the first time becomes the real conscious Lord of Nature.” This is now taken as a comment not about the prospects for social revolution, but for ending the sex class system. Firestone also updates the tools: the new prospects (new ways in which life comes under the dominion of man) emerge not in relation to the productive forces developing in the industrial revolution but in relation to the tools of nascent informational capitalism.

Radical feminism’s essentialist positions have often produced political paralysis; this is one factor in the famously unhappy marriage between Marxism and feminism perhaps. As the socialist feminist Barbara Ehrenreich put it:

The trouble with radical feminism, from a socialist feminist point of view, is that . . . it remains transfixed with the universality of male supremacy—things have never really changed; all social systems are patriarchies; imperialism, militarism, and capitalism are all simply expressions of innate male aggressiveness.¹³

But Firestone has no truck with the kind of impasse indicated here. In the *Dialectic* it is made clear that the original crime was not perpetrated by patriarchy (a word rarely used in the book) but by nature. And the point is that nature can now (soon) be overcome by technology with the result that “to grant that the sexual imbalance of power is biologically based is not to lose our case.”¹⁴ Technology is a weapon that enables women to address the roots rather than symptoms of their oppression and so the prospects for the sex class struggle are materially improved:

Until a certain level of evolution had been reached and technology had achieved its present sophistication, to question fundamental biological conditions was insanity. Why should a woman give up her precious seat in the cattle car for a bloody struggle she could not hope to win?

But, for the first time in some centuries, the preconditions for feminist revolution exist—indeed, the situation is beginning to *demand* such a revolution.¹⁵

The new move is that these human-made tools are to be deployed in the realm of nature. Donna Haraway points out that for Firestone nature—the enemy—is also the realm of the organic body, which, due to this division of nature from culture, is divorced from the body politic.¹⁶ On the other hand, Firestone is not only arguing that these new tools reforge the connections between these spheres but also that revolution in each of them remains necessary. The program she develops thus demands three revolutions: sexual, economic, and cultural, as a beginning point. Haraway is surely right to argue that in general Firestone understands technical control as a means to respond to “nature,” and Haraway’s charge is that Firestone’s basic mistake was to *reduce* all social relations to natural objects. However Firestone’s sense of how technology operates (and is materialized) across the *extensive* grounds of contestation she lays out means that it does not quite have the totalizing role Haraway ascribes to it. It is tempting to suggest that Firestone is saved from technological determinism by Marxism.

At any rate, the grounds of contestation are mapped by Firestone in a chart setting out a program for revolution that corresponds to the classic Marxist model¹⁷ and comprises three stages: First comes the development of new conditions making change propitious. In these contexts a resurgent women’s movement finds new (self) direction, and new hope—and in the process rescues the radical tradition of feminism from historical oblivion at the hands of conservatives. A struggle between contending sex classes results: time to jump out of the cattle truck. Second comes a time of transition, akin to the dictatorship of the proletariat as it was envisaged within the Marxist tradition, except that in this case women temporarily seize control of the means of reproduction. This fundamental change is augmented by parallel revolutions in the areas of (social) class and culture. The ascendancy to power of the female sex signals a society where sex division becomes a skeuomorph,¹⁸ inscribed on culture but scratching out an order that is increasingly decorative rather than fully operative. Third comes sex communism, not narrowly defined by externalized reproduction and/or the technologies delivering this, but something at once more radical and more diffuse. Firestone describes the coming society, in its cultural form as

the reintegration of the Male (Technological Mode) with the Female (Aesthetic Mode), to create an androgynous culture surpassing the

highs of either cultural stream, or even the sum of their integrations. More than a marriage, rather an abolition of cultural categories themselves, a mutual cancellation—a matter-anti-matter explosion, ending with poof! culture itself.¹⁹

A *mutual* cancellation: in an article Firestone approvingly cites Kathie Amatniek's *Progression* on the stages of women, from traditional womanhood ("beautiful but powerless"), to uppity women, through sisterhood ("Powerful!"), to the final goal, "HUMANHOOD THE ULTIMATE!"²⁰ The terminal priority of the female sex is not the end point of this revolution and nor is an information revolution, if this implies the sub-ordination of human relations to machine logics. This kind of stance may come as some surprise to those who remember Firestone for her artificial wombs and presume her feminism aligns directly with those later versions of technophile feminism that were resolutely anti-human and explicitly set out to *fuse* with information technology rather than pass through it. It is tempting to suggest that the kinds of technological fixes for which Firestone is best known are essentially located not in the final phase of this model, but rather pre-figure forms of existence that might be expected to develop in the middle (transitional) stage.

One of the problems reading Firestone reading Marx concerns the peculiarly cavalier ways and uneven scales at which the latter is adopted and adapted: the contrast is between the airy²¹ extension of Engels from history to prehistory and the almost mechanical way in which the stages of the revolution Firestone maps out in triplicate are read-across. At times in the *Dialectic* Marxism appears to function not as offering an operational model precisely, even if this is how it is introduced, but rather as an allegory: an allegorical model for a revolution that would surely, if it were to take place, be vastly different from any model based on the political economy and/or the *social* totality.

DISAPPOINTMENT: BACK TO THE DOLLS HOUSE?

*To be called a feminist has become an insult, so much so that a young woman intellectual, often radical in every other area, will deny vehemently that she is a feminist, will be ashamed to identify in any way with the [early] women's movement.*²²

"To be called a feminist has become an insult": Firestone's work is founded at least as much on disappointment and anger about the condition of women as it is founded on hope arising through the

projected arrival of future technologies. Anger is directed both at feminism itself—the betrayal by women of the women’s movement, at those who helped take it down—and at the state of affairs this has produced. The two are, of course, connected. Firestone’s argument is that feminism lost ground after the gains of the first wave because of the attrition involved in the long struggle even for limited demands, because the demands of its more radical wings were trampled by the reductive focus on the suffrage, but most of all because *the goals of feminism were finally delivered upon but in a reduced form*. The result was a disempowering “myth of emancipation” operating over a fifty-year period “to anesthetize women’s political consciousness.”²³ The consequences were the retirement of many women from the political sphere, the channeling of much of what energy remained into other (peoples’) struggles, and the erasure from the collective memories of women of struggles other than those around the restricted single issue of political representation. In particular the contribution of the Left and of radical feminism was submerged.

Once again Firestone’s analysis is informed by the Marxist tradition. However, it is also clear that the history she writes is (paradoxically enough, given Firestone’s dislike of the tradition with which Friedan is now most associated) a radical extension of Friedan’s work on the feminine mystique. Thus exploring the position of women in the years following suffrage Firestone argues that early reverses led in the late 1940s and 1950s to the bleakest decades of all. Sensuality, commitment, collectivity were all lacking. All that was on offer was “TV soap operas and commercials...” and “if the pain still persisted...psychotherapy.”²⁴ Compare this to Friedan, writing in the *Feminine Mystique* about what she termed the “sexual counter revolution,” arguing that “the old prejudices... were not so easily dispelled by the crusading feminists, by science and education, and by the democratic spirit after all. They merely reappeared in the forties, in Freudian disguise.” The result, according to Friedan was that

[g]irls who grew up playing baseball, baby-sitting, mastering geometry—almost independent enough, almost resourceful enough, to meet the problems of the fission-fusion era—were told by the most advanced thinkers of our time to go back and live their lives as if they were Noras, restricted to the doll’s house by Victorian prejudice.²⁵

Friedan thus described the feminine mystique in terms of a distortion and popularization of Freudianism (in cultural, not class terms

essentially) that sent woman back to the “pink and white”²⁶ times of Victorian America, before women were uppity. This moment, too, might be characterized as a defeat masquerading as a victory.²⁷

Firestone’s attack, however, amounts to a critique of reformist politics *tout court*. For her the emancipation project undermines liberation: the achieving of the one disguises the lack of progress toward the other. Her trenchant critique of (applied) Freudianism ends with the injunction to replace useless therapy with “the only thing that can do any good: political organization.” Logically, however, given her position, she is also highly impatient with the strategies of the “Ladies’ auxiliaries of the Left” (feminist radicals), who do not see feminism as the first priority but view women’s liberation as part of “[a] larger revolutionary analysis.”²⁸ Women were fighting “any other radical cause but their own.”²⁹ Once again the left is “*not radical enough*.”³⁰ The real myth then, for Firestone, concerns the obfuscation of the roots of sex discrimination, this time explored not in relation to theoretical Marxism, but in relation to the history of feminist struggle. This systematically produces forms of feminism that do not recognize the priority of the sex class system. Failing to understand and therefore to engage with what they are up against, such politics can only respond with incredulity: “*That?* Why you can’t change *that!*”³¹

“*That*”: the outcome of the failure of the women’s movement is felt in the condition of the women’s movement and in the forms of life and culture Firestone sees around her. The sexual class system, “the model for all other exploitative systems,”³² continues and women have been betrayed at the level of the narrowly political. Meanwhile sex discrimination has poisoned and debased (male) culture and cheapened love (which becomes romanticism). Moreover, it has produced a cleavage between technological and aesthetic modes that is limiting for both. Art is left exploring the shiny lights and surfaces of new computer technology without ever asking what it does, while science never considers what the computer will do (culturally, socially, politically, sexually), once it is turned on. Increasingly elaborate cultural forms have emerged to continue to pin women down. On the one hand the myth of emancipation; on the other romantic love, the cultural valorization of particular forms of male defined femininity, damaging to women, but giving them their seat in the cattle car. The tale of disappointment, confusion, betrayal and backlash, set out by Firestone as the historical contexts within which a new feminist movement was arising, might seem to leave little grounds to hope that it might prosper.

THE CUDGEL OF HOPE: TECHNOLOGY AS COMPENSATION?

*Did you exchange a walk on part in the war for a lead role in a cage?*³³

The sudden twist, the way out, is given by a set of technological developments, essential to the future growth of the system, while also producing the conditions within which its fundamental reorganization can not only be envisaged, but might even become necessary. The rapid movement between what technology can do and what the women's movement has done, leaves the reader of the *Dialectic* somewhat breathless (this one anyway). Technology is a blunt instrument with which to summarily terminate the earlier tradition of women's struggle, even if this tradition is mired in idealism, false consciousness, and relative failure. Nevertheless, the role that technology is *supposed* to play in closing this chapter of history does appear, at first sight at least, to be for Firestone this rather brutally reductive one. The issue here is one that has become familiar to techno-feminism and concerns the ease with which technology, particularly "almost here" technology, can take the place of political activity, even as it is introduced as a tool to extend its possibilities. In this case, the question is whether one myth (that the essential work of suffrage has been achieved) has been replaced with another (that liberation will be achieved through technology). Early feminism, Firestone tells us, was misled by its relative success, which seemed to promise that a better future had already been secured. Is Firestone similarly bedazzled, but this time by near future technologies which promise to do the same?

Closer inspection complicates the picture. First, the technologies of which Firestone writes are rarely presented to the reader of the *Dialectic* as the *sole* or even *prime* movers of a new world order.³⁴ Firestone never argued that sexual revolution would be provoked solely by the new technologies, despite the degree to which her argument has been reduced to this. A raised consciousness of their real situation on the part of women was also crucial—one reason why the New York Radical Feminists (NYRF) believed from the beginning that consciousness raising programs were important—and it was the *relationship* between the real conditions and forms of awareness that was key. Firestone after all, argued that it was "[t]he difference between what is almost possible and what exists [that] is generating revolutionary forces."³⁵

Second, if consciousness matters, then the cultural impacts and materializations of technology matter too. The role technology comes to play in *The Dialectic of Sex, taken as a whole*, and certainly when it is read as a manifesto, is ambiguous and multilayered. Firestone does not simply accept and expand the logic of techno-economic determination so that it can operate in the grounds organized by the sex class system. Technology also comes to articulate or configure various potentialities for the future.

Finally, it is hard to read the discussion of feminism's history in the *Dialectic*, which is striking for its personal tone, its sheer exasperation, without believing that the recourse to almost existing technologies is less "scientific" and more personal than it seems. Prepare the ground as Firestone may, insisting on the sober materialist approach to analysis, tracking the history, there is a sense here, that despite all this, technology continually *exceeds* its assigned role—if that role is simply to be the instrument through which to realize the possible in the real. It contains something more, a *desire*: the state of feminism is such that it needs something, and technology *becomes* that, or comes to stand for that something.

Disentangling the threads here, it becomes clear that technology is deployed in multiple ways in the *Dialectic*. It is recognized as a material component of the existing system (being materialized in a series of different ways as noted above), although this system is also one in which there are other agents and actors (women). Technology is also (and simultaneously) deployed to construct images of a potential future and to construct, in the imaginary as well as in the real, a means through which this future might be sought. This might produce a form of totalitarian reconciliation, the redoubled foreclosure of the possible, that insists that the vision it promulgates, claimed to be derived from the objective situation rather than being imagined or designed, certainly *will* rather than *might* be implemented. That is, it will be forged not through the hazard of chance (through collective action for instance) but by virtue of the inevitable unfolding of a predetermined future that is already held in technology, albeit it is only "almost" here. On this basis it may not be questioned *either* in the realm of the imagination (since it is not a vision) or in the realm of the real (since it has not yet occurred to *be* disputed). We are back to Engels's objection to idealism (utopian socialism) as a force that operates to disconnect the idea of the project of transformation from the project of making history—and we may also realize the importance of time in the constitution of various forms of utopian thinking.

Firestone's qualified adoption of Engels's historical materialism in *Socialism: Utopian or Scientific* may have brought with it a clear

rejection of utopianism as idealism (being determines consciousness and not vice versa) and of utopian socialists as limited to good will moralizing,³⁶ but clearly a form of utopian thinking is intrinsic to her work—as it is to Marxism as a whole. The question this raises is connected to how or whether she avoids the hazards of the potentially problematic combination of technological determinism and utopian idealism: what is the role and function, and, perhaps, what are the *time/space co-ordinates*, of her utopian vision?

UTOPIA AND TECHNOLOGY

*Utopia, the good no place, the ultimate in human good, or human folly.*³⁷

*A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias.*³⁸

It is often said of second wave feminism that it was “utopian.” This kind of judgment is either passed on the predictive qualities of the second wave (“it turned out to have been utopian in its expectations”), or on its more general analysis (“it always was utopian”). In either case, “utopian” is often used here to mean “unrealistic,” referring to a wish for something not judged deliverable, credible or even worth regretting.³⁹ The satisfaction of long held wishes through technology, which commonly enables forms of communication and mobility that would have seemed impossible or fantastical to earlier generations, might represent the opposite case, since here something very definitely arrives. But in this delivery too, there may be a shortfall.

In *Something’s Missing*, Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch discuss what they term the shrinking of utopian consciousness within technocratic modernism and in so doing make a useful distinction between banal and revolutionary forms of utopia. The first are entrenched in the dominant social order, tending to confirm or perfect it. On this basis they contain nothing that is not already possible and have no potential that is not already known. The second, the revolutionary forms, provoke the genuinely new, and as a consequence, are not *yet* possible. This kind of utopia, according to Bloch, is

[n]ot . . . nonsense or absolute fancy; rather it is not *yet* in the sense of a possibility; *that* it could be there if we could only do something for it.

Not only if we travel there, but *in that* we travel there, the island of utopia arises out of the sea of the possible—utopia, but with new contents.⁴⁰

Something has not come to be *yet*. This form of utopian consciousness amounts to more than individual dreaming—castles in the sky—but is able to escape the conundrum that everything possible has already been thought, *because* it has not *yet* been thought. The Marxist conception of utopia, emerging out of Marxism's own recognition of the need for revolutionary forms of hope, is that, although it is also a non-place (*yet*), it is in some way attached to the historical formations out of which it arises. It might be said that this kind of utopia arises in that there is a journey *from*, as well as in that we travel, *there*. In this account, an ambiguous place is given to technology, which, often "delivers the goods" but in doing so eviscerates the dreams they held. Adorno, however, is also careful to stress that the depreciation being discussed is general and technology does not inevitably play this role, but only *tends* to. The discussion in *Something's Missing* provides a commentary on the forms of utopianism found in *The Dialectic of Sex* not only because the latter grapples with the relationship between technology and utopia, but also because of Firestone's attachment to historical materialism and the imperative to remain grounded in "...time and the historical development of man."

Adorno and Bloch stress the renewed importance of utopia as a political tool. They argue that hostility to utopianism and to the utopian figuration (the blueprint), evidenced in the iconoclasm of Marxism (and Marx) was a historically conditioned response to the needs of a specific era. Adorno in particular argues that in more recent times, there may be a real need to reconstitute utopianism, and to develop new utopian figurations, particularly if what exists ("actually existing" socialism for instance), delivers only a dead end.

My sense is that Firestone's vision was in many ways properly utopian. Certainly the desired end point of her journey has little to do with the kind of banal formation that Adorno and Bloch associate with technology and understand as thoroughly conservative, and not only because the technology of which she writes is still (only) "almost there." What happens on the way may however be a different matter. Exploring this, the final sections of this chapter take three more turns, considering Firestone's ambivalent relationship with technology and the quality and the "content" of her most famous vision, before returning briefly to contemporary feminism and the question of the further adventures of the *Dialectic*.

(NOT FOR) THE LOVE OF TECHNOLOGY?

Firestone is certainly not an uncomplicated technophile. Her attitude to the technologies central to her project is surprisingly indifferent. Her writing is not marked by the technophilia that animates Haraway's cyborg and makes it so engaging (loveable even) and she is not seduced by the prospect of that technologically achieved divorce from the body that so engaged later cyberfeminism. On the contrary, Firestone wants the body returned to its rightful owner, defended from intruders (which is how developing fetuses are seen). Firestone did not like humans *or* machines much. The fantasy of pregnancy without "deformation" produces a startling image of body hate and/or body fear. Haraway convincingly reads Firestone's position in terms of bodily alienation that can only be intensified through its submission to technological domination.⁴¹ On the other hand, Firestone's problem is not to be solved by *dissolution* and post-human border confusion, but by a refreshed—if extra-ordinarily defensive—form of bodily *integrity*. This position finds an echo amongst feminists developing contemporary perspectives on reproductive technologies, many of whom have noted with unease the increasing focus on the child and the relative obliteration of the mother in contemporary fertility discourses.⁴² Firestone's womb machines appear kiln-like rather than cybernetic (or perhaps my sense of them comes from the image on the *Women's Press* cover of the UK edition).⁴³ Going back to the habits of dragons, it might be said that the form of incubation envisaged for humans is more oviparous than it is either viviparous or cyborgian—but this is all that can be said since the details are sparse.

As for developments in forms of household automation, all Firestone tells us is that the housework problem will be *fixed*. The fact that cybernetic technologies are to bring this about through the automation of labor is both central, in the sense that it exchanges a labor relation for a technological relation, and incidental. Angela Davis, for example, also referring to Engels, argued for the same outcome (the de-privatization of housework) through the deployment of paid (human) cleaning squads, rather than through the introduction of automated dustbots.⁴⁴ This indifference might be traced back to Firestone's sense of the divisions between the technological and aesthetic modes—and the despoliation of both as a consequence. In these conditions she chooses to remain at a certain distance from the technologies that are to assist in the birth of her revolution.

One aspect of this distancing is that technology is more interesting to Firestone when it is purged of its existing content. The metaphor

of cinema, which surfaces in surprising places in *The Dialectic of Sex*, is instructive in this regard. Firestone argues that the technology of cinema “broke down the very division between the artificial and the real, between culture and life itself, on which the aesthetic mode is based.”⁴⁵ Cinema operates as a pre-figurative form of that reconciliation between two forms of realization—that which takes place in dreaming, and that which takes place in “reality”—which might constitute the outcome of a successful revolution. The glimpse of another world that cinema grants is neither technological nor aesthetic, but beyond both. Cinema thus provides, in the limited sphere of the dialectic of culture, a sense of what it means to bring the real world back to its senses.

Not coincidentally, the same cinematic metaphor is used to describe Marxism and its capacity to grasp history as process, “a movie not a snapshot,”⁴⁶ and Firestone elsewhere describes revolutionaries as enacting something of this same pre-figurative cancellation, since they, operating in the broken world she discerns, are nonetheless the “visionaries of the aesthetic mode, the idealists of pragmatic politics.”⁴⁷ The program she develops is informed by a sense that the fusion of scientific Marxism (in the technological mode) and feminism (in the aesthetic mode) can itself, or is itself, an instance of some form of pre-figurative reconciliation.

Technology returns, but not as the ultimate “content” of a future form of life—and in this role is highly valuable. Firestone describes progress as the attempt to achieve the “realization of the conceivable in the possible”; the aesthetic mode realizes what is conceivable in dreams, technology sets about seeking to deliver the conceivable in the actual.⁴⁸ The distortions of the sex class system, however, means that empirical science does this with no imagination whilst the aesthetic mode does it with no sense of the connection of ideas to reality. Fusion between these broken halves would reconnect a vision with the means through which it might be approached—and would lead to something profoundly new. This is the birth in which Firestone is most interested and to the extent that she thinks technology can be a midwife, she is profoundly technophile.

A fleshed out vision of what such a society might look like is offered in only one place in the *Dialectic*, since Firestone recognized demands for a blueprint as a classic trap for revolutionary thought. She was nonetheless “tempted . . . to make some “dangerously utopian” concrete proposals,”⁴⁹ justifying this decision, much as Adorno did in relation to communism, by pointing to the lack of existing figurations of other possible worlds. The results

are some “alternatives to 1984,” setting out ways in which a different kind of society might function: household groupings rather than family units, limited household contracts, external reproduction as a choice, shared childcare and shared sex (presumably amongst those old enough to consent). She was right to be cautious because these concrete projections are largely how the work has come to be remembered and understood. Firestone was a feminist communist who desired the fundamental transformation of the totality, and the advent of forms of being that she mostly and consciously refused to define except negatively. But she became simply the mad dangerous feminist who demanded artificial wombs. This, of course, does not fully reflect her ambitions. It also fails to follow her argument or to trace her revolutionary mapping to its proper conclusion.

The most properly utopian vision cradled in Firestone’s text is not that confined to the single image (which many feminists now find dystopian) of women freed from nature’s “deformation” by virtue of the exteriorization of the womb, nor even to the more elaborated picture of possible social groupings beyond the family. Rather, it is bound up with the account as a whole. Here, rigorous attempts to draw up a balance of the struggle so far and to assess its consequences—no matter how bleak and disappointing—are countered by a sense, not only of new possibilities but even of new worlds. The narrative history resolves into the revolutionary program, and the program content is increasingly, as the stages of the revolution are laid out, replaced by form, or by a form of negative content. And how are we to understand “Cosmic consciousness?”⁵⁰—the mystically inflected appellation Firestone gives to the final outcome of her sexual, cultural and economic revolution—*except* in properly utopian terms?

The question was rhetorical, but there are two ways to understand it. First if *this* future is beyond technology—for there is a hint that technology dissolves into a new form of communication⁵¹—it is also, of course, and this was the point, beyond sex class. Androgyny is a negative definition for what would in the end not be negative but generalized. The genuinely revolutionary demand made by *The Dialectic of Sex*, is not for artificial reproduction, or women’s liberation, or a technological utopia, but for a culture in which the very idea that genital difference influenced all forms of life would seem quite simply ludicrous, as unlikely, as *mythical*, as the idea that from dragon’s teeth would spring armed men

UTOPIA AND ITS TRAVELS

*The state didn't wither away in 1969.*⁵²

*This fashion for stepping back in time.*⁵³

This time the radio snippets refer to feminism itself; “feminism,” and “beauty pageants at English universities,” “backlash,” “are we just going backwards?” “Mother, blue stocking, *lap dancer*” (hopefully not the ULTIMATE). “Feminism is coming back to life”: these are some of the conditions within which *The Dialectic of Sex* is reread today, and without negating the differences, there are some striking parallels to be discerned between conditions today and those in which Firestone was writing.

One is to be found in the sense of retreat, the sense that feminism’s ambitions have contracted and that women’s expectations have returned to those of former times—or to neo-liberalism’s approximation of them. A second is to be found in the state of contemporary political feminism, said to be reemerging after a period of hiatus dominated by various forms of feminist quiescence (and/or postfeminist *acquiescence*). A third parallel is discovered in contemporary frictions over how feminisms’ histories are understood, written, remembered and forgotten: except that this time around it is the second wave (accepting the hopelessly frozen terminology for the present) that is the subject of this rewriting, and the third wave that is regularly accused of systematically erasing from its accounts of the past all but the liberal wing of feminism. The more radical wing of this new wave, on the other hand, laments the failure of will of those coming through earlier waves. “Babies and breast implants,”⁵⁴ one feminist critic declares, are what the second wave has come to, put out that the state failed to wither away. The sense of a gulf between generations is familiar, as is a sense that particular traditions of feminism are more vulnerable to historical revision or neglect in their own time than others. This is a reason to report this history in fragments here rather than attempting a summation—although it does seem justified to note the diminishing of at least mainstream feminism’s utopian consciousness.

It is in these contexts that it is clear that Firestone’s *project* failed: the state did not wither away; neither did the family. In many countries feminists are still launching campaigns for basic rights. Reproductive technologies are not working to break down the family, as Maureen McNeil has shown,⁵⁵ and automation is not reducing time spent working in the home (a series of studies suggest it never

did). More, as any number of statistics will show, women are still, despite all of this, less well paid, have less status, and in far too many countries of the world, lack full citizenship rights. In a series of places their lack of rights is not being subverted by cyberspace but is on the contrary being extended by it.⁵⁶

On the other hand Firestone's *analysis* of the state of feminism as political project could be said to find much confirmation. The consequences of the failure of women to act decisively produced a further eclipse to parallel the one she documented. And even if the rise of the net and the advent of other new technologies did produce various forms of more radical feminism in the 1990s, this was not taken up and generalized by the broader movement. Indeed, women's roles in the computer sciences for instance, are shrinking; their engagement in particular forms of techno-culture is lower than ever. This technological reticence has, as Sherry Turkle shows,⁵⁷ much to do with a fear of breaking with feminine forms of identification, of failing to adequately perform as women. This is reminiscent of a return of the tyranny of the pink and white; except now femininity is wearing Jimmy Choo shoes.

Laying aside both of these judgments, a different way to consider the further adventures of the *Dialectic* might be to look at how its *utopian* message, the revolutionary demand it articulates, fares today. And if there is a general sense that, within the mainstream of feminism, utopianism *itself*, in the sense of a hope for change, is something that is unrealistic—and even lost and unlamented in more recent times—techno-feminism does have a somewhat different relationship both to Firestone and to her utopia. The writing in this field is markedly distinct from the hygienic, polite discourse that constitutes some of the “entrepreneurial” third wave thinking that has received much prominence.

So, are the *Dialectic*'s further adventures best traced vicariously through these later techno- and/or cyberfeminists? Firestone's proclamation of a “feminist revolution in the age of technology”⁵⁸ certainly makes her a pioneer of informational feminism. Various scholars have linked Firestone, through Donna Haraway, to Sadie Plant and other 1990s cyberfeminists.⁵⁹ Another clear connection is that between Firestone and feminist science studies.⁶⁰ Indeed Haraway is the pivot here, given the centrality of her work both to 1990s cyberfeminism and feminist science studies, the latter deeply influenced by her methodology and epistemology. And Haraway of course, launched her own utopia into the world, in the figure of the cyborg...

But how far can contemporary cyberfeminism in particular, in all or some of its various branches,⁶¹ be regarded Firestone's legatee? A

continuity is certainly found in the shared expectation that technologies “just around the corner” in the bio-tech/genomics fields will come to fruition. Once again (or *still*), much is promised, but not quite delivered, by “almost there” technologies. The break comes less in relation to technology perhaps, than in relation to what is expected of utopia, and what can carry it.

In 1967 Michael Foucault explored the paradoxical forms of space that go under the name “utopia,” distinguishing between those that exist in time, which as he sees it are fundamentally unreal, and those that exist in unlikely spaces: heterotopias, temporary autonomous zones; places that are at once something and something else.⁶² As noted, Adorno and Bloch, in contrast, describe utopia in fundamentally temporal terms, in which revolutionary utopias are not fictional precisely, but rather are not *yet*. On that basis they do have a certain claim to reality, or a connection to it, and can be distinguished in their turn from the abstract forms of utopia of the utopian idealists. Foucault’s distinction forms part of a reevaluation of space against time, networks versus history, and is of course part of his engagement with Marxism. He defines this in terms of a contest between the “pious descendents of time and the determined inhabitants of space.” If Firestone is on one side of this, Haraway’s cyborg might be on the other. The cyborg, somewhat despising of history, climbs out of it, and becomes a creature unchained from time, dancing across the scene of cyberfeminism, never terminally attached to a specific era but continuously reemerging, in response perhaps to the circuits of innovation within the technologies of which it was originally formed. The cyborg might be considered as a form of embodied utopia, a form of heterotopia that travels in the imagination rather than in history, downloading into integrated circuits, not arbitrarily perhaps, but sometimes accidentally, and sometimes when new (networked) connections are made. Unlike the astronauts of the 1960s, it needs no placenta and eats the air: promise-crammed.

Firestone on the other hand is enough of a Marxist to make time essential to her revolutionary program and her utopian vision is a part of that or emerges from it. This does not mean that she is pious. She disposed of the good will moralizing of utopian socialism in the opening pages of her book and what she did to Marxism—ripping and reburning its key ideas—is hardly piety. Nonetheless the nature of her utopian thought and in particular the location of the utopia toward which she would like to build is essentially in history, not networked simultaneity, and not in technology, since even in her most determinist moments technology is to alter history and to do it in historical time.

The different quality of the utopian visions here may have something to do with how well they travel on. Firestone's dreams, as they are pulled out for inspection, like so much old cloth, can seem curiously outdated, even though they relate to debates that remain relevant today. And this does not relate only to the proposals for collective life, but to the revolutionary stance and rhetorical tone adopted in the work. Firestone's radicalism, her polemical tone combined with the utter seriousness with which she makes her demands, is characteristic of her time. This makes it the harder to gauge or understand her project as a whole without paying sustained attention to it.⁶³ The *Dialectic* is most easily read, against all Firestone's intentions, when it is explored not through or across the grounds of scientific Marxism, but as a personal vision. Finally, this difficulty emerges, not only because of Firestone's own approach, but also because of feminism's own bad habit of consuming its own history, and of contracting its sense of what is possible, conceivable, or desirable, to what goes on that is at once new, here, and now: whichever wave is breaking is right. Perhaps it is not surprising that some of its recent utopias have indeed been banal. In sum, we should locate Firestone's writings historically, not to constitute the *Dialectic* as a museum piece, but to reexplore her demands and her visions, which, after all, turn on forms of life and forms of technology whose future is not determined, that have not arisen *yet*.

The long freezes of feminism leave slivers of ice in the ground. Firestone, as her name suggests, both lit the spark and took the heat. That she did so against the odds, with such impatience, with such a sense of having deferred long enough, and with such a sense of hope, makes her work the more compelling. *The Dialectic of Sex*, it seems to me at least, is at once a shout of triumph—"now it is possible!"—and a cry of pain and frustration about the distance to travel and the difficulty of getting there. It is in this light that Firestone's sense of the final and sudden dissipation, the canceling out of all that weight, the glorious and outrageous and utterly impious demand for *an end to all this*, to all of the fixed, fast, frozen relation that is sex class, and the demand for something really new, something *androgynous*, is so very powerful. From this distance, it is easy to find her hopelessly utopian in her reading of what technology will do. But I prefer to salute her impossible and properly utopian demand to let the unthinkable arise through the struggle: to take *everything* that is currently given—and cancel it.

NOTES

1. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 171.

2. Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 156.
3. BBC Radio Four, Thursday January 1, 2009, 08:30.
4. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 3.
5. "For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of life..." Kennedy's inauguration included comments on the bomb. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4865498.stm>).
6. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 3.
7. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 7.
8. See Barbara Ehrenreich on the relative problems of central committee sexism versus real world discrimination, for a commentary: "What Is Socialist Feminism?" (*WIN Magazine*, 1976/Working Papers on Socialism & Feminism, New American Movement [NAM], 1976). (Accessed online). But it is Marxists who have been most assiduous in bringing Firestone onto the web. See, for example, Firestone, Shulamith, *The Dialectic of Sex*, Marxists Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/subject/women/authors/firestone-shulamith/dialectic-sex.htm> (January 1, 2007), and Firestone, Shulamith, *Women and the Radical Movement*, Marxists Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/subject/women/authors/firestone-shulamith/radical-movement.htm> (January 1, 2007).
9. Ginette Castro, *American Feminism* (New York: NYU Press, 1990).
10. Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Scientific and Utopian*, (New York: International Publishers, 1978) 44.
11. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 8. Although Engels did write, in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York: Pathfinder, 1972, 75): "The first division of labor is that between man and woman for the propagation of children."
12. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 15.
13. Ehrenreich, "What Is Socialist Feminism?"
14. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 10.
15. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 3.
16. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, (London: Routledge: 1991), 10.
17. See for instance Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (Or Lenin).
18. See Nicholas Gessler, "Skeuomorphs and Cultural Algorithms, Lecture Notes in Computing Science," Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on Evolutionary Programming VII, 144 (1998): 229.
19. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 174.
20. "TRADITIONAL WOMANHOOD IS DEAD! TRADITIONAL WOMEN WERE BEAUTIFUL...BUT REALLY POWERLESS! 'UPPITY' WOMEN WERE EVEN MORE BEAUTIFUL...BUT STILL POWERLESS! SISTERHOOD IS POWERFUL! HUMANHOOD THE ULTIMATE!" Text from Kathie Amatniek

- artwork, *Progression*, cited in Shulamith Firestone, "The Jeanette Rankin Brigade: Woman Power?" (*The New York Radical Women*: 1968).
21. For a left critique see Lindsey German, "Theories of Patriarchy," *International socialism* (1981) second series: 12. (Accessed online). German argues, essentially, that Engels cannot be extended in this fashion since the family itself becomes a property relation under capitalism so that beyond the term there is very little (except the name) to link old and new "family" forms.
 22. Shulamith Firestone, "The Women's Rights Movement in the USA: A New View." The CWLU *Herstory* Website, <http://www.cwluherstory.com/CWLUArchive/womensrights.html> (January 1, 2007).
 23. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 24.
 24. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 25–6.
 25. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (London: Penguin, 1963), 111.
 26. The feminization of American culture in the Victorian era adds another twist to this. Ann Douglas notes, "[i]n the midst of the transformation of the American economy into the most powerfully aggressive capitalist system in the world, American culture seemed bent on establishing a perpetual Mother's Day, the "pink and white" of nineteenth-century U.S. women, who set out to gain power through the exploitation of their feminine identity as their society defined it." See Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of America*, (New York: Noonday Press 1997), 6–8.
 27. Ann Douglas's claim is that the feminization of America, was real enough, but arrived in the guise of sentimentality rather than liberation and was part of the "self-evasion" of a society "both committed to laissez faire industrial capitalism and disturbed by its consequences. Feminization at that time then guaranteed the continuation of the male hegemony in different guises." Douglas, *The Feminization of America*, 12–13.
 28. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 64, 31, 35.
 29. Which is not to say they were always welcome there. See Ginette Castro, *American Feminism*, on the circumstances of Firestone's own break with the Left.
 30. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 35.
 31. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 3.
 32. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 35.
 33. Pink Floyd, *Wish you Were Here* (1975).
 34. Marxism has also been convincingly defended from precisely the same charge of insistent determinism. Donald Mackenzie, for example ("Marx and the Machine," *Technology and Culture* 25 [1984], 473–502) turns to Marx's 1859 *Preface* to reexplore the relations between forces of production and relations of production: the latter includes the conscious labor of man so any reading of the forces of production as including these relations would be some way from the

- strongly deterministic position holding that “machines make history” rather than humans.
35. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 171.
 36. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 5.
 37. Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias* (New York: Compass Books, 1922).
 38. Oscar Wilde, cited in Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (London: MIT, 1998), 17.
 39. “For if utopias are never to be realized, is there any more harm done in accepting their loss than in lamenting it?” Kate Soper, “Postmodernism, Subjectivity and the Question of Value,” in Judith Squires, ed., *Principled Positions* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993), 21.
 40. Ernst Bloch in “Something’s Missing: A discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing,” in Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, 17.
 41. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 10.
 42. See, for example, Carol Stable, *Feminism and Technological Fix* (Manchester, Manchester UP, 1994).
 43. That is, a cartoon-style drawing of a pregnant woman standing on a wall. The woman’s body—specifically her belly—is partly filled in with bricks.
 44. “In the final analysis, neither women nor men should waste precious hours of their lives on work that is neither stimulating nor productive.” Angela Davis also used Engels to make a case against Wages for Housework in “The Approaching Obsolescence of Housework: A Working-Class Perspective,” in *Women, Race and Class*, (London: Women’s Press, 1982) Accessed on-line. <http://www.marxists.org/subject/women/authors/davis-angela/housework.htm>. Barbara Ehrenreich later joined a house-gang, and discovered life as a cleaner in the United States was low paid and exploitative, and that very little water is used to clean with. (*Nickel and Dimed, On (Not) Getting By in America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001).
 45. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 169.
 46. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 4.
 47. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 171, fn 3.
 48. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 156–57.
 49. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 203.
 50. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (London: Women’s Press, 1979), 181.
 51. Phallogocentrism, the one true code through which man speaks, is also presumably to be over-thrown. See Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*.
 52. Janis Cortese, “Feminism, Tradition, and the Path to Progress,” (*The Third Wave*, June 6, 2001)(Accessed online). <http://www.3rdwwave.com/>.

53. *Women's Hour*, BBC Radio Four (Wednesday, January 21, 2009).
54. Cortese, "Feminism, Tradition, and the Path to Progress."
55. Maureen McNeil, *Feminist Cultural Studies of Science and Technology*, (London: Routledge, 2007). 88.
56. See, for example, Lucie Morillon, "Activists Face Obstacles Online in Winning Women's Rights in Iran," *Mediashift*, December 15, 2008 http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/lucie_morillon/.
57. Sherry Turkle, "Computational Reticence, Why Women Fear the Intimate Machine," in *Technology and Women's Voices*, ed. Cheri Kramarae (New York: Routledge, 1986).
58. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 15.
59. Carol Stabile, "Feminism, Tradition, and the Path to Progress"; Judith Squires, "Fabulous Feminist Futures," in *Fractal Dreams, New Media in Social Context*, ed. Jon Dovey (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1996), 194–216; Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones* (Doubleday: London, 1997).
60. E.g., Joan Haran, Jenny Kitzinger, Maureen McNeil, and Kate O'Riordan, *Human Cloning in the Media: From Science Fiction to Science Practice*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).
61. The first wave of cyberfeminism was known as determinedly post-human, but there are materialist cyberfeminist analyses of information technology with a generally more materialist approach. See Cornelia Sollfrank, *Next Cyberfeminist International*, (Hamburg: Hein, 1999).
62. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*, [1967] (1984) 5: 46–49.
63. See Susanna Paasonen, "Surfing the Waves of Feminism: Cyberfeminism and its Others," *Rhizomes 04* (Spring 2005).

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PART II

Sex, Love, and the Family

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Questioning the Foundations of Heterosexual Families: Firestone on Childhood, Love, and Romance

Stevi Jackson

Among the most radical elements of *The Dialectic of Sex* is Firestone's attack on the foundations of the conventional, heterosexual nuclear family. The best-known aspects of her critique are, of course, her identification of biological reproduction as the central determinant of women's subordination and her argument that women can only be liberated when, through technological intervention, they can be freed from their reproductive function. This aspect of her work, though central, has received undue attention so that she is often remembered only for her biological determinism—from which most feminists (myself included) would wish to distance themselves. She was, in the 1970s, out of step even with other radical feminists, some of whom shared her conviction on the primacy of “sex” (or gender) divisions in history but found her biologically based arguments and, in particular, her position on reproductive technology, problematic. Firestone was, in this respect, very much an individual voice and as a result, her ideas have rarely been taken up by other feminists.¹

Although Firestone saw the “biological family” of man, woman and infant as a human universal she did not consider it immutable and unchanging; for her these biologically founded relationships are, as Alison Jagger notes, “overlaid by social institutions.”² In making the family the focus of her critique, Firestone was closer to other feminist thinkers of the 1970s and early 1980s than is often realized. Her radicalism was a product of the political climate of the time—a time

when feminists and others on the Left saw “the family” as an oppressive structure implicated in the maintenance of the subordination of women, lesbians, and gay men and in the perpetuation of the bourgeois social order. Nonetheless Firestone’s passionate and scathing attacks on the relationships considered foundational to conventional family life—those of the heterosexual couple and of parents and children—were in some ways innovative, particularly in relation to childhood. Other feminists at the time sought to demystify heterosexual love and romance, but very few questioned the bond between mothers and children. Writing in the early 1980s, Alison Jagger pointed out that Firestone was “almost alone in her radical critique of the whole institution of childhood and demands for its abolition.”³ Since then there has been an exponential growth in the critical study of childhood,⁴ but it is still possible to identify only a few feminists who have made connections between women’s location within heterosexual relations and the social shaping of childhood.⁵ As a pioneer in this respect Firestone’s work deserves more serious consideration for it speaks to central feminist concerns and continues to provoke questions about aspects of social relations that often, even now, go unchallenged.

Taken together, her analysis of adult-child and couple relationships constitute a potentially powerful critique of institutionalized heterosexuality—although Firestone’s inability to think outside a heterosexual frame means that this potential is never fully realized. Moreover, the power of her often acute sociological observation is consistently undermined by essentialist assumptions, not only in the most obvious sense of biological determinism, but also in her preconceptions of universal human needs and emotions. Through a reading of her chapters on childhood, love, and romance I will weigh her insights against the flaws in her arguments and also consider, in the light of recent social change, how relevant they remain today.

CHILDHOOD—AND MOTHERHOOD

Motherhood has received extensive attention from feminists but far less is said about childhood. As Barrie Thorne notes, feminists “who have opened the topic of motherhood to fresh understanding have been relatively unreflective about the assumptions they make about children.”⁶ This is, perhaps, surprising given that feminists have for some time been aware that ideals of motherhood have historically been linked with shifting perceptions of “the child” and the “needs” of children.⁷ This should at least suggest that we consider constructions

of childhood, yet feminists have only rarely followed this logic. They have generally been concerned more with mothers than children, with the consequences of maternal responsibilities, often with the effect that children are positioned as objects rather than subjects, as presenting problems for women's autonomy or women's rights. Where the consequences of childrearing arrangements for children themselves have been considered, it is usually in terms of the reproduction of gender relations,⁸ in which children are viewed from an adult perspective and treated as "adults in waiting" rather than as autonomous beings.⁹

Firestone's version of biological determinism is very different from those who valorize women's maternal capacities. Far from celebrating the mother-child bond, Firestone sees it as "no more than shared oppression." She recognizes that motherhood and childhood are necessarily co-constituted, yet this insight is initially framed in terms of her central thesis, with its biological basis: "The heart of women's oppression is her child-bearing and child-rearing role. And in turn children are defined in relation to this role."¹⁰ Something interesting begins to happen here, however, for while she reasserts the causal primacy of biology, she also pays attention to the historical specificity of family forms and moves toward an argument for the social construction of childhood.

While Firestone sees women's reproductive capacities as the root of their subordination she insists on "the *relativity* of the oppression: though it has been a fundamental human condition, it has appeared in different degrees and different forms."¹¹ This variability is related to the history of the family; she identifies "the patriarchal nuclear family" as only its most recent form and it is this, she argues, that has led to the emergence of the "construct 'childhood'." So here childhood is not a natural given but a "construct," a product of a particular history: indeed, she says, it is a "myth."¹² In making this case Firestone relies on Philippe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood*¹³ and, following him, confidently asserts that in medieval times there was "no such thing as childhood."¹⁴ Firestone did not, of course, have access to later critiques and modifications of Ariès's history and it is now accepted that he overstated his case and that he was less than rigorous in his interpretation of his sources.¹⁵ Children in medieval times *were*, as he argued, included into adult life far more than they are today, but it is clear that they were not regarded simply as miniature adults. Ariès's own evidence indicates that children were seen as social subordinates within a patriarchal and feudal social order, that they were very much under the authority of the head of the household in which they lived

and worked. Moreover childhood was regarded as a period of moral and practical training for later life.¹⁶ Yet medieval childhood was not childhood as we know it today; as David Archard suggests, there may always have been some kind of *concept* of childhood, but particular *conceptions* of childhood are culturally and historically specific and our particular, modern, Western, conception of the child is the product of a lengthy process of historical transformation.¹⁷

Thus while Firestone accepts Ariès's account uncritically, as was not uncommon at the time, she is not greatly out of step with majority historical opinion, which continues to regard childhood as socially constructed, and with much recent sociological work which contests the naturalness of childhood.¹⁸ She is substantially correct in arguing that the singling out of children as a "special" category of people, requiring "specialist" provision in terms of their dress, education, and pastimes, has a history, evolving slowly since the fourteenth century. This entailed gradually sequestering children away from the adult life in which they had once participated. She also, importantly, identifies the classed, as well as the gendered, character of these transformations—that specialized childhood did not initially apply to girls and that it was only the upper classes and the rising bourgeoisie who had the luxury of subjecting their children to childhood. It was the latter who began to refine the concept of childhood into something we recognize today, particularly in the nineteenth century when it began to be institutionalized, especially through schooling, and spread to the population at large. Firestone would probably have concurred with those Foucauldian scholars who have seen childhood as constituted, from the nineteenth century onward, as an object of the scientific gaze through such disciplines as psychology, social work and education, which have claimed expertise in monitoring, categorizing and managing childhood and children.¹⁹

Not surprisingly, given her argument that children are oppressed, Firestone focuses on the negative implications of this for children themselves. Like many radical educationalists of the 1970s she saw schooling as retarding development rather than advancing it, with the introduction of rigid age grading and a spoon fed curriculum limiting what could be learnt and from whom, with children "corralled into a special place with their own kind," thus prolonging their dependency within the family.²⁰ At the same time the hierarchy and competitiveness this imposed upon children prepared them for a future in a hierarchical social order as well as underlining their subordinate status in relation to adults. In this subordination she sees parallels with class (and by implication race): the oppressed have historically been seen as

lacking in cognitive capacity, often as charmingly simple-minded, and as requiring the care and supervision of their betters. There is an obvious parallel here with imperialist ideologies, although Firestone does not say this. Colonized peoples have been seen as child-like, in need of education and guidance from the superior colonizers and as lacking the “maturity” to govern themselves. That such forms of domination have historically been justified by infantilizing the dominated should give us pause for thought.

There are even stronger parallels between women and children, between, in Firestone’s terms “the myth of childhood...and the myth of femininity.”²¹ Among her examples are that both women and children have been associated with asexuality and “purity,” both have been accorded exaggerated respect masking their inferior status, both have historically been considered mentally deficient, have been confined to separate social spheres and so on. The effect of this has been to set women and children apart from the “norm”—the adult male. As Firestone puts it, once again, despite an underlying appeal to biological, or at least physical differences, using the vocabulary of social constructionism:

In each case a physical difference has been enlarged culturally with the help of special dress, education, manners, and activity until this cultural reinforcement itself began to appear “natural,” even instinctive, an exaggeration process that enables easy stereotyping: the individual eventually appears to be a different kind of human animal with its own peculiar set of laws and behaviour (“I’ll never understand women!”... “You don’t know a thing about child psychology!”).²²

Firestone sees these differences as symptomatic of the shared subordination of women and children. In both cases their subordinate status is concealed and becomes difficult to contest because it is so often expressed in “the phraseology of ‘cute’ [which] is so much harder to fight than open oppression.”²³ It is only when (young) women or children refuse to play along that the negative attitudes to them become manifest. The parallel may break down, however, when thinking of older women: only young women can successfully exploit the strategy of playing cute—which Firestone fails to note, despite her awareness of age segregation within the population at large. There are undoubtedly important parallels between women and children, but there are also other kinds of interconnections—in particular the historical institutionalization and prolongation of childhood has led, as Firestone recognizes, to a greater elaboration of motherhood and child rearing.

The myth of childhood, Firestone argues, has been further reinforced in contemporary times, with the expansion of compulsory education and the increasing privatization of family life. With the decline in harsher forms of child-rearing there has been, she suggests, a growing emphasis on ensuring children's happiness, with the idea that childhood is a "golden age" of life: "children must be embodiments of happiness" and it is a parental duty to give each child "a childhood to remember."²⁴ Whole industries have grown up to satisfy the needs and wants of children, to market specialist goods to them and to advise parents on their care. An array of specialist professions now proffers advice on children and their expertise in caring for them. Here Firestone's argument references both the reach of consumer capitalism and the growth of techniques of surveillance in contemporary society—and arguably these points now have even more resonance than when she was writing.

Childhood today remains marked off from adulthood in crucial ways. Yet to the myths of the golden age that Firestone discusses we must add a new one: the myth of childhood under threat. Increasingly it is being argued that childhood is not as golden as it once was, that it is being eroded by the pressures of consumption, too early maturity and external threats to the "freedoms" of childhood. This is clearly expressed in the introduction to Neil Postman's defense of children's "need" for childhood (and for the heterosexually coupled parents who can provide it):

To have to stand and wait as the charm, malleability, innocence and curiosity of children are degraded and then transmogrified into the lesser features of pseudo-adulthood is painful and embarrassing and, above all, sad.²⁵

The idea that children are growing up too quickly without experiencing childhood to the full is now widely aired. Certainly children's childhoods are changing, but that does not mean that the institutionalization of childhood has any less impact. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, risk anxiety now contributes to the construction of childhood and the maintenance of its boundaries, with adults urged to exercise constant vigilance in order to protect both children and childhood.²⁶ It is worth assessing the extent to which the contours of contemporary childhood have been and are defined by the factors Firestone identifies as constituting childhood oppression: first, physical and economic dependence; second, sexual, family, and emotional repression.

PARENTAL PATRONAGE

Firestone does not deny that children are smaller and weaker than adults but argues that current social arrangements reinforce these disadvantages rather than compensating for them.²⁷ As legal minors children are virtually the property of their parents to rear as they will. Interestingly she makes this point by raising the issue of children's vulnerability to physical abuse, at a time when few other feminists had considered this issue. It is the case that this problem is now far more publicly acknowledged than it was in the 1970s and that in most western countries steps have been taken to protect children perceived to be "at risk," but it is clear that these provisions often fail and that neglect, injury and death still befall children all too often—precisely because of the privatized nature of family life and the potential tension between competing principles underlying much policy and practice: the protection of children on the one hand and the preservation of family unity on the other.

It is economic dependence, however, that Firestone identifies as central to the oppression of children, arguing that children's dependence on parental patronage is a source of humiliation. Children may be well fed, clothed, and cared for but have to beg or wheedle for anything specific they want—making a source of independent income something many children value.²⁸ As Firestone points out, removing children from the workplace is now seen as a sign of progress—the distance we have traveled from the bleak days when children labored in coalmines. This is perhaps even more evident today when the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child dictates that children should be excluded from paid work and when the idea of children working conjures up images of third world sweatshops. But Firestone urges us to think more broadly: "What we ought to be protesting, rather than that children are being exploited just *like* adults, is that *adults* can be so exploited."²⁹ Thus it is exploitation rather than the fact of work that requires our critical attention.

We should at least take seriously the suggestion that dependence has its down side. This is widely recognized in the case of women, where feminists have campaigned for women's autonomy but not, it seems, where children are concerned. In a society where individual autonomy is valued, dependence is a marker of less than fully human status. More than this, it can render children and young people less capable, less able to act on their own behalf, thus reinforcing the idea that they "need" to be looked after and protected. Under contemporary conditions children's dependency is being intensified by the risk

anxiety engendered by the fear that the social world is becoming less safe, that children need, for example, to be taken to school rather than left to find their own way there as they would have been a few decades ago.³⁰ Moreover the duration of dependency is lengthening—the years of compulsory schooling have been prolonged further since Firestone’s time and current economic conditions make it more difficult for even more privileged young people to live without parental support.

In addition to their dependency, Firestone argues, children suffer from sexual repression. While I would not endorse her Freudian framework, and would contest the notion that there is a preexisting “natural” sexuality that can be repressed, what Firestone refers to as “forced asexuality” bears further examination. I have argued elsewhere that sexuality is socially constructed and ordered, and part of that ordering is the marking of sexuality “for adults only.”³¹ The idea that sex is inimical to the well-being of children helps define the boundaries of childhood while supposed sexual risks to children provoke considerable anxiety: about the consequences of too much sex in the media, too early sexual experimentation as well, of course, as the idea that a predatory pedophile lurks around every corner (a fear that eclipses other, more common, dangers). Despite the pervasiveness of sexual imagery in contemporary Western culture there is still an expectation that we should shield children from sexual knowledge. This in turn engenders anxiety about how to let them into the secret: parents often say that they value an open approach to sexuality but in practice find it difficult to discuss sexual matters with children;³² sex education in schools, at least in Britain and the United States, continues to be fraught with controversy and its content tends to be limited and to overemphasize the dangers of sex.³³ This censoring of sexual information is not repression, but it does underline the ways in which childhood is bounded by adult-imposed restrictions often to the detriment of children themselves: vague warnings about “stranger danger” without the knowledge to anticipate what might actually be dangerous may make children more, rather than less, vulnerable to abuse; restrictions on sexual knowledge make coming to terms with sexuality more problematic for children and young people.

When it comes to what she defines as “family repression,” Firestone relies on a citation of R. D. Laing³⁴ and a few quotations from children dissatisfied with their parents—which I find unconvincing. She discusses emotional repression largely in terms of education, which she sees as keeping children’s spontaneity and creativity in check in order that they fit into the routines of school. This may be the case,

but none of us, neither adults nor children, are able to be entirely spontaneous and I wonder whether social life would be tolerable were we able to do so. Here I have the uncomfortable feeling that Firestone is, as in the case with her analysis of sexuality, assuming essential, innate human qualities repressed by social institutions rather than appreciating that we are all products of sociality. I wonder too whether she implicitly presupposes what she sets out to critique—that children are a special category of human beings (in this case especially creative and spontaneous).

It is the case, however, that the confinement of children within families, schools and other specialist settings limits their horizons and their opportunities for wider social contacts. Here, in my view, Firestone is on firmer ground. She draws attention to the ways in which, particularly for middle-class children, their lives are supervised and circumscribed by adults: toys and entertainment are chosen for them, recreation is confined within certain areas, friends are limited to those of the same age, class and neighborhood and they are organized into specific children's groups, clubs and organizations. This aspect of the surveillance and regulation of children has, if anything, intensified since Firestone was writing: first by increasing anxiety about children's safety and secondly by the ways in which "child-centeredness," backed by expert advice, has resulted in parents turning their children into projects to be worked upon. As Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim put it:

It is no longer possible to accept the child just as it is, with its physical and mental peculiarities or even deficiencies. The child itself becomes the focus of parental effort. It is important to correct as many defects as possible... and to encourage skills... There is a whole new market with enticing offers to increase your child's competence, and soon enough the options begin to look like new obligations.³⁵

Today's middle-class Western children have their lives filled with sports activities, dance and music classes and various after-school clubs. Everything is done to nurture particular talents, but since parents usually drive them to these activities and since these activities are designed specifically for children of particular ages their broader social competences may be simultaneously inhibited. In conducting research on parents and children in the late 1990s, one of the main challenges I and my co-researchers faced was organizing interviews with family members around the numerous evening activities in which the children participated. Most of these families were from the

skilled working class or lower middle class—so it may be that the preoccupation with “improving” children may be spreading beyond solidly middle-class households. Parents reported that they rarely allowed children to travel anywhere alone (despite the fact that they themselves had routinely done so when they were the same age). The result was children who lacked the ability to navigate around their own city and interact with strangers (one mother told me how she had needed to teach her twelve year old daughter how to catch a bus!).³⁶

Firestone argues that the only children who partially escape from such regulated routines are poor, ghetto children—but only at the cost of later being crushed by racist and class exploitation. What she does not say—and what has become even more evident today is that such children are subjected to increased state surveillance and control: unsupervised children in public spaces are increasingly seen as a threat to social order. The differing degrees of constraint imposed on children, the varied parental and governmental attempts to improve and contain them, are related to their location within western societies in which material inequalities are increasing, and in which their future prospects are directly related to the outcomes of adult child-surveillance strategies. The intersections between the subordination of children and class, racial and gender divisions are more complex than Firestone’s analysis suggests, but she does at least keep class and racial divisions in view to a far greater extent than many of her feminist contemporaries.

Firestone’s polemic against childhood and her bald assertion that “childhood is hell,”³⁷ are perhaps over-stated, but I suspect that many of us can remember times in childhood when we experienced the humiliations to which she drawn attention—being laughed at or thought “cute” when we were trying to make a serious point or when we betrayed understandable ignorance of knowledge from which we had been excluded, being subjected to unwanted physical intimacy from various aunts, uncles, and family friends (hugs, kisses, hair-ruffling, cheek pinching, and so on)—as well as constantly being reminded of our social and economic dependence on parents. This should be enough to make us question the romanticization of childhood, to think about why childhood is the only form of social subordination valorized as a state of freedom.

Sociologically speaking, childhood *is* a form of subordination and the product of a social division between adults and children and is shaped in intersection with other social divisions such as those based on class, gender and racialization. Childhood is not, then, merely a natural state of immaturity, but a social status defined by social and

economic dependence, subjection to adult authority, exclusion from adult citizenship rights, and by formal and informal practices that mark out the place of children within families, schools and the wider society and locate them as “other” in relation to adults. In the last few decades, sociological work has challenged adult-centered views of childhood, shifting the focus away from children as adults in the making (the “becoming child”), to children as active agents (the “being child”).³⁸ We should not forget, however, that children’s lives are bounded by adult surveillance and that lives are largely controlled by adults who have a great deal of power over them.³⁹ This power generally only becomes something of concern when it is abused—when children are subjected to violence or neglect. But as Christine Delphy reminds us “there can only be an abuse of power when power already exists.”⁴⁰

All this is not to deny the materiality of children’s situation as smaller, weaker, less experienced beings—which, of course, Firestone herself acknowledges. But this is as Barrie Thorne says, “greatly magnified by economic and social organization and cultural beliefs.”⁴¹ This makes issues of children’s rights problematic since in many respects they do need care and protection and cannot be entirely autonomous—certainly not when they are very young. Thorne suggests that we rethink the way we theorize not by prioritizing autonomy but by recognizing that all of us are interdependent, that we “begin with selves defined through relationships with others, retaining full awareness of social hierarchies.”⁴² This might enable us to rethink adult-child relationships without losing sight of their hierarchical nature on the one hand and issues of care and nurture on the other.

Here we need also to consider the limits of the parallels between women and children on which Firestone’s analysis relies. Not only are children necessarily to some extent dependent, but also childhood is a temporary state—all of us were once children. This makes childhood rather different from subordination based on gender and race. As Barrie Thorne observes:

Whereas those of different genders or races rarely cross social categories, in this case the subject/other division masks a running process; children, the subordinates and the other, are daily moving towards adulthood, the dominant position. And the dominants were once subordinates.⁴³

Awareness of the obvious analogies between women and children, then, should not lead us to neglect the equally important differences—and one of these is that women themselves have power over children.

Feminists have generally not confronted this issue. Indeed feminist campaigns for mothers' rights over their children—as opposed to the rights of fathers—have rarely considered that such rights are, as Christine Delphy points out, rights over another category of people. If this is not recognized and if we do not contest the “naturalness” of mothers' relationship to their children, she suggests, the feminist project “becomes a corporatist project, and it no longer deserves to be called a liberation project.”⁴⁴ Delphy maintains that feminists must abandon their claims to a “special” maternal relationship to children if they are to achieve the ultimate objective of overturning the existing gender system—an argument that brings her closer to Firestone's position, though from a rather different direction.

Few, however, have been willing to take up this challenge. The reason why feminists have, with so few exceptions, failed to develop a critical stance on childhood is, I submit, because of a reluctance to challenge motherhood. Despite decades of critiques of essentialism, which should have equipped us with the conceptual tools necessary to question motherhood and childhood more rigorously than Firestone did, maternal values and virtues continue to be valorized. As Delphy has noted there are some aspects of women's “difference” and distinctiveness that even feminists strongly committed to social and cultural analyses of gender seem to want to retain as positive aspects of femininity, as sources of alternatives to masculine values.⁴⁵ It is a brave feminist who challenges this maternalist ethos. Among those who have ventured to do so is Lynne Segal who has suggested that “the virtues of maternal love can be problematic.” Echoing many of Firestone's concerns, albeit from a socialist feminist perspective, Segal goes on to say:

In our intensely individualistic, competitive, capitalist society, love and concern for others become inappropriate outside our very own small family groupings. Class privilege and racist exclusion are most frequently justified, by both women and men, in terms of the interests of one's own children. Narrowly focused on what often seems the threatened and precarious wellbeing of each individual child, maternal behaviour can become over-anxious and controlling, clinging and possessive... Within the context of male dominance, children may be the only reparation for women's frustration and sense of powerlessness. Women's maternal selflessness can become a kind of unconscious maternal selfishness, and an inability to allow children to develop caring relations with others.⁴⁶

While we might all want care for others to be valued, as feminists we should also be prepared to subject the particular forms of caring

associated with maternal values to critical scrutiny as part of familial relations and gender divisions that have served for so long to keep women in their place. A more radical anti-essentialist position on gender should also sensitize us to the ways in which differences between women and men are not simply what is human divided into two, but products of differentiation itself, reflecting relations of dominance and subordination.⁴⁷ This becomes particularly clear when we consider how the values of caring for others and the celebration of women's emotional literacy (frequently contrasted with men's lack of it) are also implicated in women's troubled intimate relationships with men—as is the privatization of caring to which Segal refers. And here, too, in her attack on love and romance, Firestone does not pull her punches.

LOVE, ROMANCE, AND THE PRIVATIZATION OF EMOTION

Love, says Firestone, “perhaps even more than child-bearing, is the pivot of women's oppression today.”⁴⁸ Given the centrality of child-bearing to her analysis, this underlines the importance of love, too. It is love, of course, that binds women into conventional family relationships and thus not only to wifehood, but also motherhood—and to what Firestone sees as the oppression they share with children. There is another implicit connection between her position on childhood and that on love: in both cases she is critical of possessive and, at least to some extent, exclusive relationships.

Firestone was not alone in questioning love—other feminists before her had done so, including the Russian revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai and, of course, Simone de Beauvoir,⁴⁹ and it remained an issue for many feminist writers and activists in the early period of second wave feminism. Love, in particular romantic love, was suspect because it seduced women into lives of domestic drudgery, summed up by the slogan “it starts when you sink into his arms and ends with your arms in his sink.” Firestone, too, sees love as tying women into their subordination but, like Beauvoir, goes further in arguing that love as we know it is symptomatic of the oppressive relationships through which it is expressed. Her analysis contains flashes of insight, but is sometimes undermined by her essentialism and sometimes by the passage of time, which has made some of her observations seem rather dated.

Firestone begins by restating an old question: “What were women doing while men were creating masterpieces”? Her answer is that men

were enabled to think, write and create “because women were pouring their energies into those men” and that women’s lack of cultural creativity results from their preoccupation with love.⁵⁰ This could sound like an old sexist cliché except that Firestone emphasizes that men benefit from women’s love and that “(male) culture was built on the love of women and at their expense.” Women may, as dependants, have been parasitical on the male economy, but “(male) culture is parasitical, feeding on the emotional strength of women without reciprocity.”⁵¹ We might want to challenge this supposed total lack of creativity now that feminists have done so much to recover the work of past women thinkers, writers, artists and scientists, but it has historically been the case that there is a major asymmetry here and that women have, for hundreds of years, more often been supporters of men’s endeavors rather than initiators of their own projects. We might also want to question the continued relevance of Firestone’s claim now that far more women make their mark in the public world—but despite this there is an accumulation of research suggesting that women continue to do the bulk of emotional work in heterosexual relationships;⁵² as well, of course, as much of the care work. There is a parallel between Firestone’s claim that men benefit from women’s love and Anna Jónasdóttir’s far more materialist account of “love power” by which men appropriate women’s capacity to love and care “without giving back in kind” so that women become “empowerers’ of social existence” for men.⁵³ Jónasdóttir argues that, far from declining in importance, this aspect of women’s subordination has come to the fore precisely because of the rights women have gained elsewhere, so that it is now a key site of feminist struggle.

Firestone suggests that culture is “saturated with sexual polarity” and posits a division between the male “cultural half” and the female “emotional half” of the social world.⁵⁴ While this may indeed reflect the way culture has historically been constructed, Firestone here comes dangerously close to essentializing this dichotomy in terms of attributes inherent in men and women, in part because of her reliance, here as elsewhere in the book, on psychoanalysis.⁵⁵ Men are not unaware of the female “half,” she tells us, but “live it on the sly.” They may not take love seriously—the result, she says of the Oedipal situation and their need to reject the feminine in themselves—but they cannot altogether do without it. She thus seems to assume some essential division between the emotional and the cultural and that the socio-cultural order equals the sum of its gendered parts.⁵⁶ She also, as we will see, presupposes that love has some essential properties independent of the social relations and cultural parameters through which it is lived.

Love, Firestone says, is not altruistic but selfish—it is the attempt to “take over” another person: “the self attempts to enrich itself through the absorption of another being.” But love also renders the lover “wide open” to another and thus constitutes a state of total emotional vulnerability.⁵⁷ Thus anything other than a mutual exchange of selves will inevitably be damaging. Love between equals she suggests would be enriching, but this rarely happens. Lovers’ bliss is generally short-lived. Drawing on the work of Theodor Reik she suggests that love turns destructive because it involves the substitution of the other for one’s ego ideal, creating impossibly high expectations, which lead ultimately to disillusionment and the fading of love. Firestone distances herself from Reik, however, by arguing that this destructive cycle is not intrinsic to love but only to “the love process *today*”⁵⁸—love corrupted by power, in its contemporary manifestation as romantic love.

Hence, as in her discussion of childhood, she moves away from universalizing, naturalizing explanations, but in this case only to an extent. The selfishness she ascribes to love, which she claims is not in itself destructive, is posited as love’s essential character—already existing to be corrupted by patriarchal power. The problem with this proposition is that it is difficult to envisage love except through its historically and culturally specific manifestation, to imagine what “it” might be in the absence of social and cultural constructions of it. I would agree that contemporary romantic love is more selfish than it is altruistic, but this selfishness, this desire to absorb and take over the other’s self, to make them the center of our universe and oneself the centre of theirs, could only exist in a society with a highly individualized conception of self-hood. This then, is far from likely to be love in its natural, uncorrupted state (even if such a thing were conceivable).

Despite her essentialist assumptions, however, Firestone does make some telling critical points about love as we know it. Even if we do not accept the language of love corrupted, it is clear that heterosexual love has, through most (or all) of recorded western history, been characterized by “*an unequal balance of power.*”⁵⁹ Once again resorting to psychoanalytic explanations—unnecessarily, in my view, since the point she makes is perfectly sociologically coherent without it—Firestone offers a wonderfully sharp observation of the workings of romantic idealization:

A man must idealize one woman over the rest in order to justify his descent to a lower caste . . . Thus “falling in love” is no more than the

process of alternation of male vision—though idealization, mystification, glorification—that renders void the woman’s class inferiority.⁶⁰

This, according to Firestone, is what enables women to love in return. Women she claims, have no need to idealize men and it is unwise for them to do so since, as she puts it, women’s survival depends on being able “to ‘psych’ men out.” Women know, she says that men’s love is “inauthentic,” but they nonetheless “require proof of it before they can allow themselves to love (genuinely, in their case) in return.”⁶¹ Here we have a curious vacillation between essentialism and social construction. Women do not idealize because of their relative powerlessness—an explanation firmly rooted in women’s social situation—yet the love they “allow themselves to feel” is “genuine,” while that of men is “inauthentic”—returning us to essential emotions that exist outside their social context. Firestone speculates further that some degree of idealization would exist even if “the political context of the love between the sexes” were eliminated—but then it would represent sensitivity to the hidden values of the other rather than “*false* idealization.”⁶²

Returning to the theme of differences between women and men, Firestone quotes Simone de Beauvoir’s famous dictum: “The word love has by no means the same sense for both sexes, and this is one cause of the serious misunderstanding that divides them.”⁶³ She discusses various stereotypes of women’s and men’s experiences of love and draws three conclusions: that “men can’t love,” that women’s “clinging” reflects their objective social situation and that this has not changed significantly. In keeping with her analysis of romantic idealization she suggests that men tend to fall in love with an image, a projection of their own making and thus move swiftly from being besotted with a woman to being disillusioned with her. For this reason, she implies men are more likely to leave women than vice versa—women rarely leave men, she says except when they have “more than ample reason.”⁶⁴ This immediately rings false, as one consequence of the liberalization of divorce laws on both sides of the Atlantic is that women now initiate the bulk of divorces—though possibly still “for more than ample reason”—and thus, in formal marriages, at least, seem to be more prone to leave men.⁶⁵ One aspect of heterosexual relations that Firestone neglects is that marriage benefits men and that they gain a great deal from it (it would hardly have survived were this not the case, for all men’s protestations of female ensnarement).

Firestone suggests that when men are faced with pressure from a partner to commit, this engenders panic, resulting in attempts to

assert their freedom and independence. But, she claims, they nonetheless want to be loved; they seek to do so without making an equal commitment in return. Women, as a result of this male flight from commitment, devote considerable energy to the “manhunt” and develop “subtle methods of manipulation” to catch and keep their man.⁶⁶ They do so in order to gain a sense of self-validation, an assumed escape from inferior status, as well as a source of economic support, which means they are only ever able to love in exchange for the security a man can provide. A woman’s main weapon, says Firestone, is sex. Once a man is snared, both parties are disappointed. She fears that he does not love her for herself and finds that the hoped for elevated status results in little more than being his appendage and domestic drudge; he is looking for a woman to be placed on a pedestal, but once romantic idealization wears off and her discontent becomes evident he is perplexed by her apparent transformation—reflected in the old male line, which Firestone cites “You’re not the girl I married.”⁶⁷ Little, she argues, changed as a result of the sexual revolution. Its effects were simply to take away women’s prime weapon (withholding sex) while duping some into believing that an independent lifestyle and free sexual relations with men could work—only to find themselves loveless and alone, or doomed to being the “other woman.”

The most obvious omission in Firestone’s argument is that she never considers the possibility of love between women as a way out of the binds she describes. But even if we take this as an argument about heterosexual love, surely much has changed? For some, maybe: it is now possible for more privileged, educated women to choose to be economically independent and to perhaps to have more bargaining power within heterosexual relationships. But many still give up their careers to support their men. For less privileged women, given the continued discrepancy in men’s and women’s earning power, living without a man may mean a life of poverty. The sexual revolution has had mixed consequences, in some respects freeing women but also placing more pressure on them to be sexual—and the sexual double standard, while somewhat modified, has not disappeared altogether—rather the line between respectable and disreputable female sexuality has been redrawn. Women appear to be seeking more equitable heterosexual relationships, but the inability of men to commit and their strategies for avoiding it remain the stuff of women’s magazines, popular fiction and self-help books. Women it seems, continue to be searching for love and continue, very often, to be disappointed by the form of it men offer.

Many of the elements of “love gone wrong” that Firestone identifies have continued, over the last few decades, to show up in studies of long-term relationships—women putting far more effort into making the relationship work than men do, women needing to be reassured that they are loved—and men resenting this as nagging.⁶⁸ In *Revolutions of the Heart*, Wendy Langford provides a compelling, empirically grounded account of the career of love relationships from initial bliss and mutuality to conflict and disillusionment that is strikingly similar to Firestone’s description. (This similarity may result from their mutual interest in Reik—though in Langford’s case the theory is backed by data, by interviews with women on their experience of love.) It begins with falling in love and each party being open to the other and equally vulnerable, but when things begin to go wrong women find themselves involved in a downward spiral. When they try to “work at” the relationship, men withdraw, making women feel less secure; men fail to notice women’s distress or communicate with them, exerting their power through withdrawal and silence, so women put even more effort into trying to please their man and make it work, resulting in men’s increased withdrawal (and sometimes hostility and violence) and rendering women more powerless. Thus many of the women she interviewed looked for security in “the very relationship that was undermining them.”⁶⁹ Firestone may be correct to say that little has changed in recent years.

It is specifically romantic love that has these effects and as Firestone describes it this is love corrupted by power into a “diseased form.” While she sees both love and the power imbalance inherent in heterosexual relations as universal, varying only in degree, romanticism is conceptualized as having a history developing when the economic and social bases of oppression are no longer enough to sustain women’s dependence. In keeping with her central (biologically based) thesis she argues that as “civilization advances and the biological bases of sex-class crumble, male supremacy must shore itself up with artificial institutions or exaggerations of previous institutions.”⁷⁰ Hence for, example, the tightening of the boundaries around the nuclear family and the elevation of women to a “status of mock worship” counteracts historical and technological developments that might enable women to break free from their subordination.⁷¹ Romanticism, for Firestone, is a cultural tool that keeps women in their place—but which is also damaging to men—and which works through “eroticism,” “the sex privatization of women” and “the beauty ideal.”

Firestone defines eroticism as the channeling of all our needs for love and warmth into genital sex as the only legitimate outlet for

adult physical affection. But this is asymmetrical—men seeking sex view women in terms of sexual conquest; women become “love objects” to such an extent that they “regard *themselves* as erotic.” In one of the rare instances that Firestone acknowledges anything outside heterosexuality she observes, in a footnote, that homosexuals are ridiculed because they view the male as sex-object, going doubly against the norm since, she suggests, even women do not see men this way. This is something that has changed since Firestone’s era in that the male body has become increasingly eroticized. Yet it remains the case that women’s sexuality is often equated with being “sexy” (sexually attractive) rather than *sexual* (autonomously desiring), so that even feminists can be guilty of reading a woman’s embodied performance of sexiness as an expression of her sexuality.⁷² Indeed Firestone herself does this, although in her case the reduction of sexuality to sexual attractiveness is symptomatic of women’s subordination.

The rather odd phrase “the sex privatization of women” refers to the ways men view women, as sexual objects, as essentially all alike but persuade women “that what she has in common with other women is precisely what makes her different” so that women equate their “sexuality” (sexual attractiveness) with their individuality.⁷³ Firestone suggests that women are conned by this, for example, by taking generalized compliments to women as personal compliments and being flattered by what we would now call sexual harassment. What men “really” think of women is revealed in male-only “bull sessions” or when men are angry with “their” women. While there is little doubt that such objectification still exists, it has become less acceptable and women have become less accepting of it. We should also be wary of assuming that men’s macho posturing in homosocial contexts reflects what they really think.⁷⁴ Yet we still live with uncomfortable indications that women may continue to value themselves in terms of this “false individuality” and with the problems that arise when “the ‘chick’ graduates to the ‘old bag’ and finds that her sexual attractiveness has vanished—and this is particularly evident in relation to what Firestone calls “the beauty ideal”⁷⁵

Firestone recognizes that ideals of beauty are culturally and historically variable. The ideals, she claims, serve a political function in that most women cannot attain them but spend much of their time desperately trying to approximate to them because “their social legitimacy is at stake.”⁷⁶ Paradoxically women thus strive to express their individuality through appearance by becoming more and more alike. If anything, this preoccupation with appearance has become even more marked with the increasing acceptance and practice of cosmetic

surgery—which may also have the effect of making the bodies subjected to it even more uniform. But, Firestone notes, with remarkable prescience, the amplification of this as a result of modern media is also entrapping men in image consciousness while also intensifying the eroticization of women to the point of “erotomania”: “From every magazine cover, film screen . . . subway sign, jump breasts, legs, shoulders thighs.” It is also creating contradictions in that the “work” of feminine beautification is revealed to men through the advertising of the products needed to sustain it. This may, she suggests, be backfiring since the media have, in effect, “exposed the degradation of femininity.”⁷⁷ Certainly these issues are now much more often publicly debated, but the amplification of this eroticization and its contradictions are even more evident today.

In this discussion of romanticism, Firestone seems to have moved a long way from love, but what she seems to be arguing is that romantic love, as love corrupted by inequality and power, depends on these processes whereby men objectify and stereotype women as a class—apart from the one they idealize as their chosen love object by elevating her above the rest. Firestone does not want to do away with love or with the excitement of eroticism; rather she seeks to redefine both. She concludes with a flourish:

Why has all joy and excitement been concentrated, driven into one narrow, difficult-to-find alley of human experience, and all the rest laid waste? When we demand the elimination of eroticism, we mean not the elimination of sexual joy and excitement but its rediffusion . . . over the spectrum of our lives.⁷⁸

This is an inspiringly radical thought—but also, in the light of what has gone before, somewhat confusing. I have, in the past, read it as an attack on the exclusivity of romantic love and the privatization of emotion, concentrating it on the heterosexual couple. This is certainly one reading, and Firestone is consistently critical of the closing in of the nuclear family and its isolation from the rest of social life—which would make this interpretation more credible. There is a strong echo of this interpretation of Firestone in Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh’s characterization of “the anti-social family” written ten years later:

It is as if the family had drawn comfort and security within itself and left the world bereft. As a bastion against a bleak society it has made that society bleak . . . Caring, sharing and loving would be more widespread if the family did not claim them for its own.⁷⁹

Such a radical reading of Firestone's conclusion is, perhaps, derailed by her characterization of love. Her insistence that love itself, in the sense of losing oneself in another, is both essential to human nature and potentially positive, undermines her critique of contemporary intimate relations since it seems to take as given the monogamous couple as the locus of love. We are left with a conundrum—can we diffuse eroticism over all of our lives while still maintaining the exclusivity of love? I think not. And, to return to the issue of childhood, can we eradicate the negative consequence of children's dependence while the monogamous heterosexual couple remains the privileged site of adult love relationships? I think it unlikely. Yet there is still hope here in Firestone's vision of an eroticism that is not reducible to genital sex and close personal relationships that are not confined within families, which might make it possible to recuperate a more radical, less couple-oriented, interpretation of Firestone's view of love—and this would certainly be more in keeping with her analysis of childhood.

IN DEFENSE OF RADICALISM

What would I take from Firestone's analysis? Her analysis of childhood is, for me, both more radical and more convincing than her perspective on love. Central to her argument is the privatization of family life: it is this that makes children's dependence into a state that secludes them away from wider social relations and makes them more vulnerable to abuse. It also produces a situation where being without a partner or children can lead to loneliness and lack of social support—perhaps something a young feminist in the early 1970s could not be expected to notice. While seriously flawed, her dissection of love as pivotal to women's subordination still does, at some points, hit home and it would seem that love is still a troubling experience for heterosexual women. Firestone's most obvious failing is that she does not directly confront the institutionalization of heterosexuality, though she strikes at its heart: the mythology of romantic love that sustains it and the assumption that children should be the exclusive responsibility of their parents. She was not, of course, alone in this since, in the early 1970s, very few feminists extended critiques of heterosexual relations to include heterosexuality as such.

In the intervening decades the stability of heterosexuality in the Western world has come to look more precarious, with women seeking greater sexual autonomy, more frequently delaying or eschewing marriage or escaping from unsatisfactory unions while at the same

time lesbian and gay lifestyles have become more available and tenable with the expansion of citizenship rights. Some have argued that this has resulted in a “queering” of intimate familial relationships.⁸⁰ I am more skeptical. It may be that heterosexual bonds are now more fragile and queer alternatives more visible, but there is little evidence that the appeal of monogamous love has disappeared and the normalization of homosexuality may actually simply be extending “family values” rather than undermining them. In many respects Firestone’s vision of radically different forms of love and childrearing potentially queers our understanding of the family far more fundamentally than many of the changes that have actually occurred—especially if we make a more radical interpretation of her view of love. Firestone opens up utopian possibilities close to those imagined in Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*,⁸¹ where a potential future is one where non-monogamy is normal and where children (in addition to being gestated outside the womb) have more than two parents and are not excluded from adult society.

Such radicalism is no longer a prominent feature of feminist thought—it was born of a more optimistic era in which we thought we could change the world and a politics of the personal in which attempts were made to live our politics, to find alternative, less oppressive, ways of relating to others. Feminist analysis has, since the time when Firestone was writing, become more pessimistic about the possibility of radical change (though sometimes more optimistic about what is achievable in the present). There have been gains in the process, in the move away from totalizing claims and greater sensitivity to differences among women—though Firestone was more attuned to issues of race and class than many at the time. We are now more aware of the dangers of essentialism (and not only in its obvious, biological forms) and should, therefore, recognize that what childhood means and what love means differ in different parts of the world and that they are not natural facts of life. Greater theoretical sophistication, however, has often come at the cost of losing sight of feminist goals and the barriers to achieving them.

Firestone’s perspective was profoundly humanist in both positive and negative senses—positive in that she does not, despite her biologism, condemn men as irredeemable beasts but rather hopes for a world that might be better for all of us; negative in that her critique is limited by appeals to universals of human “nature” despite her acknowledgement of the ways in which our relationships and desires are shaped by the social world we inhabit. Whatever her shortcomings, Firestone had the courage to give shape to utopian dreams, to

imagine a social world radically different from the one in which we live today, a world in which sexual dichotomies would be eradicated and in which men and women, adults and children could meet as equals.

NOTES

1. See Alison Jagger, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Savage, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 1985).
2. Jagger, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, 91.
3. Jagger, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, 154.
4. For accounts of developments in childhood studies see Chris Jenks, *Childhood* (London: Routledge, 1996) and Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout, *Theorizing Childhood* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998).
5. Among the few feminist works on childhood are: Stevi Jackson, *Childhood and Sexuality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982); Barrie Thorne "Revisioning Women and Social Change: Where are the Children?" *Gender and Society* 1, no. 1 (1987); Christine Delphy, "Mothers' Union?" *Trouble and Strife*, 24 (1992).
6. Thorne, "Revisioning Women and Social Change," 96.
7. See, e.g., Nancy Chodorow and Susan Contrato, "The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother," in B. Thorne and M. Yalom, eds., *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions* (New York: Longman, 1982); Diane Richardson, *Women, Motherhood and Childrearing* (London: Macmillan, 1993); Steph Lawler, "Children Need but Mothers Only Want: The Power of 'Needs Talk' in the Constitution of Childhood," in J. Seymour and P. Bagguley, eds., *Relating Intimacies: Power and Resistance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999).
8. A prime example is Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).
9. See Thorne, "Revisioning Women and Social Change."
10. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (originally New York: William Morrow, 1970; this edition New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 65.
11. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 67.
12. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 67ff.
13. Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962).
14. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 68.
15. For a summary of the main criticisms of Ariès, see Colin Heywood, *A History of Childhood* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).
16. Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1990); Heywood, *A History of Childhood*.
17. David Archard, *Children: Rights and Childhood* (London: Routledge, 1993). See also Heywood, *A History of Childhood*.

18. See, e.g., Jenks, *Childhood*; R. Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes, "Imperiled and Perilous: Exploring the History of Childhood Sexuality," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 21, no. 4 (2008).
19. Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (London: Routledge, 1989); R. Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes, "Developing the Sexual Child," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 21, no. 4 (2008).
20. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 78.
21. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 79.
22. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 80, ellipses in original.
23. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 80.
24. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 83.
25. Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xiii.
26. This argument has been developed at length in a number of publications I have co-authored with Sue Scott, see especially "Risk Anxiety and the Social Construction of Childhood," in D. Lupton, ed., *Risk and Sociocultural Theory: New Directions and Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); "Childhood," in G. Payne, ed., *Social Divisions*, second edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); *Theorizing Sexuality* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2010).
27. Barrie Thorne, in "Revisioning Women and Social Change," later made the same point.
28. For empirical confirmation of this point see Virginia Morrow, "Responsible Children? Aspects of Children's Work and Employment Outside School in Contemporary UK," in B. Mayall, ed., *Children's Childhoods: Observed and Experienced* (London: Falmer, 1994).
29. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 87.
30. See Jackson and Scott, "Risk Anxiety and the Social Construction of Childhood" and "Childhood."
31. For fuller discussions of childhood and sexuality see Jackson and Scott, *Theorizing Sexuality*. Note that, unlike Firestone, I am not suggesting that children are naturally sexual, or that they are naturally asexual. They are what it is socially possible for them to be and become.
32. Sue Botcherby and Sue Scott, *Parents as Sex Educators* (Report for Durham Education Authority, 2004); Jane Frankham, "Sexual Antinomies and Parent/Child Sex Education: Learning From Foreclosure," *Sexualities* 9, no. 2 (2006).
33. Jane Pilcher, "School Sex Education: Policy and Practice in England 1970 to 2000," *Sex Education* 5, no. 2 (2005); Judith Levine, *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Michelle Fine and Sara McLelland "Sexuality Education and Desire: Still Missing after All These Years," *Harvard Educational Review* 76, no. 3 (2006).

34. In *The Politics of the Family* (London: Tavistock, 1969) and elsewhere, Laing argues that the internal dynamics of family life are inherently damaging to psychological well-being, especially of children.
35. Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), 129.
36. This research was carried out with Sue Scott, Kathryn Backett-Milburn, and Jennifer Harden and funded by the ESRC.
37. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 93.
38. See, James, Jenks, and Prout, *Theorizing Childhood*, 207.
39. For a fuller development of the argument presented in this paragraph and for an overview of sociological approaches to childhood see Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott "Childhood."
40. Delphy, "Mothers' Union," 19.
41. Thorne, "Revisioning Women and Social Change," 103.
42. Thorne, "Revisioning Women and Social Change," 105.
43. Thorne, "Revisioning Women and Social Change," 102.
44. Delphy, "Mother's Union," 19. See also Christine Delphy "Changing Women in a Changing Europe: Is 'Difference' the Future for Feminism?" *Women's Studies International Forum* 17, no. 2 (1994).
45. See Delphy, "Mothers Union" and "Changing Women in a Changing Europe," and also "Rethinking Sex and Gender," *Women's Studies International Forum* 16, no. 1 (1993).
46. Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female?* (London: Virago, 1987), 5–6.
47. See Delphy, "Rethinking Sex and Gender."
48. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 113.
49. Alexandra Kollontai, *Sexual Revolution and the Class Struggle* (1919; Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1972); Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).
50. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 113.
51. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 114.
52. See, e.g., Jean Duncombe and Dennis Marsden "Love and Intimacy: The Gender Division of Emotion and Emotion Work," *Sociology* 27, no. 2 (1993); Wendy Langford, *Revolutions of the Heart* (London: Routledge, 1999).
53. Anna Jónasdóttir, *Why Women Are Oppressed* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 100, 13. See also Jónasdóttir's recent article, "Feminist Questions, Marxist Method and the Actualization of 'Love Power,'" in Anna B. Jónasdóttir and Kathleen B. Jones, eds., *The Political Interests of Gender Revisited* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2009). Here she argues that the appropriation of love power is increasingly evident in the public domain of work with the shift to people-centered service industries and the development of a management rhetoric of care and trust.
54. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 114.
55. Although, as Jagger says (*Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, 92), Firestone "de-biologizes" Freud in seeing the construction of

- masculinity and femininity as a product of male power rather than anatomical or inherent psychic differences, she nonetheless often takes psychoanalysis as describing certain essential human qualities.
56. This kind of reasoning assumes that in an equitable society the two would be recombined to make an androgynous whole—rather than that gender division produces characteristics that may not exist without it. This line of reasoning is not uncommon. For a critique see Delphy, “Rethinking Sex and Gender.”
 57. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 115.
 58. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 116, italics in original.
 59. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 116, italics in original.
 60. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 118.
 61. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 118.
 62. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 118–19.
 63. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, in Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 121.
 64. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 121.
 65. Indeed men often claim to be unaware that there was anything “wrong” with the relationship at the point that women initiate divorce proceedings.
 66. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 123.
 67. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 127.
 68. E.g., Penny Mansfield and Jean Collard, *The Beginning of the Rest of Your Life: A Portrait of Newlywed Marriage* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988); Duncombe and Marsden, “Love and Intimacy”; Langford, *Revolutions of the Heart*.
 69. Wendy Langford, *Revolutions of the Heart*, 140.
 70. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 131.
 71. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 131–32.
 72. For a discussion of this equation of sexuality with sexual attractiveness see Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott “Faking Like a Woman,” (*Body and Society*, 2007).
 73. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 134.
 74. Empirical research with boys and young men has revealed that when they are interviewed in group situations they often maintain a mask of hegemonic masculinity, including negative attitudes to women, but when interviewed alone they reveal far more vulnerability. See, e.g., Ann Phoenix, Stephen Frosh and Rob Pattman, “Producing Contradictory Masculine Subject Positions: Narratives of Threat, Homophobia and Bullying in 11–14 Year Old Boys,” *Journal of Social Issues* 59, no. 1 (2003).
 75. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 135.
 76. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 136. Somewhat simplistically Firestone sees such ideals as male defined. More objectionably she sees them as being defined by “misogynist” gay men—but she was not alone in this.

77. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 138.
78. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 139.
79. Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family* (London: Verso, 1982), 80.
80. Sasha Roseneil "Queer Frameworks and Queer Tendencies: Towards an Understanding of Postmodern Transformations of Sexuality," *Sociological Research Online* 5, no. 3 (2000); Sasha Roseneil and Shelly Budgeon, "Cultures of Intimacy and Care Beyond 'The Family': Personal Life and Social Change in the Early 21st Century," *Current Sociology* 52, no. 2 (2004); Judith Stacey, *In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).
81. Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (London: Women's Press, 1979).

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Toward a Cybernetic Communism: The Technology of the Anti-Family

Nina Power

In *The Dialectic of Sex* Shulamith Firestone declares her version of communism to be the most radical yet incorporating and extending the vision of hitherto existing revolutionary thought through the inclusion of two often-ignored components of human and social life—the unconscious and the family. In her own words, “[i]f there were a word more all-embracing than *revolution* we would use it.”¹ To this polemical end, she seeks to combine a reading of Freud with a radical critique of the nuclear family in terms of the possibilities presented by reproductive and workplace technology. Among Firestone’s ultimate demands are the freeing of women from the “tyranny” of reproduction and the equal and collective sharing of childrearing. The implication of the former change would, Firestone thinks, threaten the family in radical ways. Coupled with her second major demand, “the political autonomy, based on economic independence, of both women and children,”² this combination of economic, political, and biological freedom as a whole Firestone calls “cybernetic communism.” The complete “integration” and “sexual freedom” of all women and children would accompany and follow from the political freedom granted by the reorganization of the family structure in the wake of technological emancipation from childbirth.

Firestone’s vision of a future without natural inequality or the nuclear family is breathtaking in its scope as well as in its conviction that technology holds the key to the emancipation of women and children. However, her argument is not without serious problems, practical as well as theoretical. This essay, though greatly sympathetic

to Firestone's aims, addresses three of these problems. The first is ontological, the second temporal, and the third historical.

The first is the deepest and concerns the concept of "nature" at work throughout *The Dialectic of Sex*. Firestone envisions that technology will get rid of nature, as we have historically understood it, with particularly far-reaching implications for women. At the same time, however, she posits the existence of a supposedly "natural" pansexuality that will become unfettered once reproduction is no longer tethered to human biology. However, it is not clear that Firestone is justified in imagining that the death of one nature will lead to the emergence of a second nature—why would technology destroy one and unleash another? What sense would it make to talk of "nature" at all if technology will so radically transform our relation to its historical meaning? In this sense her project for a "cybernetic communism" takes into account both productive and reproductive aspects of human life and labor. Although Firestone's acknowledgment that the personal (the unconscious sexual drives) is not only political but also more fundamental than the political—and indeed structurally prior to any political scenario (democratic, repressive, or revolutionary) makes for a serious and unique challenge and possible contribution to historical materialism, her use of the terminology of the natural/non-natural, in particular, ultimately poses more questions than answers.

The second problem concerns the *sequence* of Firestone's projected revolution. At points she writes as if scientific progress will be the catalyst for social change and at others as if cultural shifts must predate the progressive implementation of scientific developments. The first position leaves her open to accusations of technological determinism, the second to free-floating utopianism. How can she mediate between the two poles?

My final criticism of Firestone concerns the practical developments that have taken place in the field of reproductive technology since the publication of *The Dialectic of Sex*. Although many of her predictions in regard to technological developments have in fact come to pass in the years since her work appeared, it is starkly obvious that the socio-sexual changes that she suggested would ensue as a result of these changes have not, even if we take the one side of her argument that cultural change must precede technological change. Rather than Firestone's pansexual utopia, these developments have in fact inaugurated the increasing privatization of reproduction within the family, with collective approaches to family life only appearing in reactive, religious forms (the evangelical Christian attack on birth control and

abortion, for example). Ultimately there are specific reasons why Firestone's revolution did not happen; nevertheless she makes urgent and important claims that still bear upon the future of feminism and the political lives of women.

THE END OF NATURE?

Firestone's approach to the question of sex is refreshingly blunt. Sex difference is real. Men and women exist, and possess asymmetrical physical capacities that have historically made existence for women extremely difficult and frequently unpleasant or even lethal. Firestone's particular strand of materialism is therefore not only historical but also profoundly biological, thus material in an older, more classically philosophical sense. We can compare Firestone's materialism to the explicitly "vulgar" materialism of La Mettrie for whom "[t]he human body is a machine which winds its own springs. It is the living image of perpetual movement."³ Firestone accepts that culture and history have played important roles in shaping the way we conceive of men, women, (and children) and their differing roles but that underlying all these interpretations are some basic anatomical continuities—unchangeable until now. It is not therefore economic class that underlies oppression but biological and physical characteristics. As she puts it: "Nature produced the fundamental inequality."⁴ This claim about the reality of sex difference and its natural consequences—there are women and there are men and women suffer precisely because of their womanness—puts her at odds with the majority of feminism, past and present. She is interested neither in more subtle analyses of the cultural meaning of sex and gender, nor in reclaiming a positive essence of female physicality (celebrating birth, for example, or the specificities of female sexual experience). As Stella Sandford puts it: "On the main points that constitute her distinctive contribution to feminist theory she finds herself in opposition to the mainstream of US radical feminism."⁵

Firestone is unusual in taking the premise so often used by conservative thinkers of one stripe or another—that women and men are recognizably and naturally different both biologically and culturally—but uses this as the background for her projected revolution, by accepting that *thus far* history has not yet managed to discover a way out of this predicament. For Firestone, it is not the case that anatomy is destiny, but rather that *it has been*, in fact that for the whole of human history this has been true, but need not be any longer. Firestone can, without too much difficulty, be seen as a thinker

belonging to a certain strand of Enlightenment thinking, not the liberal branch that would advocate slow and steady social reform and change within existing institutions, but the kind of thinking that wholeheartedly advocates the integration of technology into human life and the revolutionary potential for its transformative possibilities. She acknowledges that at present technology can and has been used for disastrous and oppressive ends (forcing women into sterilization programs, permitting doctors control over women's reproductive capacity, etc.), but that this is not an inherent feature of technology as such. Just as her "vulgar" materialism puts her closer to La Mettrie than to Marx, her pro-technological approach puts her closer to an Enlightenment thinker such as Voltaire, with his celebration of science, than to many of her 1970s theoretical peers, the latter of whom are more concerned with the horrific legacy of the gas chambers or the impact of human beings on their environment than with a bright new future of machines. Indeed, Firestone's attitude toward the environment and any negative human impact is arguably rather cavalier. It is probably too late, she says, to redress natural balances. All we can hope for is to establish an artificial (manmade) balance "in place of the natural one, thus also realizing the original goal of empirical science: human mastery of matter."⁶

Her "technofeminism," then, is dissimilar to the technofeminisms of others who later actually coined the word, as it is predicated on the assumption that it is both possible and desirable to totally dominate and overcome nature, human and beyond, rather than on the celebration of the liberatory potential of forming other identities in cyberspace, for example. As Judy Wajcman puts it in *Technofeminism* "Cyberfeminists have coffee in cyber-cafes, surf the Internet, and imagine a gender-free future in cyberspace."⁷ If anything, Firestone puts the techno-theorizing of the late twentieth century into sharp relief, revealing the shamefully apolitical and escapist nature of such projects, which cannot help but exclude the majority of the world's women and lack any serious claim about the link between technology and emancipation. Rather than do away with sexual difference in the playground of a virtual world, Firestone reminds us through her vulgar materialism that to even have a choice about contraception is perhaps a more pressing need for real, nonvirtual women than the opportunity to perform ambiguity in cyberspace.

Though many criticize Firestone for her overly optimistic conception of technology, it is on the more fundamental question of her definition of nature that her argument about technology flounders. Although Firestone starts with the premise that there *is* a natural sex

difference, before moving on to show how technology can put an end to the historical ignominy of biological asymmetry, another kind of unexamined nature—the presupposition of a “natural” polymorphous perversity that would include all kinds of physical behavior, from the sexualized to the merely affectionate—suddenly takes the place of the older, unwanted nature. In many ways, Firestone does not take her own argument about the transformative capacities of technology seriously enough, resorting to the uncritical positing of an ontological wellspring of physicality that somehow underlies current social, cultural, and political organization. What if the very mechanism that allows for the separation of physical interaction from reproduction is the same mechanism that kills the desire to engage in such behavior? In the case of the contraceptive pill, researchers at Boston University Medical College found that women who take the pill regularly have much lower levels of the hormone that drives sexual desire.⁸ Although this example alone is not enough to “prove” that reproductive technology does not release a wellspring of desire, but rather suppresses it, it does indicate an unexamined aspect of Firestone’s theory of natural sexuality.

Given her initial suspicion of “nature,” where does her faith in a *second* nature come from—one which, unlike the usual concept of “second nature,” is both primordial *and* can only be attained through technological change? The clue lies in her claim that: “Women and love are underpinnings. Examine them and you threaten the very structure of culture.”⁹ Firestone’s second nature depends upon an ontological conception of love as that which will exist after or beyond technology. In this respect, Firestone can be usefully compared to the Young Hegelians and their insistence on the ahistorical and generic function of love. Ludwig Feuerbach, for example, states: “No living being is destined for happiness; but all are destined for life precisely because they live. Love, however, is the life of life.”¹⁰ Love for Feuerbach is an ontological feature of human beings, that which underlies the alienations of religion, philosophy, and atomized social life. For Firestone too, although it is technology rather than humanism that permits the revelation of love, love is the “underpinning” that unites sexual and nonsexual modes of behavior together in a continuous whole. But is there any such thing as a natural love of the species for itself? It may be for Firestone that “Pregnancy is the temporary deformation of the individual for the sake of the species,”¹¹ but why is love somehow more natural than pregnancy, for example? Why is social-affection more “true” than the affection a mother feels for her own child?

The point here is not to deny the role and importance of love in human relationships and the need and desire for physical contact, but to raise a note of skepticism that reproductive technology would somehow be capable of unlocking some underlying immanently normative, wholly positive, humanist physicality. After all, according to her own argument, what would be left of the “natural” such that one could base a futural politics upon it? Firestone’s Reichianism betrays her more radical commitment to the mechanization of desire. In the end, she is too simplistically caught up in the opposition between a “good” sexuality (open, generous, indifferent to its object, anti-familial) and a “bad” sexuality (depressing, routine, domesticated). Firestone is ultimately less straightforwardly conceived of as a Marxist than as a radical feminist follower of Wilhelm Reich. Reich of course certainly considered himself a Marxist of sorts, but both he and Firestone share the fundamental assumption that sex (in both senses) precedes class. As Reich puts it, “[*The*] process of sexual selection is older than the ‘class conflict’ between man and woman and is the cause of this antagonism.”¹² In Firestone’s words, there is “a level of reality that does not stem directly from economics.”¹³ Firestone calls this expanded historical materialism “sex class,” in much the same way that Reich talked about the “social sex-economy.” When Firestone speaks of developing a materialist view of history based on sex itself,” we should hear the word “sex” in both senses, as in the biological differentiation of the human animal and the physical behavior that would fall under the category of the sexual (although Firestone aims to shift the implications of this category to include all forms of physical affection across all ages and all social relations). By getting rid of the family and its universal “malpsychology,” “we would in effect be doing away with the repressions that mould sexuality into specific formations.”¹⁴ Again, “If we dismantle the family, the subjection of ‘pleasure’ to ‘reality,’ i.e., sexual repression, has lost its function; and is no longer necessary.”¹⁵

The liberating potentiality of reproductive technology in the forty years since Firestone wrote her short book has, if anything, only proved the tenacity of the nuclear family and the ever-widening gulf between public and private life. It may be that Firestone’s time has not yet come, in which case we may need to propose technological innovations yet more radical than even she imagined. But the implications of technology for sexual and social life seem nowhere near as straightforward as she imagines, either in the present or in the future. How does technology relate to wider cultural shifts? Does one necessitate the other? Is it a “cybernetic communism” or a “communistic cybernetics?”

THE TEMPORALITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Although Firestone is unusual among feminists for being so unguardedly pro-technology, there is a very real, practical sense in which she has a point—perhaps the Enlightenment, understood as the rational application of technology and science in the name of improving the lives of individuals, bears greater emancipatory potential for the concrete lives of women than of men. Firestone broaches and celebrates the teleological drive of technology head on: “Empiricism is only the means, a quicker and more effective technique, for achieving technology’s ultimate cultural goal: the building of the ideal in the real world.”¹⁶ But which comes first, technology or cultural change? This section addresses the ambiguity of temporality in Firestone’s vision.

Firestone stands out among both feminists and twentieth-century intellectuals in this unconstrained love of the machine, which she alternatively describes as cybernetics—a kind of “acceleration” of scientific understanding of human functions.¹⁷ Indeed there is something futurist about her commitment to the transparencies and totalizations of science, which makes her an extremely rare kind of feminist indeed. Futurism in its early-twentieth-century formation was explicitly misogynistic, consigning women and their wombs to a dead era to be replaced by speed, transport, war, and chaos. As Marinetti puts it in the 1909 Futurist Manifesto: “We want to glorify war—the only cure for the world—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas which kill, and contempt for woman.” There are further parallels. In her all too brief discussion of art, Firestone shares the same disdain for the current organization of culture as the Futurists did, which she calls “the death of aesthetic humanism.”¹⁸ For Marinetti too, museums were to be compared only to cemeteries. However, the *telos* of Firestone’s vision is not war, as it was for many of the Futurists, but a holistic, expanded notion of culture itself: “The merging of the aesthetic with the technological culture is the precondition of a cultural revolution.”¹⁹ It should be noted that this is a common motif in Firestone’s work—the attempt to remodel a concept in terms of expanding and thus destroying its original narrower meaning. The revolution will change what we mean by sexuality, culture, and nature. Fusing the aesthetic with the technological (which Firestone somewhat bluntly describes as female and male modes) will create an “androgynous culture” that will instigate a kind of “matter-antimatter explosion” canceling out culture altogether: “The *id* can live free.”²⁰ But would this expanded, holistic notion of culture in which the *id* can truly express itself in art

and physicality be remotely interesting? Although Firestone begins in many ways from Freud's insights into the nuclear family, she refuses the argument that repression plays a necessary role in the creation of culture, looking forward instead to a future in which free desire will express itself in every way.

Firestone's futurism can productively be compared to the ideas expressed by two other thinkers—both concerned with technology, though in quite different ways—Herbert Marcuse and Leon Trotsky. For Marcuse, writing in *One-Dimensional Man*, the lure of futurism is an illusion: “In the construction of the technological reality, there is no such thing as a purely rational scientific order; the process of technological rationality is a political process.”²¹ Clearly Firestone sees technology as being put to use for political ends, but does she have a politics of technology itself? For Marcuse “When technics becomes the universal form of material production, it circumscribes an entire culture; it projects a historical totality, a ‘world.’”²² It is not merely that technology has the power to harness and control nature but that there is nothing natural about the course of technological development, which should be borne in mind at all times, if one is to remain critical. For Marcuse technology has multiple implications with regard to nature and the individuals that fall under its worldview: “Nature, scientifically comprehended and mastered, reappears in the technical apparatus of production and destruction which sustains and improves the life of the individuals while subordinating them to the apparatus.”²³ Although technology may improve the lives of those who use it, as Firestone, quite correctly, certainly believes, it may not always remain in the service of the ideals to which we are committed. It may not eradicate sexism in the way Firestone would desire, as William T. Blackstone points out: “Oppression . . . could exist even under conditions in which some biological differences are minimized (strength, for example) or in which certain biological functions (childbearing) are not performed by women but by machines.”²⁴

But it is clear that overall Firestone has no truck with a certain strand of critical thought that would be suspicious of unmediated notions of progress and an unfettered celebration of technology. However, her implicit point about a gendered relationship to technology is of some importance. There is absolutely no doubt that access to contraception, safe abortions, and supervised childbirth drastically improves not only the quality of life of women, but also their chances of survival, full stop. But do these innovations give hints of a feminist revolution to come or can they in fact be perfectly well accommodated by the existing capitalist order?

Apart from the relatively minor cultural impact (at least according to Firestone's standards) that technological innovation has had in the forty years since she wrote her book (further discussed in section three), there is a confusion in *The Dialectic of Sex* about the *order* of her revolution-beyond-revolution. Is it that technology will necessarily destroy existing institutions such as class and the family? Or that a cultural takeover of technology is required before science can be steered in the right, feminist direction? Does Firestone fall prey to a kind of technological inevitabilism that leaves her open to criticisms of historical determinism? At times Firestone does indeed seem to imply that there is something necessarily prior about technological development: "Empirical science is to culture what the shift to patriarchy was to the sex dialectic, and what the bourgeois period is to the Marxian dialectic—a latter-day stage prior to revolution."²⁵ At other points her claim seems closer to a proposal to change the culture of the family before technology can release a true "human condition": "our final step must be the elimination of the very conditions of femininity and childhood themselves that are now conducive to the alliance of the oppressed, clearing the way for a fully human condition."²⁶ And: "until the decision not to have children or to have them by artificial means is as legitimate as traditional child-bearing, women are as good as forced into their female roles."²⁷

The problem here is twofold. The first is the difficulty of bringing to the forefront something that is supposedly hidden. As Firestone says: "Sex class is so deep as to be invisible."²⁸ Like Freud's "unconscious," which is revealed only in moments of breakdown and lapses of speech, the unspoken acceptance of the nuclear family must be revealed in all its contradictions. But surely technology will need a hand in doing this? Although Firestone is explicit about her desire to fuse this broader historical materialism with Freud, she argues that analysis is a weak solution to the problems that Freud identifies: "Freudianism was the perfect foil for feminism, because, though it struck the same nerve, it had a safety catch that feminism didn't—it never questioned the given reality."²⁹ But how would technology itself "question the given reality" without help from consciousness-raising (to use an old-fashioned term) on the part of those who could see the progressive potential of that technology? This, as Marcuse saw it, is a political problem. Yes it is true that women are at the continual mercy of their biology, true that human infants take a long time to grow up, and true that mother/child interdependency shapes the psychology of both mothers and their children; it is true that "[t]he biological family is the vinculum through which the psychology of power

can always be smuggled.”³⁰ We can agree with Firestone and Engels that reproductive difference between the sexes is the first division of labor, or as Engels puts it: “According to the materialistic conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life.”³¹ Yet, seizing the means of reproduction is not merely a historical inevitability, nor something that the technology itself will invoke. Firestone misses a crucial dimension of human life (and feminist history), namely politics. Without political organization, any response to technology will either be overly conditioned by that technology itself or will bear no relation to the aims supposedly at stake. This is the point that Sandford makes in “Sexmat Revisited”:

But with no distinction between a political and a biological concept of sex, Firestone’s thoroughgoing and often pitiless account of how sex matters in every aspect of social and economic life, its structural importance, falls, disastrously—and, it must be said, sometimes comically—into the grounding thesis of the inherent inequality of biological sex difference and its primary explanatory importance and the proposals for the abolition of biological reproduction. The contradiction between the assertion of the “biological reality” of sex division and its eventual disappearance is in fact the dialectic of *The Dialectic of Sex*, the exposure of the error of its starting point.³²

Politics mediates nature and technology, and has to if progressive or revolutionary projects are to be advanced. Without a conception of politics or strategy, Firestone oscillates between grandiose technofuturism and baseless speculation. The scope of her project can usefully be compared to Trotsky’s claims at the end of *Literature and Revolution* in which he states:

The care for food and education, which lies like a millstone on the present-day family, will be removed, and will become the subject of social initiative and of an endless collective creativeness. Woman will at last free herself from her semi-servile condition. Side by side with technique, education, in the broad sense of the psycho-physical molding of new generations, will take its place as the crown of social thinking. . . . Man, who will learn how to move rivers and mountains, how to build peoples’ palaces on the peaks of Mont Blanc and at the bottom of the Atlantic, will not only be able to add to his own life richness, brilliancy and intensity, but also a dynamic quality of the highest degree. The shell of life will hardly have time to form before it will burst open again under the pressure of new technical and cultural inventions and achievements. Life in the future will not be monotonous.

Trotsky's new man, and the women liberated from "semi-servility," herald a time in which human creativity and technological dynamism fuse in the name of a "non-monotonous future" (but again the worry about Firestone's unleashed id comes back—what if total lack of repression creates nothing new?). But Trotsky too leaves open the question of whether these transformations take place in a certain order. At one point he suggests that:

The human species, the coagulated *Homo sapiens*, will once more enter into a state of radical transformation, and, in his own hands, will become an object of the most complicated methods of artificial selection and psycho-physical training. This is entirely in accord with evolution.

If this transformation is "entirely" in accord with evolution, then what makes it such a radical break? And what does evolution mean once it has been taken into mankind's own hands? Surely any notion of nature that once was operative is now completely redundant? Although Trotsky and Firestone are very close in many respects—the emphasis on technology, the total reform of culture—they differ on the priority given to economics and sex. For Trotsky:

Man first drove the dark elements out of industry and ideology, by displacing barbarian routine by scientific technique, and religion by science. Afterwards he drove the unconscious out of politics, by overthrowing monarchy and class with democracy and rationalist parliamentarianism and then with the clear and open Soviet dictatorship. The blind elements have settled most heavily in economic relations, but man is driving them out from there also, by means of the Socialist organization of economic life. This makes it possible to reconstruct fundamentally the traditional family life.³³

In other words, economic reform precedes changes to traditional family life, but for Firestone, as we have seen, it is "sex class" that underlies economic disparity. Indeed, all socialist revolutions are doomed to failure, she argues, unless they take the family into account. The family structure thus underlies economic oppression, is indeed its source. Sex class precedes economic class. In a specific instance that relates very directly to Trotsky's arguments above, Firestone states "the failure of the Russian Revolution to achieve the classless society is traceable to its half-hearted attempts to eliminate the family and sexual repression."³⁴ But is Firestone too quick to dismiss the Soviet project? Soviet theorists foresaw relations based on

“free union” or “free love,” much as Firestone does (although Goldman notes that “Lenin . . . strongly disliked these terms because of their association with bourgeois promiscuity”³⁵). There were also important tensions in the formulation of the Soviet question on sex and family matters. Alexandra Kollontai, who founded the Women’s Department in the Soviet administration, was more radical than Lenin in her far-reaching ambitions for the transformations of sex relations and is in many ways a kind of precursor to Firestone. Kollontai famously argued that “In nature there is neither morality nor immorality . . . the satisfaction of healthy and natural instinct only ceases to be normal when it transcends the limits established by hygiene.”³⁶ Kollontai recognized that free love alone would not solve the problems of sexual inequality unless total reform of the family was carried out.

The Soviet Union under Lenin, despite its marriage, divorce, and childcare reforms, did not yet have the technology to make clear the link between reform at work (the inclusion of women in the workforce) and the total reform of family life as Firestone does. The Soviet attempt to transform the nuclear family was stymied by a number of factors: war, poverty, lack of education, and as yet undeveloped technology. This meant that any utopian ambitions along the lines of Firestone’s unobstructed pansexuality were difficult to achieve and often counterproductive. As Goldman puts it: “The idea of ‘free union’ had tragic and unforeseen consequences for women as long as they were unable to support themselves and their children.”³⁷

Yet the question of the *order* of the feminist revolution rears its head once more when Firestone is contrasted with the actual historical process of reform in the Soviet Union after the revolution. If the Bolsheviks strongly emphasized waged labor as a prerequisite for women’s liberation it was because they felt that economic reform would produce social reform. The Soviets based female emancipation on the inclusion of women in the labor force: “women would only be free if they entered the world of wage labor.”³⁸ And indeed women’s inclusion into the workforce has had massive effects on the way we regard their purpose, capacities and social-reproductive role. But Soviet reforms indicate another potential criticism of Firestone’s techno-futurism, namely that what might need to take place before the transformation of technology in a progressive vein is the transformation of social relations, and not the other way around. When the Soviet Women’s Congress of 1927 called for a system of communal dining because women were still not free from the “family burden” it was clear that work alone was not changing patterns of family behavior.

While the Soviets proposed the socialization of housework and child-care, Firestone leaves almost everything to the machine, which will fix housework, reproduction, and the working day. The Soviets needed to make strategic decisions about everyday oppressions, with the state playing the role that Firestone accords to technology: "Society will feed, bring up, and educate the child."³⁹ But society is comprised of its members and of the relations between them.

In the end, then, technology may well be secondary with regard to the social relations without which technology has no inherent transformative capacity. But how has technology actual played out in the lives of women at home and in the workplace in the years since Firestone wrote her polemic?

THE PRIVATIZATION OF THE PRESENT

Given the 40-year gap between *The Dialectic of Sex* and today, and given Firestone's belief in the progress of technology, are there hints of the kinds of freedoms afforded by developments in contraception, for example? Of course, it is not simply the case for Firestone that technological developments will straightforwardly lead to the dissolution of family structures or the destruction of class relations, as control of the means of (re)production is critical in terms of its future development, yet there is much optimism in her project, as if all of these transformations were just around the corner. Cybernetics ("the full takeover by machines of increasingly complex functions"⁴⁰) and the control of fertility will "so radically redefine our relationship to production and reproduction" as to require "the destruction at once of the class system as well as the family."⁴¹ Nevertheless, if Firestone is correct in the details about the far-reaching cultural changes that supposedly accompany technological innovation in the realm of the biological (materially speaking, widespread use of contraception, in-vitro fertilization (IVF), test-tube technology, etc., all of which have become much more widespread since the publication of *The Dialectic of Sex* in 1970) then presumably hints of her progressive vision would have begun to appear in the realm of the domestic, and subtle shifts in the perception of the nuclear family would be underway. But it is not at all clear that this is the case.

In the final section of the book, "The Ultimate Revolution: Demands and Speculations," Firestone again points to the historical specificity of her call to arms, as if *The Dialectic of Sex* could only have been written at the point at which the total overcoming of nature could be expressed: "the biological family unit has always oppressed women

and children, but now, for the first time in history, technology has created real preconditions for overthrowing these oppressive ‘natural’ conditions.”⁴² However, it is one thing to say that a certain kind of analysis is possible at a certain moment in history, and quite another to think that certain *practical* consequences follow from the possibility of being able to make this argument. On this point it is interesting to compare Firestone to other more recent attempts to promulgate the idea that it is only now that a certain kind of labor has become prevalent that we can make general claims about human nature. Unlike Firestone, however, whose analysis is resolutely material—even down to her explicit portrayal of pregnancy (as her friend tells her, “like shitting a pumpkin”)—for thinkers such as Paulo Virno it is the *immateriality* of contemporary life that reveals certain possibilities for political change. Virno’s wager is the following—that it is only now, when the differential traits of the species (that is, that which separates us from other animals; namely, verbal thought, the transindividual character of the mind, neoteny, the lack of specialized instincts) are the “raw material” of capitalist organization that we can return again to the question of a politics of human nature. Thus the problem of the “natural” emerges contingently, that is, at a certain historical moment, yet as if for the first time.⁴³ Virno reminds us of Marx’s claim from the “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” of 1844: “It can be seen how the history of industry and the objective existence of industry as it has developed is the open book of the essential powers of man, man’s psychology is present in tangible form.”⁴⁴ But the difficulty here for Virno is identifying the cracks in the edifice—what separates the exploitation of human capacities under “biolinguistic capitalism” from the resistance to such forms of exploitation? Firestone is faced with a similar problem, as it is technological innovation that will ultimately reveal a supposedly natural, underlying sexuality. Firestone’s initial commitment to sexual difference does however suggest an interesting critique of contemporary theories of immaterial labor. While many have noted the “feminized” nature of contemporary work, there is often the absence of a discussion of what to do with the supposedly revenant philosophical anthropology when the sexed nature of capacity and its transformation is taken into account. If philosophical anthropology reveals not immaterial capacities (language skills) but the kinds of capacities that Firestone identifies—the natural, unfair distribution of biological capacities—then what effect does this have on any theory of work? Capitalism cannot deal adequately with pregnancy, but neither perhaps can its autonomist alternatives. Firestone’s brutal materialism can be usefully resurrected in the age of immaterialism.

For Virno, immaterial labor indicates the basic elements of human cognitive capacity in the present. For Firestone, this revelation is a little way off but eminently thinkable, for example when she says of reproduction: “Soon we shall have a complete understanding of the entire reproductive process in all its complexity, including the subtle dynamics of hormones and their full effects on the nervous system.”⁴⁵ Firestone’s quest for scientific transparency is in keeping with her turbo-Enlightenment approach to human development, but the implications of technology on labor, and the treatment of men and women by a certain technicized work should be noted. Firestone, however, radically overestimates the impact of machines on the need to work in the future: “Machines . . . could act as the perfect equaliser, obliterating the class system based on exploitation of labor.”⁴⁶ Possibly they could, but it is manifestly clear that the cybernation of work has not led to emancipation for their operatives. The precariousness of and lack of specialized skills required for most informational jobs (beyond learning how to use a computer or a telephone) have meant that women in particular are at risk of becoming dispensable. This chimes with the recent claim that in the economic downturn in 2008–9 women were losing jobs twice as fast as men.⁴⁷ Agency work in the European Union (EU), often advertised as a “flexible” option for women, is explicitly precarious (no more than 13 weeks at any one place otherwise the company would have pay for a week’s holiday) and means that no one working for the agency has any idea about who their colleagues are (how many people are on the agency’s books? Where do they work?)⁴⁸ Firestone recognizes that the alienation of work has its own effects, for example, when she discusses how cybernation “aggravates the frustration that women already feel in their roles, pushing them into revolution.”⁴⁹ But this is to drastically underestimate the prolonged and increased alienation that technology has in fact brought to the workplace.

Though Firestone could not have predicted that the technological revolution is all too compatible with the continuation and extension of the status quo (although she does, it should be noted, foresee the internet: “why store facts in one’s head when computer banks could supply more comprehensive information instantaneously?”⁵⁰), she perhaps could have recognized that work would have had a rather more predatory relationship to the machine than any revolution, feminist or otherwise. Firestone misses the all-pervasive relationship of work to social life in general, seeing perhaps the inclusion of women in the workforce as a sign that collective working life and the alienation of the workplace might lead to broader cultural shifts, rather

than yet more atomization. When theorists of immaterial labor talk about the bleeding of the working day into time previously regarded as private (being called at home, answering emails in the evenings to give two concrete examples), this observation should be accompanied by an analysis of the impact of these machines on the relationship between workers and their bodies. The “aggravation” that Firestone predicted never transpired. Instead we have what we might call a private mechanization and a public mechanization, an unstable and unhappy relationship between the technologies available to the self and the technologies of the workplace. If anything the two are even further apart, that is to say, less on the cusp of revealing their revolutionary potential, than in Firestone’s day.

Is the political alienation of workers of a greater order than the alienation of women’s capacity to reproduce? Or does one underlie the other? Eleanor Burke Leacock notes that “In some ways it is the ultimate alienation in our society that the ability to give birth has been transformed into a liability.”⁵¹ But why has it been transformed into a liability? The technologies that Firestone projected—IVF, wide access to contraception, advice, and abortion, test-tube technology—are here, at least in richer parts of the world. And yet there is no collective understanding of or concern for such technologies. Depressingly enough, the politicization of birth control and any organized response to it comes from the side of reaction (the Evangelical pro-life movements). The atomization of the female worker and her inclusion into the workforce is predicated on the idea that her reproductive life is her concern...until such time as it impacts upon her job, of course. Capitalism, particularly in its neo-liberal formation, has not dealt with reproduction, which it both needs in the long run (more workers) but abhors in the short term (the expense of maternity leave, and so on). Indeed, if contemporary capitalism had a say in it, it would probably wish that the dystopian reading of Firestone’s hope for total mechanization had come true, and that babies could be cheaply produced by machines and cared for by robots until such time as they could be put to work in call centers.

As it is, the privatized understanding of contraception (whether you are on the pill, use condoms, do not have sex, are trying for a child) is precisely that—a matter for the individual. Pregnant female workers are pitted against childless women who are asked to resent those who “choose” to have children. Technologies in which Firestone saw so much potential, such as IVF, are often used as a kind of resort after women have delayed childbirth in order to maintain their position in the workforce and pursue their careers. Here advanced technology and

the scientific understanding of complex hormonal processes as Firestone envisaged are put to work in the name of the individual worker and not in the name of women as an oppressed sex class at all. The idea of regarding one woman's reproductive choice as any business of anyone other than her and her family is unthinkable as part of a progressive project. Does Firestone allow for the fact that technology could individualize rather than collectively politicize? What would a follower of Firestone have to say about the religious Right's monopolization of the collective implications of reproductive technology (especially its profound conservatism)? Contemporary forms of collectivity that involve considerations of the public implications of reproduction seem to be restricted to religious movements and are as far from Firestone's Reichian reflections as they could be. Again Firestone has underestimated the political implications of technological progress, omitting to countenance the idea of a fierce backlash against the developments achieved by the science of reproduction.

But perhaps, in a more limited way, there are flashes of hope here and there. In discussions of recent civil partnership reforms in the United Kingdom it was briefly mooted that the legislation could include atypical relationships that did not involve any sexual relation—for example, relations between a patient and his or her carer, or between siblings. Ultimately test cases failed, such as that between two sisters who wanted to ensure that they had the same rights as heterosexual and, more recently, homosexual couples.⁵² But that the conversation took place at all opens up territory already staked out by Firestone in 1970. When she muses on the possibility of “trans-sexual group marriages which also involved other children” and suggests that “enduring relationships between people of widely divergent ages would become common,”⁵³ the promise of the acceptability of non-traditional relationships is raised. What little progress we have made since Firestone may be seen here, even if there is still a long way to go. It may be that the implications of asexual relations are in the long run more profound than those of a directly sexual nature, which would certainly be one direction in which to take Firestone's diffusion of sexuality to every aspect of life.

Fighting at the level of the unthought of oppression itself, Firestone's project is an eminently difficult one. Enlisting elements of Freud's theoretical work into a communist project that goes beyond the vision of Marx and Engels themselves, all within the bounds of a short polemic, was bound to mean leaps in argumentation and disparities with the world in which it ultimately finds itself. As we have seen, Firestone's “materialist view of history based on sex itself” lacks

a political dimension, as Sandford points out, but it is also fatally ambiguous over the concept of nature at stake as well as the temporality of technological and cultural changes. Firestone's arguments are not irrelevant by any means, as they serve as a useful corrective to the idealist excesses of contemporary theories of cyberspace and immaterial labor and provide us with a practical template against which to judge the present. *The Dialectic of Sex* also forces us to rethink our conception of sexual existence. "Why," Firestone wrote, "has all joy and excitement been concentrated, driven into one narrow, difficult-to-find alley of human experience, and all the rest laid waste?"⁵⁴ If Firestone's technological revolution is to be preserved, it should be in this most joyful of modes.

NOTES

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2. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 186.
3. La Mettrie, *Man A Machine* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1912), <http://www.cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/LaMettrie/Machine/>.
4. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 184.
5. Stella Sandford, "Sexmat, Revisited," *Radical Philosophy* 147 (September/October 2007), 29.
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7. Judy Wajcman, *Technofeminism* (London: Polity, 2004), 3.
8. Ian Sample, "Taking the Pill Could Reduce Women's Libido, Scientists Claim," *The Guardian*, May 26, 2005.
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11. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 180.
12. Wilhelm Reich, *The Invasion of Compulsory Sex-Morality* (London: Penguin, 1971), 151.
13. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 7.
14. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 54.
15. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 56.
16. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 162–63.
17. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 162.
18. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 167.
19. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 158.
20. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 174.
21. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (London: Routledge, 1964), 168.
22. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 154.

23. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 166.
24. William T. Blackstone, "Freedom and Women," *Ethics* 85, no. 3 (April 1975: 243–48), 245.
25. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 163.
26. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 94.
27. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 182.
28. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 3.
29. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 64.
30. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 12.
31. Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, ed. Eleanor Burke Leacock (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 71.
32. Sandford, "Sexmat, Revisited," 32.
33. All three quotations are from Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, Chapter 8, "Revolutionary and Socialist Art," http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/ch08.htm.
34. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 190.
35. Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State & Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life 1917–1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 7.
36. Quoted in Goldman, *Women, the State & Revolution*, 7.
37. Goldman, *Women, the State & Revolution*, 143.
38. Goldman, *Women, the State & Revolution*, 11.
39. Alexandra Kollontai, "Communism and the Family," *Selected Writings* (London: W. W. Norton, 1977), 134.
40. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 176.
41. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 183.
42. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 175.
43. Paulo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (New York: Semiotexte, 2004).
44. Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844," *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1975), 453.
45. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 179.
46. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 183.
47. Isabel Oakeshott, "Women Losing Jobs Twice as Fast as Men," *Sunday Times*, January 25, 2009.
48. Interestingly, Firestone proposes that one interim way of reducing the desire for women to reproduce is to increase and extend the prevalence of "lifetime jobs" or single professions: "A single life organised around the demands of a chosen profession, satisfying the individual's social and emotional needs through its own particular occupational structure," 204.
49. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 184.
50. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 212.
51. Introduction to Engels's *Origin of the Family*, 40.

52. Frances Gibb, "Sisters Joyce and Sybil Burden Lose Legal Appeal Over Death Duties," *The Times*, May 30, 2008.
53. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 209.
54. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 139.

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Integration, Intersex, and Firestone's Dialectic

Mandy Merck

Seeking precedents for their struggle for equality, the feminists of the 1960s readily turned to the American civil rights movement. Simone de Beauvoir, the dedicatee of *The Dialectic of Sex*, had herself taken Gunnar Myrdal's 1944 study of "The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy," *The American Dilemma*, as a model for *The Second Sex*, noting Myrdal's own "very interesting analogies between Negroes' and women's status."¹ And, like their nineteenth century abolitionist predecessors, a number of the founders of Women's Liberation had been anti-racist activists early in the 1960s, while Black Power offered an even more militant model at their end. As Shulamith Firestone writes:

the issue of racism now stimulated the new feminism: the analogy between racism and sexism had to be made eventually. Once people had admitted and confronted their own racism, they could not deny the parallel. And if racism was expungeable, why not sexism?²

Firestone hails the public acknowledgement of racial subordination as an important source of encouragement, of belief in the possibility of similarly acknowledging the injustice and non-inevitability of male dominance. She also cites the strategic lesson learned from Black Power, as the radical movement for African American pride and self-sufficiency was known, about "the right of the oppressed to organize around their oppression *as they see and define it*."³ But she does not withhold from black activism the criticism of male chauvinism she aims at the white

Left. Moreover, as feminist critics have complained, her critique of the nuclear family combined with her own perceptions of the libidinal ties between black and white Americans to develop into a highly reductive attempt to attribute the nation's racism to patriarchy.

Problematic as this analysis has proved to be, Firestone also acquired from the civil rights movement a conceptual terminology and political objective so apparently obvious as to escape comment—"integration" versus "segregation." Although she stresses the importance of women organizing separately against their own oppression, Firestone was not a separatist. On the contrary, she proposes radical feminism "as central to any larger revolutionary analysis"⁴ and seeks to export it as widely as possible. And, as her highly critical remarks on women's sexual behavior, artistic endeavors, and "mother-love" indicate, she was not an exponent of what would now be understood as a positive feminine "difference." Her aim is to release women and men from the culturally gendered⁵ dyad of the "subjective, intuitive, introverted, wishful, dreamy or fantastic" and the "objective, logical, extroverted, realistic"⁶ into a society undivided by genital differences. This she calls "integration."

Firestone's repeated use of this term, both in its precise historical meaning and in a broader metaphorical sense, signals a particular understanding of the relations between men and women that she seeks to change, as well as the dialectical process predicted to bring that change about. Although her argument for racism's origins in sexism is itself racist in conception, the analogy she draws between racial and sexual segregation is too important to ignore. Not only does it inform her own account of the subordination of women and children, it survives in an important successor text, Martine Rothblatt's transgender manifesto *The Apartheid of Sex*. This essay is an attempt to think through that analogy and to demonstrate its—perhaps surprising—salience to some contemporary discourses on sex.

UNISEX

Published in 1970, *The Dialectic of Sex* is the product of the radical imaginary of its time, one that had broken with the sexual styles of postwar America to experiment with "unisex." The word, as commentators often complain, is not unambiguous, ostensibly designating the convergence of sexual characteristics, in practice referring to the adoption of similar clothing and coiffures by women and men. After the rigid dichotomies of the panty girdle and the grey flannel suit, the 1960s ushered in shared fabrics (denim), garments (trousers), and hairstyles (long). But, whether as street style or as formalized by

designers such as the provocative Rudi Gernreich (who claimed invention of the trouser suit for women), these fashions often maintained or even intensified the gender distinctions they purported to contest. Thus Gernreich's notorious topless bathing suit featured straps across the cleavage that made the bared breasts look even more prominent. The contradictory implications of this sartorial movement were effectively admitted in 1970, when the designer officially launched his "unisex look" and predicted that "it's inevitable that men's and women's clothes will become alike. I believe the similarity will make their anatomical and spiritual differences more evident."⁷

The Dialectic of Sex offers no praise for these "freedoms of clothing."⁸ Never a champion of the hippie movement, Firestone ignores the shared bell bottoms and love beads to criticize the simultaneous vogue for shorter skirts, flimsier fabrics, and discarding the bra, arguing that this had simply become the next, even more exhibitionist, stage of standardized femininity, one that enforced dieting, cosmetics, and—in an astute anticipation of our botoxed age—the unchanging, immobile face. "Feminists," she cautions, "need not get so pious in their efforts that they feel they must flatly deny the beauty of the face on the cover of *Vogue*. For this is not the point":

The real question is: is the face beautiful in a *human* way—does it allow for growth and flux and decay, does it express negative as well as positive emotions, does it fall apart without artificial props—does it falsely imitate the very different beauty of an *inanimate* object, like wood trying to be metal?⁹

But if unisex did little to combat what Firestone calls, long before Naomi Wolf, "the Beauty Ideal," the concept still retained a radical political significance. Writing in 1970, Kate Millett—previously allied with Firestone in *New York Radical Women* and the author of that year's other major American feminist treatise, *Sexual Politics*—declares "unisex" essential for a "feminist revolution," defining it "as the end of separatist character structure, temperament and behavior, so that each individual may develop an entire—rather than a partial, limited and conformist—personality."¹⁰

Nowhere does Millett's term appear in *The Dialectic of Sex*, but her appeal for an end to the social and subjective "separation," "limits," and "partiality" of sexual dualism is echoed in its pages: "The sex role system divides human experience; men and women live in these different halves of reality; and culture reflects this."¹¹ Drawing on an eclectic range of authorities (Reik plus Reich plus social interactionism),

Firestone decries the “division,” “polarity,” and “segregation” of human beings, attributing it to a fundamental dichotomy in human societies, founded in “the sex distinction itself.” Her term for the resolution of this “schism” is “androgyny,” a characteristic said to be evident in the work of only a few twentieth century writers who “have overcome this division...by physically identifying with the female (Proust), by imaginarily crossing the line at will (Joyce), or by retreating to an imaginary world rarely affected by the dichotomy (Kafka).”¹² Here a strong aesthetic perspective is apparent in what is, after all, the work of a fine arts graduate, whose belief in “truth to materials” informs her objection to the painted female face. Firestone’s most detailed proposal for the integration of the sexes claims derivation from C. P. Snow’s “two cultures,” but her anticipation of the integration of the “subjective, intuitive, introverted, wishful, dreamy or fantastic” and the “objective, logical, extroverted, realistic”¹³ harks back to an earlier theory, one that influenced Hegel’s dialectics, the synthesis of thought and perception argued by Schiller to create beauty.¹⁴ A similar combination by cancellation characterizes Firestone’s prediction that

What we shall have in the next cultural revolution is the reintegration of the Male (Technological Mode) with the Female (Aesthetic Mode), to create an androgynous culture surpassing the highs of either cultural stream, or even of the sum of their integrations. More than a marriage, rather an abolition of the cultural categories themselves, a mutual cancellation...¹⁵

In both her use of the term “androgyny” and its artistic illustration, Firestone is undoubtedly indebted to Carolyn Heilbrun, whose hugely influential 1964 study, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*, would go into seven editions. Its introduction opens by declaring that “our future salvation lies in a movement away from sexual polarization and the prison of gender toward a world in which individual roles and the modes of personal behavior can be freely chosen...a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes, and the human impulses expressed by men and women are not rigidly assigned.”¹⁶ And in the book’s final chapter—an early rehabilitation of the Bloomsbury Group—Heilbrun anticipates Firestone by arguing that this condition “is possible, perhaps for mysterious reasons, only to a society that does not consider women defined by their love of men and children.”¹⁷

For Firestone there is no mystery here. *The Dialectic of Sex* offers a detailed explanation of how women’s subordination derives from their relations with men and children, beginning with their physical functions in regard to reproduction—menstruation, gestation,

lactation. The debilities and dependencies resulting from these are argued to underpin both a gendered division of labor (“sex class”) and a gendered paradigm of discrimination (“sex caste”). Echoing the Marxist imperative to abolish not only poverty but also class, she proclaims the goal of feminist revolution to be “not just the elimination of male *privilege* but of the sex *distinction* itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally.”¹⁸ Pursuing her argument, Firestone sketches the inclusive, integrative, socialized consequences of this revolution (if conducted, she stipulates, in concert with both an economic and cultural one):

1. “the incorporation of the neglected half of human experience—the female experience—into the body of culture, to create an all-encompassing culture”;¹⁹
2. full equality, integration, and economic independence for women and children, liberated from the biological family to live in licensed households of chosen cohabitantes and contribute to social production. Childbearing would be—electively—automated when technology permitted and childrearing shared between men, women, and other children. Motherhood as well as biological kinship would be abolished;
3. Consequently, sexual pleasure would be freed from Oedipal taboos, genital focus, and the restrictions of couple exclusivity.

To a considerable extent, the fate of Firestone’s theories corresponds to that of unisex or androgyny more broadly, which declined within the few years between the poet Adrienne Rich’s passionate 1973 proclamation in “The Stranger”:

if they ask me my identity
 what can I say but
 I am the androgynous
 I am the living mind
 you fail to describe
 in your dead language²⁰

and her 1978 recantation in “Natural Resources”:

There are words I cannot choose again:
 humanism androgyny [...]

 their glint is too shallow, like a dye
 that does not permeate
 the fibres of actual life
 as we live it, now²¹

As Rich's second poem suggests, one early feminist objection to facile proclamations or proposals of androgyny was the perceived profundity of female subordination, "so deep as to be invisible" as Firestone characterizes "sex class."²² And with the turn to psychoanalysis came the claim that sexual identity is, however fantasmatically, intrinsic to the formation of subjectivity. Conversely, other critics complained that the concept of androgyny reifies gendered subject positions,²³ subtly implying both their heterosexual complementarity and the male priority in the term's etymology. In regard to the first group of objections, Firestone clearly challenges the naturalization of a reproductively based division of the sexes—"You can't change that!"—with a forthright insistence on the mutability of "fundamental biological conditions," given developments in technology and the social context in which those conditions are lived;²⁴ and her rationalist rereading of Freud dispenses with depth psychology altogether. But on the question of androgyny's reification of the heterosexual hierarchy it purports to challenge, she seems surprisingly vulnerable. Although *The Dialectic* predicts that artificial reproduction would render genital differences culturally insignificant and abolish sexual taboos, its imagination of this postpartum existence is posed ambiguously. The opening prediction that "an unobstructed pansexuality [Freud's 'polymorphous perversity' refracted through Marcuse] would probably supersede hetero / homo / bi-sexuality"²⁵ is later revised to propose that "people might still prefer those of the opposite sex simply because it is physically more convenient,"²⁶ "for sheer physical fit."²⁷ Admittedly Firestone questions whether "a purely physical factor could be decisive"²⁸ and pronounces vaginal orgasm "a myth."²⁹ Yet the assumed anatomical complementarity of straight sex radically undermines her prophecies of a future "transsexuality"—indicatively used as a synonym for "pansexuality" rather than the curiously ignored, although already familiar, phenomenon of transgender identification and bodily alteration.

But if *The Dialectic of Sex* now seems haplessly heterosexist, its equivocal treatment of masculinity is even more striking. To be sure, Firestone condemns the male confusion of sexuality with power and argues against making women "like men, crippled in the identical way."³⁰ Still these statements stand in strange juxtaposition to her account of the "asexual" identification of the prepubescent girl:

anything that identifies her with the mother she is trying so hard to reject is also rejected. But that a small girl on her own will see herself as of the same sex as her mother is much less likely than that she will see herself as asexual. She may even be proud of it. After all, she has no

obvious protrusions, like the breasts that mark the female for her. And as for her genitals, her innocent slit appears to bear no resemblance to the hairy mound that her mother has: she is seldom even aware that she *has* a vagina because it is sealed. Her body as yet is as limber and as functional as her brother's, and she is at one with it.³¹

This seems to be a rewriting of Freud's discussion of the little girl in his lecture on "Femininity," and what a rewriting it is. Far from being asexual, the little girl in Freud's account is clitorally sensitive and romantically attached to her mother. Her later hostility is said to be incited by the recognition that this parent cannot provide her with the envied penis. Firestone rejects this explanation to argue that what is envied is actually men's "access to that interesting wider world that is denied her mother,"³² a fairly routine claim at the time, and wholly in accord with her "feminist translation"³³ of psychoanalysis. But her abject description of the maternal body, with its "hairy mound" and "protrusions," and her elegiac evocation of the girl's—"innocent," "sealed," "limber and functional"—prompts questions about the writer's own identification. Setting aside her uncharacteristically³⁴ traditional portrait of childhood as an idyll of unalienated physical existence prior to a fall into gender and division, we might ask if the body that child is "at one with" is her own or her brother's? If the latter, Firestone has ironically arrived at the same point as Freud, who locates the preoedipal girl at the phallic stage of sexual development, calling her a little man.³⁵

Critics of androgyny often charge it with androcentrism, the mere addition of feminine characteristics to a singular norm of masculinity, "monosexualité" in Irigaray's term. More recently, certain articulations of queer theory have been accused of reinstating such a norm by exempting sexuality from "the enmeshments and constraints of gender (read: women) and, thus, even from the body."³⁶ From a similar perspective, Elizabeth Spelman has arraigned Firestone, and her mentor Beauvoir, for "somatophobia," fear or disdain of the embodiment traditionally associated with subordinated populations. Taking up Adrienne Rich's reconsideration of maternity in *Of Woman Born*,³⁷ Spelman accuses both Firestone and Beauvoir of effectively upholding the misogynist distinction between female nature and male culture traced in *The Second Sex*. Their lament of women's "biologic fate," as Beauvoir puts it, is criticized for seeking to disassociate woman from the body, rather than the body from its negative characterization. Thus, she argues, they fail to distinguish between motherhood as a patriarchal institution and motherhood as an experience open to the transvaluation advocated by Rich. Spelman's term for this

theoretical disembodiment is “abstraction,” ceasing to think of women in terms of their physical characteristics, “such as womb and breast.”³⁸ Such a conceptual move is warned not only to wrest women’s lives from their historical materiality, but also—following the analogy posed between sexism and racism—to encourage a disregard for their other physical characteristics, notably “the skin and hair” that can signify racial difference. While stipulating that such features do not constitute racial identities, Spelman stresses the influence of the meanings associated with them on personal experience: “Women’s oppression has been linked to the meanings assigned to having a woman’s body by male oppressors. Blacks’ oppression has been linked to the meanings assigned to having a black body by white oppressors.”³⁹ Again following Rich, on white feminists’ inattention to the different experiences of black women, she detects a similar abstraction from the political consequences of embodied particularity in Firestone’s claim that “*racism is sexism extended.*”⁴⁰

THE SEX/RACE ANALOGY

To understand why Firestone would even attempt such an argument, it is necessary to recall the U.S. politics of the 1960s. Although historians suspect the motives of the Southern congressman who at the last minute inserted an amendment into the 1964 Civil Rights bill adding sex to the prohibited categories of discrimination in employment, it is significant that the liberal Democratic congresswoman who had proposed the previous year’s Equal Pay Act, Oregon’s Edith Green, opposed it on the grounds that racial discrimination caused far more suffering. Other northern Democrats, mindful of union objections to the amendment, followed suit.⁴¹ Like the Equal Pay Act, the amended Civil Rights bill passed, but contests over the primacy of racial and sexual struggles for justice persisted. As Firestone observes, some of the most radical militants in early women’s liberation had been active in the 1960s civil rights movement, and they came to see male dominance as comparable or even prior to the reluctantly acknowledged evils of racism. Alice Echols argues that their “tendency to subordinate class and race to gender and to speak hyperbolically about a universal sisterhood was in large measure a reaction to the left’s penchant for privileging class and race over gender.”⁴² Not untypically, after an indicative discussion of the parallel between wives and slaves drawn by Aristotle, Kate Millet writes in *Sexual Politics* that “sexism may be more endemic in our own society than racism.”⁴³ Similarly, she offers the term “interior colonization” to

describe institutionalized male “rule” as “sturdier than any form of segregation . . . perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and [providing] its most fundamental concept of power.”⁴⁴

In her characteristically synthetic style, Firestone took this argument much further in the fifth chapter of *The Dialectic*, writing what is less an analysis of the relations between sex and race in 1970 America than a melodrama of conflicted kinship entitled “Racism: The Sexism of the Family of Man.” The allusion is again to art, the 1955 Museum of Modern Art exhibition of work by photographers from 68 countries curated by Edward Steichen and later published in several mass marketed editions. Purporting to document the universality of experiences such as romance, birth, and death, “The Family of Man” became a humanist cliché in mid-century America. Firestone opens her discussion by consigning this universalism to the pre-Black Power days of the early civil rights movement, when “black people were ‘colored people,’ they wanted only the same simple things uncolored people wanted (‘we’re just folks’).”⁴⁵ Critiquing (*pace* Spelman) the liberal occlusion of “the obvious physical, cultural and psychological differences” between black and white Americans—and noting those of income in a statistical footnote ranking black men’s below white men’s but above both white and black women’s—she moves on to Eldridge Cleaver’s prison writings and the fiercely antagonistic responses his sexually charged prose provoked in white men. “Why,” she asks, “is racial prejudice so often phrased in sexual terms?” Her answer begins with the family, whose Latin origins in *familia*, “the total number of slaves belonging to one man”⁴⁶ she had previously noted. Literalizing Steichen’s title, she argues that “the races are no more than the various parents and siblings of the Family of Man.”⁴⁷

In Firestone’s punning treatment, this family is indeed the man’s, the white American patriarch said to rule over the white “wife-and-mother” with “the blacks, like children, his property.” Perceiving their mutual oppression, the white Mother (capital M courtesy of Firestone) may then make common cause with her black Son in a vicarious political identification with antiracist struggle doomed to end in her tears (the term “hysteria” is actually used) and his “bitterness” when the ambivalent bond between them breaks down. True to form, this connection is characterized as sexual, and again illustrated artistically, with the black Son’s plight evoked via a synopsis of Amiri Baraka’s 1964 play *Dutchman*: a middle-class black man is reluctantly attracted to a blonde temptress on a subway train, discovers a mutual understanding, only to be betrayed in a murder justified by her false accusation of rape. As for the black Daughter, she is said to transfer

her affection from the white Mother, with whom she initially sympathizes, to the more powerfully perceived white Father, whom she may imitate or desire in competition with the Mother. In aggressive language emulating Cleaver's, this rivalry is said to translate into racial antagonism, with black women regarding whites as "frigid bitches" and whites denouncing them as "sluts."⁴⁸ The relation between the two communities at large is that of white rape in the "black ghetto Whorehouse," where the black Sister is pimped by her abusive black Brother to maintain the hypocritical fidelity of white middle-class marriage: "And *that's* why there is no family solidity in the ghetto."⁴⁹ Calling for the white wife and the black whore to recognize that The Man (race now unspecified) is their mutual enemy, Firestone leaves the last word to Cleaver, whose confession of his own violently tyrannical ambitions punctuates her warnings of the equally patriarchal proclivities of Black Power.

"Is the writer doing comedy here, or have we misread her text?"⁵⁰ Hortense Spillers's question is not rhetorical. Firestone's narrative of racism as a product of the nuclear family tasks her synthetic powers to absurdity. In particular her argument that all children are in some sense the property of their parents is simply incommensurate with the realities of actual enslavement. To both Spillers's and Spelman's despair, history, in this case the brutal history of race in the United States, is effectively ignored. Despite her acknowledgement of nineteenth century feminism's relationship to abolitionism, the devastations of slavery and its aftermath—a history that predated the arrival of most of the white "parents" into the country—is scarcely acknowledged in an account of racial politics written a mere century after the Emancipation Proclamation. Nor, despite the footnoting of median income levels for white male and female Americans one-third higher than those of their black counterparts, does the word "poverty" appear. And, although aimed at the dubious universalism of Steichen's exhibition, her pun on "the family of man" has a sinister resonance in the racist theories of the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel, who labeled his 1912 illustration of evolutionary ascent from ape to African to Asian to classically rendered European a "family group"—effectively infantilizing Africans, just as Firestone infantilizes African Americans.⁵¹ Finally, as Spillers complains, "Firestone...is...so intent on throwing out the bath water of the nuclear family, babies and all, that she actually reinforces the very notions of victimization that she claims she would undo,"⁵² thereby negating black familial support and the political resistance of black women—quoted only to "exemplify black women's mystified acceptance of the machismo of Black Power politics."⁵³

References to the baby and the bathwater are unsurprisingly ubiquitous in commentaries on *The Dialectic of Sex*, and the abiding question of reproduction returns us to Spelman's accusations of "somatophobia." Here, however, it could be claimed that her argument falls victim to a similar analytical exaggeration. Problematic as Firestone's attempt to incorporate racial subordination into her account of sexism demonstrably is, its failings are not those of bodily abstraction. Not only does she criticize American liberalism for ignoring physical diversity, she stresses the racist signification of "black flesh as something exotic, erotic, because forbidden."⁵⁴ The meanings of the black body are central to Firestone's account of interracial sex in the United States, which was undoubtedly calculated to provoke at a time when in many it had just been offered marital legitimacy. Far from repressing or abstracting embodiment, Firestone seizes on the physicality of racial signification—unlike the signification of her third social division, class—for its parallel to the physicality of gender signification, the "genital differences [that] matter culturally." As I will argue, that perceived physicality will direct the unconscious logic of Firestone's comparison of racial and sexual politics.

At its most manifest, there is something worth considering in this analogy—a term whose political currency in the late 1960s should be remembered: "segregation." Although first challenged by the "Brown vs. Board of Education" Supreme Court decisions of 1954–55, the enforced separation of the races in education, employment, housing, commerce, health care, public accommodation and transport both caused and persisted beyond the civil rights legislation of a decade later. For women acutely aware of their own official or de facto exclusion from many occupations, training schemes, universities, recreations, religious ministries, and most divisions of the military, the sexual segregation of these U.S. institutions was an inevitable point of comparison. Thus Firestone argues that her contemporaries turned to radical politics because of their exclusion from "the official—segregated—arenas of power."⁵⁵ Similarly, she complains of the "age segregation" pervasive in American life, and demands that "all institutions that segregate the sexes, or bar children from adult society . . . must be destroyed."⁵⁶ Read in this light, the synthetic thrust of *The Dialectic of Sex* is more defensible. If the condition of sexual oppression is one of the enforced division, separation, or partiality of sexed existence, then the sublation of "the sex distinction itself," rather than female embodiment, becomes the objective. "Integration," in both its historically specific and more general sense—the "merging of the divided sexual, racial, and economic classes"⁵⁷—is pronounced the precondition for equality.

QUANTUM SEX

A quarter of a century separates *The Dialectic of Sex* from a polemic that significantly endorses and extends its arguments. It too predicts that “whatever relevance genital shape had for a division of society into men and women in the past, these reasons and traditions are obsolete as we move into the twenty-first century.”⁵⁸ And it too takes encouragement from successful anti-racist struggles. Yet *The Apartheid of Sex* is subtitled “a manifesto on the freedom of” [rather than “freedom from”] gender,” and it addresses a new world, one in which a multiplicity of genital and gonadal differences, if not “sexes” or “genders,” has been granted recognition.

Written by the transgender lawyer and communications entrepreneur Martine Rothblatt, *The Apartheid of Sex* proceeds from the 1993 Hawaii Supreme Court decision that the refusal of a marriage license to a lesbian couple breached the state constitution’s guarantee of freedom from sex discrimination, a ruling that was later overturned by a state ballot to amend the constitution. In 1996, the U.S. Congress responded to this initiative with the Defense of Marriage Act, which denies federal recognition and marriage benefits to same-sex marriages recognized by individual states. Reviewing the pre-1967 laws prohibiting the marriage of mixed race couples, and writing as a member of one herself (as well as a spouse in a now lesbian marriage), Rothblatt turns to other historical parallels, racial registration at birth and the racial segregation of public restrooms and athletic competition. All these are now outlawed in the United States, while comparable provisions in regard to sex, together with the prohibition of homosexual marriage, remain legal in most states.⁵⁹ The genital formalism of this norm is underlined by the fact that surgical transformation would enable a Hawaiian lesbian to marry her female partner legally, as a man.

Rothblatt opens her polemic by comparing her childhood discovery of the many varieties of Judaism with her subsequent realization that the differences identified with race and sex also proceed along a continuum rather than a dualist divide. Since her focus in this brief polemic is American, her choice of the Afrikaans “apartheid” rather than Firestone’s “segregation” to describe the legal situation of the mid 1990s is, to a considerable extent, rhetorical. Apartheid was a timely term in the year after Nelson Mandela’s election, and it extensively employed the legal classifications whose sexual equivalent Rothblatt targets for change. But Rothblatt’s racial analogy—given its intended parallel with transgender identity—has to be stretched

very tight to compare the decision to change sex with the ethnic choices of “young Europeans who identify as dreadlocked Rastafarians,” and “Asians who have adopted African culture.”⁶⁰ Moreover, her implicit argument that racial justice has been achieved via the abolition of de jure segregation and apartheid ignores their continuing de facto prevalence (in housing, education, and employment) in both the United States and South Africa.

Conversely, where Firestone inflates the role of actual and metaphorical kinship in black Americans’ subordination, her successor views the family positively. For Rothblatt, who regards such relations as increasingly elective, the family is an instrument of social unification, and she celebrates her own inter-racial and, post-transition, lesbian marriage as well as her four children. Eschewing Firestone’s irony, she proclaims that “we are all part of one big human family.”⁶¹ Moreover, Rothblatt’s pride in her entrepreneurial success sharply differentiates her views from Firestone’s on capitalism and its privatized social relations. An appendix to *The Apartheid of Sex* sets out an International Bill of Gender Rights, including that of all human beings to enter into (implicitly two-person) marital contracts and to conceive, adopt or foster children. Ignoring the economic limits to sexual “choice,” Rothblatt enthuses about how IVF and surrogacy have transformed reproductive functions into commodified services. Soon, “all that will be left of a male or female difference will be reproductive systems that social choice and biotechnology can make available to any person, regardless of anatomical birthright.”⁶² But although the artificial womb was even closer to realization in the 1990s, the end of pregnancy is not her strategic imperative. Two related developments, in sexual science and sexual politics, share an important role in this change.

The Apartheid of Sex was published in 1995, two years after the biologist and historian of science Anne Fausto-Sterling startled the readers of the *New York Times* by asking “How Many Sexes Are There?” Deploring the dualist constraints of the pronoun system in which she wrote, she introduced *Times* readers to three additional sex types, *herms* (from “hermaphrodite”), people with “one testis and one ovary,” *merms* who “have testes and some aspect of female genitalia but no ovaries,” and *ferms* who “have ovaries and some aspects of the male genitalia but lack testes.” Fausto-Sterling’s description of the by then recognized scientific taxonomy as “at least five sexes—perhaps even more”⁶³ was merely the latest provocation in her series of influential challenges to the presumption that human beings are dichotomously divided in biology, psychology, or intellect. Judith

Butler deploys her critique of the masculinist assumptions framing the investigation of genetic sex-determination;⁶⁴ Marjorie Garber cites her celebration of the hermaphrodite's "ability to live sometimes as one sex and sometimes as another"⁶⁵ in defense of bisexuality; and—not unusually among those who quote Fausto-Sterling—Rothblatt invokes her writings to argue both for the breadth of sexual diversity and against "*absolute* sex differences."⁶⁶

Fausto-Sterling's two major popular works offer some clues to this apparent contradiction. *Myths of Gender*, her 1985 critique of prevailing biological theories of sexual difference, repeatedly challenges the biomedical evidence for dichotomous variations between women and men. Observing the radical reduction in the gap between female and male performances in competitive distance swimming and running, she argues that "only time will tell" if "some of the height and strength dimorphism between males and females would diminish in a culture in which girls from infancy are engaged in the same amount and kind of physical activity as boys." And, while acknowledging average physical differentiation, she urges us "to remember that the amount of variation among men and women is greater than that between the sexes. Thus no two differently sexed individuals can be assumed, sight unseen, to have different heights, shapes or strengths."⁶⁷ In a similar vein *Myths of Gender* points out the dearth of evidence for sex-based differences in mathematical and verbal abilities, and challenges those claimed in regard to aggression. But if this now venerable classic is emphatic in its opposition to the dichotomous differentiation of men and women, it nevertheless retains genital dualism in its explicit pathologization of individuals whose bodies depart from certain norms. Thus, children born with apparently male exterior genitalia but two X chromosomes, ovaries and oviducts are described as "suffering from [an] illness" in which the processes of sexual development "became unglued." This, together with the converse syndrome, in which the newborn has female or ambiguous genitalia combined with male internal gonads that cause the later development of a penis and scrotum, are termed "genetic defects." Nevertheless, Fausto-Sterling concludes with a caveat: "Not even the sex organs are categorical. At what point in its growth do we stop calling the genital tubercle a clitoris and start calling it a penis? How small does a penis have to be before we call it a clitoris?"⁶⁸

In her 2000 study *Sexing the Body*, Fausto-Sterling can answer these questions in precise centimeters, thanks to a movement that did not exist when she wrote *Myths of Gender*. Encouraged by her publications, activists in 1993 had formed the Intersex Society of North America

(ISNA), and subsequently other organizations, to campaign against the medical mismanagement of nontypical gender conditions. Among their educational strategies was the design of a “phall-o-meter” to illustrate the medical wisdom that ordained the surgical reduction or enclosure of infant genitalia “bigger than 0.85 but smaller than 2.0 centimeters.”⁶⁹ Further procedures on female-assigned intersexual infants have included the construction or expansion of the vagina, labio-scrotal reduction and extensive hormone treatment, procedures that may cause scarring and pain, reduce or obviate sexual pleasure and threaten psychological and physical health—all without the consent of the patient. Meanwhile intersexual infants assigned as males may have experienced multiple surgeries to secure “proper” genital function, interpreted as a socially convincing and sexually penetrative penis, rather than one that offers pleasure to its owner. Informing these practices were assumptions that valued “aggressiveness and sexual potency for boys and passiveness and reproductive/sexual-receptive potential for girls” as well as the designation of homosexuality and blurred gender identities as “bad outcomes.”⁷⁰ To challenge such practices and the secrecy that has surrounded them, intersexuals began agitating in the 1990s to defer treatment until the subject is able to grant informed consent, eventually developing with clinicians and parents new protocols for care predicated on honesty, the patient’s active decision making, psychosocial support, the avoidance of stigma and the recognition of varying sexual norms.

Anticipating these incipient changes in both the medical management and social understandings of sex, *The Apartheid of Sex* predicts that sexual dualism will be replaced by the recognition of a non-dichotomous continuum of personalities and practices within a “unisexual model.”⁷¹ The role of cybernetics in a world in which non-binary gender is an established reality would not be to obviate pregnancy but to facilitate physical and virtual encounters between people with complementary erotic interests—from computer dating to cybersex. Rothblatt’s use of a chromatic scale to represent a continuum of sex types may seem fanciful (and occasionally stereotypical),⁷² but it serves to recall the overarching comparison she draws between sexual division and racist color lines: “the legal division of people into males and females is as wrong as the legal division of people into black and white races.”⁷³ In keeping with her apartheid analogy, the solution she envisions is a gendered variation on the “unity in diversity” adopted as the official motto of democratic South Africa.

In *Sexing the Body*, Rothblatt’s chromatic system receives reciprocal acknowledgement from Fausto-Sterling, who argues that it could

offer a way to affirm gender variation in intersex children. But, as she warns, the acceptance of such variation need not rule out sexual hierarchies, or even sexual dualism. Traditional cultures within New Guinea and the Dominican Republic recognize a locally occurring congenital condition in XY children involving a tiny penis/clitoris, undescended testes, and a divided scrotum as a third sex. Nevertheless, after the virilization of these individuals via naturally produced testosterone at puberty, they usually identify with the dominant masculinity of their culture in a system recognizing three body types but only two (unequal) gender roles. Here, as Suzanne Kessler has argued, gender performance trumps genital variation: “in the everyday world gender attributions are made without access to genital inspection. There is no sex, only gender, and what has primacy in everyday life is the gender that is performed, regardless of the flesh’s configuration under the clothes.”⁷⁴ Bowing to Kessler’s critique of the primacy her five-sex system gives to physical rather than what Kessler calls “cultural genitals: the genitals one is assumed to have under one’s clothing,”⁷⁵ Fausto-Sterling abandons the terminology of “herm, merm and ferm,” and any precise enumeration of the sexes. Instead, in opposition to the enforced conformity of social and anatomical gender, she takes up two of Rothblatt’s causes, sex registration in official identification papers and sex testing for athletes. Noting the increasing legal and scientific critiques of such practices, she too concludes her 2000 commentary on intersex with a frankly utopian anticipation of “greater tolerance for gender multiplicity and ambiguity.”⁷⁶

But if the outing of intersex has challenged the pervasive assumption of genital dimorphism, it has yet to transform the intersex movement’s dyadic conceptualization of sex. A review of its history to 2008 reveals a strong opposition to any characterization of genital variation as additional gender identity, or indeed identity at all. (The now preferred terminology for people with sexually atypical bodies is not “intersexual” and certainly not the stigma-ridden “hermaphrodite” but “person with intersex,” or—since 2005—“person with a disorder of sexual development.”) As Alice Dreger and April Herndon point out, the varying chromosomal, external and internal sexual characteristics described as intersex conditions do not lend themselves to the creation of a “community,” or to any necessary engagement with queer politics. Thus ISNA founder Cheryl Chase has argued that as these conditions do not often result in transition from an originally designated sex, they are not a form of transsexuality. ISNA and other intersex support groups (as well as Fausto-Sterling) recommend

assigning all children a provisional sex after a clinical assessment of their biology and future psychology on the grounds that:

(1) raising a child in a third or no gender is not a socially feasible way to reduce shame or stigma; (2) intersex is not a discrete biological category, so someone would always be deciding who to raise as male, female, or intersex: three categories don't solve the problem any more than two or five or ten do.⁷⁷

And if intersex is not claimed as an issue of sexual identity, still less is it proposed as one of sexual orientation. Not only do the dominant discourses of contemporary advocacy contrast intersex as gender variant anatomy with transsexuality as gender variant identity, they also oppose it to homosexuality as gender variant eroticism. Rejecting the historical parallels with nineteenth century characterizations of homosexuals as “inverts” or an “intermediate sex,” as well as the twentieth century lesbian and gay opposition to the pathologization of homosexuality, many intersex adults have defended the controversial 2005 medical definition of their conditions as “disorders of sex development” (DSD).⁷⁸ Although such “disorders” are defined simply as “congenital conditions in which development of chromosomal, gonadal, or anatomical sex is atypical,” ethicist Ellen Feder maintains that opposition to their medicalization ignores the sometimes severe health risks (of endocrinological imbalances and gonadal cancers) associated with some intersex conditions and the need for their informed treatment, if not the increasingly opposed cosmetic surgery for ambiguous genitalia.⁷⁹

In his case history of a teenage tomboy with Denys-Drash syndrome—involving a 46XY chromosomal formation, a vagina and dysfunctional testes with a related disposition to renal disease—who in infancy had been subjected to both an unnecessary clitoral reduction, a necessary removal of her testes and a kidney transplant, child psychiatrist Vernon Rosario stresses her need for life-long medical attention. “Correspondingly,” he argues, “over the past decade ISNA’s position evolved toward greater collaboration with medical specialists to improve evaluation, education, and care of intersex patients, rather than a radical identity politics of demolishing the binary sex system in favor of a gender-free or gender-rainbow society.” But despite his stated opposition to the social constructionism of Fausto-Sterling, Kessler and Butler, Rosario’s own review of the new molecular biology of genital development stresses its diversity, complexity and multiple determinations. Like Fausto-Sterling and her collaborators,⁸⁰ he

models these anatomical outcomes in two gendered bell curves with intersecting tails. Furthermore, he argues that the overlap between these male and female curves “is certain to increase” with the expansion of research on molecular genetics, blurring and possibly enlarging the boundaries of intersex. As this research already demonstrates, the interaction of genes with their immediate environment affects their functional “timing, pattern and conditions.” The consequent multiplication of recognized genetic variations is predicted to require a conceptual shift from “binary sex to quantum sex”: “a multigenetic network of gene regulation with time- and environment-sensitive factors” resisting “one gene one trait” explanations. If “sex” as reproduction remains, in Rosario’s description, “bimodal,” “sex” as “sex/gender/sexuality” is “indefinitely complex.”⁸¹

As we have seen, Shulamith Firestone’s prediction that genital difference would one day become culturally insignificant is reiterated by Martine Rothblatt. Both appeal to movements for racial equality as political (Firestone) and legal (Rothblatt) precedents for sexual equality. Both agree—to quote Rothblatt—that the “childbearing and child-nurturing capabilities of women” have led to “a genital-based division of society”⁸² and both anticipate a widespread “transsexuality” in the future, although Firestone’s version—without the second “s”—refers to practice rather than identity. Both Firestone and Rothblatt champion the liberating potential of biology and cybernetics, but here the quarter century that divides their manifestos also divides the imagined application of these sciences. Where Firestone foresees cybernetics as the agent of gender integration via artificial reproduction, Rothblatt hails it as the agent of erotic encounters in an increasingly diverse sexual environment. While Firestone celebrates the flexible, multiperson, time-limited arrangements of the non-familial households of the future, as well as the “pan-“ or “trans-“ sexuality that may develop within them, Rothblatt imagines a complex coupledom of erotically evolving subjects admitted to legal marriage and parenthood. Rothblatt writes as a neoliberal purveyor of satellite communications, Firestone as a cybernetic socialist. In 2009 a controversy arose that would directly address their hopes for the end of sexual dualism, as well as their attempts to link it with racism.

A WOMAN . . . AND A MAN

On August 19, 2009, the question of sexual dichotomy reached unparalleled public prominence when a South African runner, eighteen-year-old Mokgadi Caster Semenya, won the 800 meters at the

Berlin World Athletics Championships with a time of 1:55:45, the fastest of the year and an extraordinary 2.5 seconds faster than the silver medalist. In the previous month Semenya had broken her own personal best in the event by 7.5 seconds. That success had prompted a gender verification investigation—described to Semenya as a random doping test—secretly initiated by Athletics South Africa. After her semi-final victory in Berlin, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) announced that it had requested a “gender test,” and when Semenya won in the finals she was withdrawn from the winner’s press conference. The resulting protests drew a variety of racial analogies, with *Guardian* journalist Anna Kessel noting the irony of South Africa’s tribute to its ethnic diversity, the eleven-language national anthem “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika,” being played over the silenced Semenya as she accepted her gold medal.

In South Africa Semenya’s treatment was widely denounced as racist, with ANC MP Mandla Mandela, the grandson of Nelson, arguing that “as an African athlete she has been the victim of prejudice.”⁸³ The story of Saartjie Baartman, a slave of Dutch farmers near Cape Town who was taken to Europe to be publicly exhibited in 1810, was repeatedly invoked. Baartman was a Khoisan woman from the Eastern Cape whose curvaceous figure, with large breasts and very prominent buttocks, made her a lucrative attraction in London and Paris. Advertised as “the Hottentot Venus,” she sang and danced in scanty clothing for paying spectators. When Baartman died, at the tragically early age of twenty-six, her skeleton and organs were preserved and displayed at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris until 1974. It was not until 2002, after repeated requests by Nelson Mandela, that her remains were repatriated and buried with due ceremony in her homeland.⁸⁴

Baartman’s expansively feminine features would seemingly make her the obverse of the muscular, broad-shouldered Semenya, were it not for another characteristic that led the French to exhibit her genitals as well as her brain and bones. Like those of some other Khoisan women, her inner labia were unusually long, signifying to nineteenth-century anthropology the commensurately outsized libido and gender ambiguity often assigned to African women. The indignity of Baartman’s genital exposure was clearly recalled when South African MPs compared her treatment to Semenya’s investigation by the IAAF, who subjected the athlete to reported examinations by a gynecologist, an endocrinologist, a psychologist and a “gender expert.” Soon afterward leaked reports of the IAAF findings appeared in the media, headlined in the *New York Daily News* “Caster Semenya, forced to

take gender test, is a woman . . . and a man”: “The 18-year-old South African champ has no womb or ovaries . . . According to a source with knowledge of the IAAF tests, Semenya has internal testes—the male sexual organs that produce testosterone. Testosterone is a hormone responsible for building muscles and for producing body hair and a deep voice.” In response to these reports the former IAAF medical commission chair Arne Ljungqvist joined Anne Fausto-Sterling in observing that high levels of testosterone do not in themselves create a competitive advantage, since not all intersexed individuals have receptors sensitive to it.⁸⁵ As comment proliferated, *Sexing the Body*’s estimate that 1.7 percent of children may be born with some form of intersex conditions (“roughly 115 million individuals on the planet”) circulated in the more progressive quarters of the blogosphere,⁸⁶ as well as the observation that sporting achievement generally reflects exceptional physical characteristics, such as the unusually flexible spine with which Andy Roddick whips his high speed serve or the enormous feet that power swimmer Michael Phelps.

But for sports administrators, the Semenya affair revived anxieties over sexual norms first registered at the Berlin Olympics of 1936, notorious for Hitler’s attempt to discourage Jewish competitors and his rage at the four gold medals won by the black American athlete Jesse Owens. Less remembered is the contretemps surrounding the eventual gold and silver medal winners in the women’s 100 meter sprint, the U.S. runners Stella Walsh and Helen Stephens. Both women’s facial structure and musculature raised suspicions of gender impersonation, and when Stephens won the Olympic committee ordered an examination of her genitals, which were pronounced female. (After her death in 1980 Walsh was herself discovered to have ambiguous genitalia.) Prior to the games, U.S. Olympics administrator Avery Brundage, who opposed women’s participation in track and field events, questioned the appearance and performances of two other athletes, Czechoslovak runner Zdenka Koubkova and English shotputter Mary Edith Louise Weston. By the summer of 1936, both had withdrawn from competition, undergone surgery, and changed their names. But it was not until 1966, when cold war rivalries focused on the highly successful Russian athletes Tamara and Irina Press, that compulsory physical examinations for all female competitors were introduced for athletics championships. The Press sisters duly withdrew from all further competition.

By the 1968 Olympics, the invidious parade of naked female competitors past investigating physicians was replaced by cytological analysis for a feature found only in cells with XX sex chromosomes. But

humans may exhibit a variety of sometimes contradictory chromosomal and physiological characteristics. To take only two examples, children with Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome are born with XY chromosomes but feminine genitalia, while children with Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia are born with XX chromosomes but may have masculine genitals. So in 1991, analysis for the SRY gene then believed to determine male fetal development succeeded chromosomal testing. But when eight entrants to women's competitions in the 1996 Atlanta Olympics were discovered to have the SRY gene, further examination identified intersex conditions not deemed to produce unfair physiological advantages and they were allowed to compete. Subsequently the SRY gene was discovered to be absent in some individuals with testes and the chromosomal formation 46XX, leaving the question of sex determination unresolved. No deliberate gender misrepresentation has ever been discovered in athletics and by 1999 compulsory gender verification, already abandoned by the IAAF, was also discontinued for the Olympics. Yet the IAAF retains the option of sex assessment in what they regard as suspicious cases, despite the American Medical Association's argument that testing women athletes is discriminatory, stigmatizing, expensive and potentially inaccurate. As three British scientists reviewing current findings conclude, "there is no evidence that female athletes with DSDs have displayed any sports-relevant physical attributes which have not been seen in biologically normal female athletes. However, numerous female athletes have been unfairly barred from competing."⁸⁷

Ironically, Semenya's winning time in the Berlin 800 meters did not threaten the extraordinarily long-standing world record of 1:53:28 set by the Czech runner Jarmila Kratochvilova in 1983, who ran a world record 400 meters a few days later. A sports doctor who examined her at the time pronounced her strongly muscled shoulders, arms, and thighs not those "of a normal physiological female body" but Kratochvilova's silver medal at the 1980 Olympics indicated that she had passed the then chromosomal sex test. Remarking on her resemblance to Semenya, the conservative UK journalist Dominic Lawson joined a number of commentators in calling for an end to the sex segregation of sport, comparing it to "the rigidity of South Africa's former apartheid laws." But unlike those who proposed open competition divided, like boxing, into weight levels, or who pointed out that Semenya's first sport had been soccer—from whose male professional ranks Maribel Dominguez was officially excluded after a Mexican team had offered her a contract in 2005, and whose South African lesbian star Eudy Simelane was "correctively" raped and murdered in

2008—Lawson seized the opportunity to attack the telecasting of women's sports and then moved on to transsexuals:

the modern interpretation of sexual identity...demands that we ascribe to individuals the gender they believe they are, or want to be, even when it conflicts with that assigned to them by their genes. This is why it is socially correct at drinks parties or other public events to treat a pre-operative transsexual as a woman, even if you are all too aware of the five o'clock shadow under the foundation and of hands that look capable of twisting the tops off bottles.⁸⁸

Lawson was merely repeating the views of Germaine Greer, who had previously responded to the Semenya affair by observing that “in sport sex discrimination that is illegal everywhere else is the rule,” whereas in other social spheres “Nowadays we are all likely to meet people who think they are women, have women's names, and feminine clothes and lots of eyeshadow, who seem to us to be some kind of ghastly parody, though it isn't polite to say so. We pretend all the people passing for female really are.”

Despite their lip service to anti-discrimination, both commentators certify the male-dominated regime of sport as the last bastion of reality, in which women's endeavors are, to quote Lawson, “inherently inferior” and counter-genetic sexual identities invalid. To the protests of intersex activists,⁸⁹ Semenya's alleged gender irregularity is explicitly equated with transsexuality—crucially, in the case of this black athlete, a *ghastly* transsexuality, one that *must not pass*. In terms that signify both sexually and racially, “passing” as well as “ghastly”—with its overtones of the ghostly, the disembodied, or in the American racist epithet, the “spook”—Greer decries “a man's delusion that he is female.” Attacking not only the arguments of today's social constructionists, but also those of her contemporary Firestone, she proclaims: “Feminist fundamentalists hold that biology is a cultural creation...what the academic feminists could be taken to be saying is that (a) you're a woman if you think you are and (b) you're a woman if other people think you are. Unfortunately (b) cannot be made to follow from (a).”⁹⁰

These observations echo those of the Olympic official Norman Cox, who in the late 1940s responded to black women's track and field success with the suggestion that a special category of competition should be created for those “hermaphrodites” who so often defeated “normal,” “childbearing” women.⁹¹ Seventy years later, similar reactions greeted Semenya's victories. But as Greer herself concludes, “doesn't all competitive sport canonize and glamorize the

exploitation of genetic advantage? Who said life was fair?" Who indeed? As some commentators⁹² have replied, the "unfair advantages" historically attributed to blacks and intersexuals ignore routinely unremarked differences in childhood nutrition, access to coaching and equipment, training regimes and financial resources in general. Here Semenya, who trained barefoot in a rural district where the black monthly income averages \$135, would hardly count as advantaged.

Semenya's "castigation"⁹³ illustrates the continued pertinence of *The Dialectic of Sex*, however flawed its attempts to theorize the interrelation of race and gender. Returning to it today we can more clearly trace the logic of this convergence. Firestone's reproductive metaphor of a "more than marital" combination of Male and Female principles creating a new mode of subjectivity takes us back to the baby that cannot be discarded with the amniotic bathwater of conventional pregnancy, and not just a figural baby. If, as Rothblatt anticipates, "a zygote might be formed from the chromosomes of two women or two men,"⁹⁴ bimodal reproduction may not continue as the biological rule. But until this is achieved, we are all—to update Freud—intersexual. And as Firestone insisted to a country only then legitimating its own miscegenated relations, that sexual combination has always also been racial. Apartheid's attempt to prevent this may now be condemned, even by the likes of Dominic Lawson. Yet when the equivalent breaching of gender boundaries is perceived in a racially subordinated subject (Lawson's other example being Shi Pei Pu, the androgynous Chinese spy of *M. Butterfly* fame), it represents a "double cross,"⁹⁵ reviving anxieties about both kinds of passing.

Today the imbrication of sexual and racial transgression is textbook stuff in a field that has largely forgotten or excoriated Firestone. "Though there are good historical reasons for keeping 'race' and 'sexuality' and 'sexual difference' as separate analytic spheres," Judith Butler argues, "there are also quite pressing and significant historical reasons for asking how and where we might read not only their convergence, but the sites at which the one cannot be constituted save through the other."⁹⁶ Firestone's *Dialectic* is such a site.

NOTES

1. In a December 2, 1947, letter to Nelson Algren, Beauvoir wrote, "I should like to write a book as important as this big one about Negroes. Myrdal points very many interesting analogies between Negroes' and women's status; I felt it already." Simone de Beauvoir, *Beloved Chicago Man: Letters to Nelson Algren 1947-64* (Phoenix: London, 1999), 116.

2. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (originally New York: William Morrow, 1970; this edition New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 28.
3. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 32, emphasis in the original.
4. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 35.
5. Unless otherwise indicated I will use the terms “gender” and “sex” interchangeably, rather than employing the former in regard to psychology or personal style and the latter in regard to physiology. Firestone herself uses “sex” throughout, as in “sex roles,” “sex class,” “the sexual distinction,” and not the subsequently adopted term “gender.”
6. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 157.
7. William Claxton, “Rudi Geinreich: Fashions in Basic Black” (www.myspace.com/rudigernreich).
8. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 28.
9. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 139, emphasis in the original.
10. Kate Millett, “Sexual Politics: A Manifesto for Revolution,” in Shulamith Firestone and Anna Koedt, eds., *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation*, April 1970.
11. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 148.
12. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 148.
13. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 157.
14. See the eighteenth letter of Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans Reginald Snell, (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994) 88, footnote 1, which explains that “combined by cancellation” is the translation for “*aufgehoben*, which is here used, possibly for the first time, to mean *preserved by destruction* in the dialectical sense.”
15. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 174.
16. Carolyn A. Heilbrun, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (originally, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964; this edition New York: Knopf, 1973), ix–x.
17. Heilbrun, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*, 100.
18. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 11.
19. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 152.
20. *Diving into the wreck: Poems 1971–1972* (New York: Norton, 1973), 19.
21. *The dream of a common language: Poems, 1974–1978*, (New York: Norton, 1978), 66. For a commentary on Rich and androgyny, see Sandra Lipsitz Bem, *The Lenses of Gender* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 121–23.
22. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 3.
23. See Christine Delphy, “Rethinking Sex and Gender,” in Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, eds., *Gender: A Sociological Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002), 56–57, on one of Firestone’s key influences, the anthropologist Margaret Mead: “we must also accept that masculinity

and femininity are not just, or rather not at all, what they were in Mead's (1935) model—a division of the traits which are (i) present in a potential form in both sexes, or (ii) present in all forms of possible and imaginable societies... This vision of culture as static is... fundamental to all variants of the notion of positive complementarity between men and women."

24. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 3.
25. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 11.
26. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 54.
27. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 215.
28. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 54.
29. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 39.
30. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 211.
31. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 49–50, emphasis in the original.
32. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 48.
33. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 50.
34. In Chapter 4 of *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone, citing Philippe Ariès, challenges the "myth" of childhood as a state separate from adulthood.
35. Here the use of the diminutive may be relevant, with Firestone (who is frank about her rivalry with her brother) identifying more with the androgynous state of boyhood than that of oppressive manhood.
36. Bidy Martin, "Sexualities without Genders and Other Queer Utopias," *Femininity Played Straight: The Significance of Being Lesbian* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 77.
37. "Firestone [fails to take] full account of what the experience of biological pregnancy and birth might be in a wholly different political and emotional context. Her attitudes toward pregnancy ('the husband's guilty waning of sexual desire; the woman's tears in front of the mirror at eight months') are male derived." Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 174.
38. Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (London: Woman's Press, 1990), 128.
39. Spelman, *Inessential Woman*, 129.
40. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 97, emphasis in the original.
41. Jo Freeman, "How 'Sex' Got Into Title VII," *Law and Inequality, A Journal of Theory and Practice* 9, no. 2 (March 1991), 163–84.
42. Alice Echols, *Daring To Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 10.
43. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (originally New York: Doubleday, 1970, this edition London: Virago, 1977), 39.
44. Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 25.
45. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 95.
46. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 67.
47. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 97, emphasis in the original.
48. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 102–3.

49. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 105, emphasis in the original.
50. Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays in American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 161. Similarly, Angela Davis complains that Firestone blames the victims of racism, while invoking the traditional fear of black men's desire for white women, in *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1983).
51. Ernst Haeckel, *Die Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte*, cited in Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York, Routledge, 1995), 38. McClintock also quotes H. Rider Haggard's statement that "In all essentials the savage and the child of civilization are identical" (31).
52. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 163.
53. Lisa Maria Hogeland, "Invisible Man and Invisible Woman: The Sex/Race Analogy of the 1970s," *Women's History Review* 5 no. 1 (1996), 35.
54. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 102. Here Firestone does not confine her observations to heterosexual relations, commenting in a footnote on the role racial difference can play in lesbian relationships.
55. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 27.
56. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 187.
57. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 158.
58. Martine Rothblatt, *The Apartheid of Sex: A Manifesto on the Freedom of Gender* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995).
59. In October 2008 and April 2009, homosexual marriage was upheld by the Supreme Courts of Connecticut and Iowa, respectively. In April, May and June 2009, the Vermont, Maine and New Hampshire legislatures legalized same-sex marriage. As of summer 2009, both the New Jersey and New York state legislatures were considering the extension of marriage rights to same-sex couples, but at the time of writing the federal refusal to recognize such unions continues. Same-sex couples can marry in the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Norway, and Sweden, and can have their partnerships recognized in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Luxembourg, Slovenia, and Switzerland. See David Cole, "The Same-Sex Future," *New York Review of Books*, July 2, 2009, 12.
60. Rothblatt, *The Apartheid of Sex*, 3.
61. Rothblatt, *The Apartheid of Sex*, 165.
62. Rothblatt, *The Apartheid of Sex*, 123.
63. Anne Fausto-Sterling, "How Many Sexes Are There?" *New York Times* March 12, 1993 is the op-ed version of her article "The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough," *Sciences*, March–April 1993.
64. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 109. Citing Fausto-Sterling's "Life in the XY Corral," *Women's Studies International Forum* 12, no. 3 (1989), Butler writes: "the concentration on the

‘master gene’ suggests that femaleness ought to be understood as the presence or absence of maleness or, at best, the presence of a passivity that, in men, would inevitably be active. This claim is, of course, made within the research context in which active ovarian contributions to sex differentiation have never been strongly considered. The conclusion here is not that valid and demonstrable claims cannot be made about sex-determination, but rather than cultural assumptions regarding the relative status of men and women and the binary relations of gender itself frame and focus the research into sex-determination.” In 2008, Ryohei Sekido and Robin Lovell Badge, “Sex Determination and SRY: Down to a Wink and a Nudge?” *Trends in Genetics* 25, no. 1, 25, point out that experimental evidence now suggests “that ovarian development is established by active repression of one or more genes in the testicular pathway rather than it depending entirely on a passive ‘default’ pathway.”

65. Marjorie Garber, *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1995), 270.
66. Rothblatt, *The Apartheid of Sex*, 108, emphasis in the original.
67. Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories about Women and Men* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 218.
68. Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender*, 84–85.
69. Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 60.
70. Alice D. Dreger and April M. Herndon, “Progress and Politics in the Intersex Rights Movement,” *GLQ* 15, no. 2 (2009), 204.
71. “The term *unisexual* is used to avoid the implication that there are but two (‘bi’) sexes from which to choose lovers. Unisexual emphasizes the uniqueness of our sexuality and that of our lover. It also emphasizes the oneness of sexual continuity, just as the word *universe* means one reality full of diversity.” Rothblatt, *The Apartheid of Sex*, 141. (Emphasis in the original.)
72. Thus the emblematically gay color purple is chosen to represent the “self-reported mental nature” of “a nonaggressive person, self-described as equally nourishing and erotic,” while brown is chosen for those “equally aggressive, nourishing, and sexy in attitude” and white for the “genderless, lacking aggressiveness, nourishment, or sexiness.” Rothblatt, *The Apartheid of Sex*, 114.
73. Rothblatt, *The Apartheid of Sex*, xiii.
74. Suzanne Kessler, *Lessons from the Intersexed* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1998), 90.
75. Kessler, *Lessons from the Intersexed*, 166.
76. Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 114.
77. Dreger and Herndon, “Progress and Politics in the Intersex Rights Movement,” 217.
78. A significant group of intersex activists continue to disagree with both this pathologization of their conditions and the binary

- fundamentalism that underwrites it. See Organisation Intersex International, “DSD—Is There Really a Consensus?” www.intersexualite.org/Disorders_of_Sex_Development.html.
79. Ellen K. Feder, “Imperatives of Normality: From ‘Intersex’ to ‘Disorders of Sexual Development,’” *GLQ* 15, no. 2 (2009), 225–47.
 80. Melanie Blackless, Anthony Charuvastra, Amanda Derryck, Anne Fausto-Sterling, Karl Lauzanne, and Ellen Lee, “How Sexually Dimorphic Are We? Review and Synthesis,” *American Journal of Human Biology* 12, no. 2 (March/April 2000), 151–166, 162. The team concludes that the deviation from dimorphic sex chromosomal, gonadal, hormonal, internal and external genital characteristics may be as high as 2 percent of live births.
 81. Vernon A. Rosario, “Quantum Sex: Intersex and the Molecular Deconstruction of Sex,” *GLQ* 15, no. 2 (2009), 278–80.
 82. Rothblatt, *The Apartheid of Sex*, 4.
 83. Daniel Howden, “South Africa Versus the World: the Caster Semenya Affair,” Independent August 26, 2009. www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/south-africa-versus-the-world-the-caster-semenya-affair-1777196.html.
 84. See Rachel Holmes, *The Hottentot Venus: The Life and Death of Saartjie Baartman* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).
 85. Chris Lehourites (Associated Press), “Semenya’s Gender Test Results Are In,” posted September 10, 2009, www.fanhouse.com/news/main/caster-semenya-gender-test-results/666103.
 86. See, e.g., Daniel Muth’s “Bleacher Report,” www.bleacherreport.com/articles/255157-blurring-the-lines-the-strange-case-of-caster-semenya.
 87. Robert Ritchie, John Reynard, and Tom Lewis, “Intersex and the Olympic Games,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 101 (2008), 398.
 88. Dominic Lawson, “No Sexing, Please—Let’s All Run Together,” *Sunday Times*, August 23, 2009. www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/...dominic_lawson/article6806508.ece.
 89. In an online “message to the media” on “the Caster Semenya issue,” the Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome Support Group advises: “don’t confuse biological intersex with gender dysphoria (transsexuality)...the vast majority of our members appear completely female (even if they might have XY chromosomes and intra-abdominal testes).” www.aissg.org/PDFs/aissg-caster-semenya.pdf.
 90. Germaine Greer, “What Makes A Woman?” *Guardian* August 21, 2009, 13.
 91. William C. Rhoden, “The Unpleasant Reality for Women in Sports,” *New York Times* April 9, 2007. <http://select.nytimes.com/2007/04/09/sports/09rhoden.html>. Rhoden notes that in 1957 *Time* magazine reported that the African American tennis star Althea Gibson was forced to take a chromosome test.

92. See <http://ittakesateam.blogspot.com/2009/11/unfair-competitive-advantage-whats-it.html>.
93. See Mark Gevisser, "Castigated and Celebrated," *The Times* (S.A.) August 29, 2009. www.the.times.co.za/PrintEdition/Insight/Article.aspx?id=1056989. Gevisser details the sexist treatment of women athletes in South Africa that was later verified when it was revealed that Athletics South Africa had secretly initiated the gender testing of Semenya.
94. Rothblatt, *The Apartheid of Sex*, 15.
95. See Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 303.
96. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 168.

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PART III

Dialectics

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Technology, Nature, and Liberation: Shulamith Firestone's Dialectical Theory of Agency

Tim Fisk

There is the appearance of something paradoxical in Firestone's dedication of *The Dialectic of Sex* to Simone de Beauvoir. Where Beauvoir argued that "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one,"¹ relegating biology to the section of *The Second Sex* on the "myth" of destiny, Firestone opens *The Dialectic of Sex* by calling the oppression of women "a fundamental biological condition."² Where Beauvoir is one of the founders of a social constructionist view of gender, Firestone seems to regress to a naïve biological reductionism in which gender follows immediately from the biological fact of sex. As Judith Butler has pointed out, however, this distinction between social constructionist and biological reductionist accounts of sex and gender is not as clear as it seems to be.³ I will argue that Firestone is aware of some of this complexity, and so appeals to biology not as a fixed substance to which women's oppression can be reduced, but rather as one element within a theorization of feminist revolution which would conclude by dissolving the specificity of the biological. The dialectic in *The Dialectic of Sex*, that is, is based on the mutually constitutive and mutually contradictory relationship between the social construction of gender and the biological facticity of sex.

The relationship between the social construction of gender and the biological given of sex, as Butler describes it, is an eminently dialectical one. Gender is defined by its difference from sex, by the assertion that "whatever biological intractability sex may have, gender is

culturally constructed.” However, defining gender in this way depends on positing sex as fixed and “radically unconstructed.”⁴ A social constructionist account of gender thus depends on at the same time as it effaces a biologically reductive account of sex. The flexibility of gender depends on the fixity of sex, in a metaphysical operation whereby the essence, the sexed body, acquires a set of contingent qualities that make up its (or, rather, his or her) gender identity. The relation of sex and gender has a particularly important place in this metaphysics because of the link it makes between the body as a natural and a cultural object. It is this relationship, as we will see shortly, that is explored in *The Dialectic of Sex*.

For Butler, sex and gender are two sides of a particular metaphysical account of identity, in which identity defines a subject that is autonomous, that is, separate from and not determined by anything outside of itself. The metaphysical construal of identity posits identities as “self-identical, persisting through time as the same, unified and internally coherent.”⁵ Butler argues that the distinction between sex and gender is able to play a particularly important role in this metaphysics, because the distinction divides the fixed or given (sex) from the constructed or assumed (gender) in a way that articulates a linkage between the two. According to Butler, gender has a metaphysical role, securing the coherence of the subject through a “metaphysics of gender substance.”⁶ In philosophical accounts dating back to Aristotle, substance is the principle by virtue of which particular beings exist; in the metaphysics of gender substance, then, gender is the principle by virtue of which individual subjects exist. Gender is able to play this role because of its conceptual linkage to sex, taken as something fixed, given and natural. The metaphysics of substance is particularly powerful here because it does not appear as metaphysics, as a philosophical theory about being, but is located within common-sense understandings of the material organization of the individual’s body.

For Butler, it is precisely this positing of the material as a “primary given”⁷ that allows it to function as a substance within contemporary understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality. The materiality of sex is produced by the act of proclaiming the material to be prior to the social (or sex prior to gender).⁸ Now, this appears to describe Firestone’s own practice, in her insistence that the sexual division of labor is natural. However, as I will argue in the remainder of this paper, Firestone’s understanding of nature makes it something very different from the “primary given” that secures the substantiality of gender. I want to suggest that we need to take seriously the dialectical character of nature within Firestone’s dialectic of sex, the fact that, as

Butler puts it, “nature has a history.”⁹ Butler turns to Foucault for the insight that constraint both requires and produces the possibility of transgression, that “the law provides *the discursive opportunity* for a resistance, a resignification, and potential self-subversion of that law.”¹⁰ Butler adopts this idea to encourage us to think, not of a fixed and given materiality, but of an ambiguous and contestable materialization, in which the materialization of bodies and subjects that conform to norms cannot be disassociated from the materialization of bodies that transgress these norms.¹¹ Firestone’s dialectics has something of the same quality, in that she attempts to show how the “natural” sex division, far from being fixed and given, produces the possibility of its own overcoming.

BIOLOGY AND DIALECTICS

Firestone does not give us a definition of “dialectics” in *The Dialectic of Sex*, but we can get a sense of what the term means for her by considering how she characterizes the “dialectical method” that she appropriates from Marx and Engels. Firestone turns to Marx and Engels in order to supply “feminist revolution” with “an analysis of the dynamics of sex war.”¹² This analysis is necessary in order to insert feminist action in the historical unfolding of women’s oppression, that is, to grasp that oppression as something that can be altered. The superiority of the dialectical method lies in its injunction to “examine the historic succession of events from which the antagonism has sprung in order to discover in the conditions thus created the means of ending the conflict.”¹³ Firestone goes on to gloss a dialectical view of history as seeing “the world as process, a natural flux of action and reaction, of opposites yet inseparable and interpenetrating.”¹⁴ Now, a process, even one involving inseparable opposites, is not yet a dialectic; what makes this genuinely dialectical is, first, that this opposition contains its own negation, or, to put it another way, the existence of opposed elements is the condition of possibility for an overcoming of this opposition. The second key dialectical feature of Firestone’s account is that it does not simply identify an objective, external process, but rather makes our own relationship to the process of history a moment of that process. Because we are embedded in history, it is “by understanding thoroughly the mechanism of history” that Marx and Engels “hoped to show men how to master it.”¹⁵

There are thus three different dialectics at work in *The Dialectic of Sex*, although Firestone does not clearly distinguish them. The first is a dialectical method, taken from Marx and Engels: an attempt to

grasp history as a process in which each moment of change develops from what preceded it. The second is an objective dialectic, an account of the natural and historical world as in fact containing opposed forces that exist in tension with one another. Finally, there is an epistemological dialectic, in which our ability to know the world depends on a developing process of engagement with that world. This division is something of an analytical convenience: the three dialectics are interdependent, in that it is not always easy to distinguish a dialectical description of reality (the dialectical method) from a description of a dialectical reality (the objective dialectic), or to distinguish this dialectic in the world from dialectics in our relationship to the world (the epistemological dialectic). Nonetheless, I think it is helpful in emphasizing that “dialectics” and “dialectical” mean different things at different points in *The Dialectic of Sex*, and that elements of the book which, from one angle, may not seem dialectical, can in fact be related to one of the other dialectics being played out in the text.

Though Firestone mentions the dialectical method explicitly, after its introduction by reference to Engels it receives little further attention. The objective dialectic, on the other hand, is not made very explicit and, although the book promises a dialectic of sex, the discussion of biological sex makes little reference to dialectics. I will argue, however, that Firestone’s psychosexual account of biology does in fact have a dialectical structure that allows it to present an alternative to social constructionist theories of gender or biological reductionist understandings of sex. Firestone does, it is true, often express her thesis of the biological origin of sex class in ways that appear undialectical; indeed, it is this idea of biology as origin that is problematic from a dialectical point of view. For instance, Firestone’s description of the biological family as “the basic reproductive unit of male/female/infant in whatever form of social organization,”¹⁶ suggests that biological nature is a static given, an essence that underlies a range of inessential forms. Indeed, Firestone writes that “the biological family that we have described has existed everywhere throughout time,” and describes references to the diversity of social forms of the family as “anthropological sophistries.”¹⁷ Nonetheless, there are some interestingly ambiguous formulations here. Firestone describes the biological limits on human nature not as necessities but as “biological contingencies,”¹⁸ and calls them “fundamental—if not immutable—facts.”¹⁹ This last could equally be understood as claiming that facts are, or are not, immutable. This does indeed capture a contradiction in Firestone’s account of biology, because biology has to ground both the immutability of women’s oppression in the past, and

the possibility of women's liberation in the future. When Firestone initially introduces her account of biology, this contradiction looks like a mere inconsistency, but in her later discussion of the psychosexual nature of biology this contradiction becomes a productive, dialectical contradiction.

What allows biology to play this dialectical role in Firestone's discussion of psychosexual dynamics within the family is that it is not posited as an origin, but rather emerges as a result. Here, biology is not immediate or transparent, but rather is expressed through the formation of sexed psyches, through "specific psychosexual distortions,"²⁰ or "the development of classes [that] arises from the psychosexual formation of each individual according to the basic imbalance"²¹ of power in the biological family. And it is in paying attention to this dimension of power that Firestone believes her psychosexual approach is materialist, in contrast to the utopian idealism of previous feminism²² and the ideological obfuscation of psychoanalysis and "the cracker-barrel layman's Freud."²³ Firestone's approach is to re-interpret the psychosexual theories of psychoanalysis in terms of power; she writes that "*the only way that the Oedipus Complex can make full sense is in terms of power.*"²⁴ As power here is a social relation, rather than a feature of the individual psyche, to reinterpret psychoanalysis in terms of power is to shift the focus of study from the individual to the social causes of particular forms of individuality, from the Oedipus complex to the social context that is its cause. This social context is, first and foremost, the family.

At first sight, Firestone's analysis of the family appears to have a rather schematic quality. The object of her study is "the *biological family*—the basic reproductive unit of male/female/infant, in whatever form of social organization."²⁵ The biological family, then, is an abstraction from concrete families, an abstraction from specific social forms. Firestone's analysis is not simply abstract, however, because she believes that there is one specific social form of the family that allows for a particularly clear view of the abstract mechanisms of the biological family: "the nuclear family of a patriarchal society, a form of social organization that intensifies the worst effects of the inequalities inherent in the biological family itself."²⁶ The nuclear family is the minimal form of the biological family, in that it contains the essential elements of the biological family (father, mother, child), and it contains those in their essential relationships, with the practical (if no longer legal or moral) dependence of the child and mother on the father. The nuclear family contains the bedrock of the biological family, so that "to make both women and children totally independent

would be to eliminate not just the patriarchal nuclear family, but the biological family itself.”²⁷ Because of this, studying the development of the child within the nuclear family, that is, the development of the Oedipus complex, is the clearest way to study the psychosexual effects of the biological family. Now, the Freudian account of the development of the Oedipus complex is also the account of the development of the child’s ego, their awareness of themselves as individuals separate from the mother, individuals like the father (this is especially true for ego psychology, the “cracker-barrel Freud” in relation to which Firestone situates her critique). Therefore, to reread the Oedipus complex in terms of power dynamics is also to reread individuality in these terms; Firestone here interprets the apparent autonomy of the individual as itself socially produced.

While the historical specificity of Firestone’s analysis of the development of individual psychology might appear to be largely an analytic device, the situation becomes more complicated in her discussion of childhood. While the oppression of children is said to be an outcome of the (cross-temporal) biological family, the category of childhood itself is specifically a feature of the modern nuclear family.²⁸ I don’t believe this is merely a coincidence. Rather, the reason why the ills Firestone identifies in the biological family are especially visible in the modern nuclear family coincides with the reason, implicit in Firestone’s account, for the invention of the category of “childhood” in modernity. Prior to the invention of this category, Firestone writes, the culture “literally was not conscious of children as distinct from adults.” This was a reflection of a different social organization, in which the status of children was on a continuum with that of adults: “children then *were* tiny adults, carriers of whatever class and name they had been born to, destined to rise into a clearly outlined social position.” Because of this, their subordination *as children* was not immediately visible; subordination due to economic dependence was a common experience of “children and servants,”²⁹ rather than something specific only to children. The fact that children are dominated because of the nature of the biological family was invisible here. It became visible only with the development of the ideology of childhood, when children are separated from adults, both physically, by their enclosure in schools, and culturally, through distinctive dress and activities.

Firestone’s discussion of childhood follows that of her main source, Philippe Ariès, in describing the development of childhood without advancing an explanation of this development in terms of wider social change.³⁰ Unlike Ariès, however, Firestone locates the development of the concept of childhood within a much larger narrative (the

history of sex dialectics) and we can see in her description of childhood ways in which its development, which coincided with the rise of liberal modernity, also reflects wider features of this change. Note the description of medieval children, these “miniature adults,” as “carriers” of a “class and name,” already assigned to “a clearly outlined social position.” This clearly reflects a feudal order in which the individual does not exist aside from her social roles. The modern child, on the other hand, has no distinct social role, and is considered pure and innocent,³¹ that is to say as yet unformed by the world. The modern child, then, is an abstract individual, a bourgeois subject. The development of the modern concept of childhood goes along with a more general development of modern social relations based around the individual, and it is in this context that the biological family, which is, schematically, a relationship between three quite distinct individuals, becomes visible.

If the nuclear family is the paradigmatic form of the biological family, how are we to reconcile the nuclear family’s quite recent development with Firestone’s claims about the transhistorical universality of the biological family? One possibility is that Firestone simply projects the nuclear family on to the past in an ahistorical manner, as Assister claims.³² However, Firestone explicitly notes the historical specificity of the nuclear family, and I think there is another way of understanding Firestone’s use of the modern family as a key to understanding the family structures of the past which does not simply reify and universalize modern conditions. Firestone’s argument is not that the nuclear family in its concrete specificity has always existed. Rather, her argument is that the biological family is the appropriate abstraction with which to understand the different concrete family forms of the past. The importance of the modern nuclear family lies in the way in which, in the nuclear family, the abstract biological family has become a concrete reality, and so has become visible, giving us, now, a better understanding of our past.

Firestone’s contention that the most recently developed form of the family provides us with the clearest view of the abstraction of the biological family shares a logical structure with Marx’s claim that the history of economic forms displays a dialectical movement from the abstract to the concrete. In Marx’s understanding, what were in the past abstractions come to take on concrete forms; ideal or purely mental abstractions become concrete or real abstractions. Marx argues that, “as a rule, the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears as common to many, to all.”³³ Marx’s primary example is labor. In

pre-capitalist periods, he argues, labor could only be understood as one or another specific type of labor; any idea of labor in general had no reality, but was merely a “mental product.” Capitalism, on the other hand, has developed particular social structures that make labor in general a concrete reality: “indifference towards specific labors corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labor to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference.”³⁴ This process of real abstraction is important for Marx, because it provides a way of relating the abstractions he believes are vital to science to the specific historical circumstances he believes are the only possible object of study: “this example of labor shows strikingly how even the most abstract categories, despite their validity—precisely because of their abstractness—for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and within these relations.”³⁵

Marx’s real abstractions, then, have the same paradoxical mixture of universal validity and historical specificity as does Firestone’s understanding of the biological family. Because they are abstractions and, as abstractions, they had no real existence in the past, they allow us to draw generalizations between the present and the past, without simply projecting the concrete characteristics of the present on to the past. Marx describes this with the famous phrase, “human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape,”³⁶ which might suggest the kind of teleology sometimes associated with evolutionary theory in the nineteenth century, implying that earlier social forms were structured in such a way as to necessarily lead to certain real abstractions. In fact, however, understanding the past in terms of the real abstractions of the present is perfectly compatible with the contingency of these abstractions. The features of the past that we can identify by appeal to real abstractions are important to us because they help to explain the relation of the past to the present; it is only due to the contingencies of this relation that, as Marx puts it, the past’s “mere nuances have developed explicit significance.”³⁷ If we interpret Firestone’s use of biology as the identification of a real abstraction of this sort, we can understand biological nature not as something fixed and given, but as something continuously developing in (dialectical) relation to concrete circumstances.

“NATURE”

So, treating biology dialectically, that is, avoiding treating it as a fixed essence that merely assumes certain cultural forms, requires a theory

of biological nature that sees nature as a part of a process which contains culture as one of its moments. This is not quite what Firestone gives us, or, not immediately. Rather, she moves from considering the dialectic of the biological family to what she calls the “sex dialectics of cultural history,” which consists of a dialectic of cultural representations of nature.³⁸ Firestone identifies two basic modes of the cultural representation of nature, which correspond to the two organizing principles of matriarchy and patriarchy that she sees as characterizing, to a greater or lesser extent, previous historical periods. The first understanding of nature, historically, Firestone associates with matriarchy. In this case, nature is viewed as something external to human beings, and thus beyond their control. Following the traditional association of nature (opposite to human beings) with women (opposite to men), women are seen as “dark, mysterious, uncontrollable,”³⁹ something to be feared and worshiped. (For Firestone, matriarchy is not real rule by women, but rather a situation in which the objectification of women takes the form of forcing women into the role of goddess—which is one way of saying, not quite human.) In the economic and political sphere, this form of matriarchy lasted only until the development of agriculture; in the sphere of more abstract culture, however, what Firestone calls “the Female Principle” of “unfathomable Nature”⁴⁰ remained dominant until the end of the Renaissance.

The shift to the patriarchal phase involves a change in the way the objectivity of nature was construed. In the matriarchal phase, because nature was external to human beings, it was seen as opposed to and threatening to human beings. The patriarchal phase, on the other hand, drew the opposite conclusion from the same premise. Because nature was external to human beings, it was now seen as an object available for manipulation by humans: “the contingencies of reality are overcome...through the mastery of reality’s own workings.”⁴¹ The separation of humanity from nature now became the precondition of human domination of nature; the analogical linking of women to nature remained, but the changed status of nature leads to women being seen as possessions, rather than goddesses.⁴²

Firestone lays out a grand narrative of the changing relationships between these two modes of the cultural representation of nature in order to critique both modes, and it is in this critique that the sex dialectic of cultural history becomes properly dialectical. Firestone here applies the dialectical method and grasps the back-and-forth between two modes of cultural representation of nature as a totality, and sublates this dialectic of cultural representations into a dialectical

relationship between culture and nature. The two modes of representation of nature share two fundamental features, and these are the targets of Firestone's critique. One is the mapping of the humanity/nature distinction on to the gendered binary male/female; the other similarity is this distinction between humanity and nature itself. The connection between the two is complicated: the division into two sexes is the origin of the objectification of nature; but, at the same time, it is *because* this sex division is natural that women come to be analogized to the natural. It is this complicated interrelation that gives Firestone leverage to break down the presumed naturalness of women. Her point is not that the identification of women with nature is simply false; the naturalness of women's oppression is all too real: "sex class sprang directly from a biological reality: men and women were created different, and not equally privileged."⁴³ If we accept the concept of nature in opposition to humanity, women are indeed tied to nature in a way that men are not (i.e., through specific features of the female role in biological reproduction). But we do not have to accept this understanding of nature at all. Thus, it is through the rejection of the nature/humanity distinction that Firestone challenges the "natural" oppression of women.

Now, it might appear that Firestone accepts, even embraces this distinction, that it is by valorizing the human that she seeks to overcome the natural roots of women's oppression. In fact, however, the situation is more complicated. Take her invocation of Beauvoir's claim that humanity is "against nature," which leads to her conclusion that "the 'natural' is not necessarily a 'human' value."⁴⁴ While this might seem to simply oppose "natural" and "human," the following sentence complicates matters: "humanity has begun to transcend Nature."⁴⁵ There is an opposition between humanity and nature here, but it is not a simple opposition—rather, it is a dialectical one. Humanity and nature exist in a relationship to one another, a relationship, furthermore, which is defined by "movements, transitions, connections, rather than the things that move, combine, and are connected," to quote the passage from Engels' *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* that Firestone chose as the book's epigraph. The product of this continuing dialectic of nature and humanity can be seen in Firestone's discussion of ecology, which rejects the calls (still common today) for a nature-focused ecology quite decisively:

Certainly it is too late for conservationism, the attempt to *redress* natural balances. What is called for is a revolutionary ecological program that would attempt to establish a *humane* (man-made) balance in place

of the “natural” one, thus realizing the original goal of empirical science: human mastery of matter.⁴⁶

The turn here to “human mastery of matter” seems to put us back within the patriarchal mode of nature as something to be dominated. Haraway, indeed, explicitly criticizes Firestone in these terms. According to Haraway, Firestone “accepted that there are natural objects (bodies) separate from social relations” and so “prepared for the logic of the domination of technology—the total control of now alienated bodies in a machine-determined future.”⁴⁷ I hope my discussion this far has cast some doubt on the first part of this claim. Rather than accepting a sharp distinction of the natural from the social, Firestone shares Haraway’s “Marxist humanism,” the belief that “the fundamental position of the human being in the world is the dialectical relation with the surrounding world.”⁴⁸ Marx develops this theme in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, in which human alienation from nature is seen as alienation from humanity itself because, in Marx’s striking formulation, “nature is the inorganic body of the human being.”⁴⁹ Marx emphasizes the impossibility of drawing any hard line between the human and the natural, and this is something we can also see in Firestone’s use of cybernetics. Cybernetics is a historically specific account of technology that differs from pre-twentieth-century understandings of technology particularly in how it conceives of the relationship between agent and environment, so Firestone’s use of cybernetics distances her position from the patriarchal mode of “the logic of the domination of technology.”

Though cybernetics is not a significant part of the twenty-first century intellectual fabric, in the period in which Firestone was writing *The Dialectic of Sex*, cybernetics was a key reference point for a wide range of disciplines. Haraway points to the influence of cybernetics on postwar biology, culminating in Wilson’s *Sociobiology*, published four years after *The Dialectic of Sex*.⁵⁰ But while Haraway identified the utility of cybernetics to patriarchal capitalism, cybernetics was, in its heyday, also adopted as a framework by liberals and the Left. Liberal social scientists such as David Easton in political science and Talcot Parsons in sociology drew on cybernetics and communication theory.⁵¹ Cybernetics was also influential in the Soviet Union⁵² and in Allende’s socialist Chile, which used a system for cybernetic economic planning called Cybersyn.⁵³

Cybernetics is the science of control, but control here is understood in terms of systems of communication and feedback. Cybernetics, then, is the language in which Firestone expresses a notion of control

that does not depend on domination of an external object. Firestone's cybernetic ecology depends on a reciprocal relationship between humanity and nature, a relationship of interpenetration rather than domination. Firestone writes that "humanity will have mastered nature totally" not when it has achieved complete control over nature, but rather when humanity has "realized in *actuality* its dreams," that is, when there is no longer any distinction between human conception and external embodiment. In discussing cybernetics, Firestone uses a particular idiom, current at the time, to describe not the logic of technological domination, but the final stage of a dialectic in which the mutual dependence of the human and the natural achieves its full development in the ending of the distinction between the two.

FROM SCIENCE TO POLITICS

That, then, is the overarching trajectory of the dialectic of sex. Firestone, however, does not stop at this level of grand visions, having insisted that her radical feminism is a scientific feminism, in the sense in which Marxism was supposed to be a scientific socialism, that is, a concrete account of a possible transformation rather than just an imagined future.⁵⁴ While the sex dialectic in its cultural form allows us to *understand* the divided culture that must be overcome by feminist revolution, the actual overcoming of this culture will require specific and focused action. Although *The Dialectic of Sex* is not a manual of the tactics of feminist revolution, it does move toward such a discussion inasmuch as it focuses on the particular, concrete *embodiment* of this cultural dialectic. Firestone's primary example is the embodiment of the gendering of scientific culture in scientific practice. Firestone's enthusiasm about science is an enthusiasm for what science might be or, rather, an enthusiasm for what it is becoming under the pressure of its current contradictions; this does not imply an approval of the current state of science,⁵⁵ but rather a critique of science which also shows how its limitations could be overcome.⁵⁶

The question at issue here, then, concerns the embodiment of science in the *scientist*. The gendering of science is realized as a particular psychology common to the scientist. It is not just the empirical fact that a majority of scientists are men.⁵⁷ Rather, science *itself* is male: "women in science are in foreign territory," because the development of modern science has been determined by the "sex duality."⁵⁸ Firestone glosses this in terms of science requiring "a 'male' mind," a matter of the particular psychology of science. It is important to see, however, that this does not simply involve male scientists having

“male” minds rather than “female” ones. Rather, what happens is that the contradiction of sex dualism is itself reproduced or reflected in a particular way in the psychology required by science, leading to the emotionally divided psyche of the scientist who cannot integrate his “objective” scientific work with his own subjectivity. The contradiction between subjective and objective, or between public and private, is reproduced within the scientist, and for this reason it is possible for the dialectic of sex to play itself out on this individual level at the same time that it proceeds in the wider culture.

As the reflection of the sex division occurs within the “male” psychology of science, so is the division reflected within “female” minds, which accounts for the deficiencies of the subjective (“female”) arts, as well as for the specific way in which women are marginalized within science. Aside from marginal positions (technicians or assistants, rather than “proper” scientists) within the hard sciences, women’s incorporation into science has focused on the behavioral sciences or, in Firestone’s less complementary terms, “pseudo-scientific bullshit.”⁵⁹ The problem, for Firestone, with the pseudo-scientific character of the social sciences is that it renders them ineffective, incapable of having any effect on the social world, in contrast to “the ‘real’ sciences—physics, engineering, biochemistry, etc., sciences that in a technological society bore an increasingly direct relation to control of that society.”⁶⁰ Aside from being useful to continued male domination, this ineffectual pseudo-science is a further embodiment of the sex division in its cultural form. The ineffectiveness of the social sciences marks them as the importation of the female, aesthetic, cultural mode into science (although without the aesthetic mode’s visionary idealism); if women’s participation in science is restricted to social science, this does not represent a breaking down of the sex division in culture at all, but rather is a reconstruction of that sex division within science.

This still might represent progress, however, as a sharpening of the contradictions of the sex dialectic within science might accelerate science’s overcoming of these contradictions. Firestone suggests that the social sciences, in the process of overcoming their current pseudo-scientific nature, might be particularly well placed to achieve “the reintegration of the Male (Technological Mode) with the Female (Aesthetic Mode),”⁶¹ by combining an objective effectiveness with an end to the alienation of objectivity:

There is a new emphasis on objective social conditions in psychology as well as in the behavioral sciences; these disciplines, only now,

decades after the damage has been done, are reacting to their long prostitution with demands for scientific verification—but an end to “objectivity” and a reintroduction of “value judgments.” The large numbers of women in these fields may soon start using this fact to their advantage. And a therapy that has proven worse than useless may eventually be replaced with the only thing that can do any good: political organization.⁶²

Firestone’s insistence on the concrete effectiveness of science explains, I think, why the move from social science to political organization in the final sentence here is not a non-sequitur. In Firestone’s account, science or the technological mode is equivalent to agency: what defines the technological mode is its ability to intervene in and produce change in the world. Any effective political organization for women’s liberation must thus involve the appropriation of the male mode of agency, the technological mode, by women.⁶³

The point here is not that women’s oppression is merely a natural matter with a technological solution. Rather, the argument of *The Dialectic of Sex* is that the possibility of using technology for feminist ends is a result of the complex and continuously developing relationship between the natural and cultural connotations of “female.” Firestone’s specific technological predictions did not come to pass, and the language of cybernation no longer has the purchase it may have had when *The Dialectic of Sex* was written, but the dialectical conception of nature that underpins Firestone’s particular understanding of cybernetics remains valuable. The dialectical account of nature in *The Dialectic of Sex* suggests that we replace the sex/gender distinction with a sex/gender dialectic. As the sex/gender distinction has come to seem more problematic, the idea of a sex/gender dialectic represents an interesting possibility for rethinking that distinction. It is as a representative of this path not taken by second wave feminism that Firestone remains relevant today.

NOTES

1. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 267.
2. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (originally New York: William Morrow, 1970; this edition New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 3.
3. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 4–12.
4. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 6, 7.
5. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 16.

6. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 21.
7. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 35.
8. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 5.
9. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 5. Butler here refers to, but does not name, feminists who “have argued that a rethinking of ‘nature’ as a set of dynamic interrelations suits both feminist and ecological aims.” Firestone would certainly fit into this category.
10. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 109.
11. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 3.
12. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 4.
13. Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, quoted in Firestone, *Dialectic of Sex*, 2.
14. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 4.
15. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 5.
16. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 9.
17. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 9–10.
18. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 9.
19. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 9.
20. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 10.
21. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 9.
22. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 7.
23. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 59.
24. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 43, italics in original.
25. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 9, italics in original.
26. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 43–44.
27. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 44.
28. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 81.
29. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 69.
30. Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962). Ariès does relate particular changes in attitudes toward children to other factors, such as religious practice, educational reform, or legal norms, but his interest is in charting changes in family life and corresponding conceptions of children largely in their own terms. He does not attempt to develop a general theory that would explain the development of the concept of childhood as a whole.
31. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 78.
32. Alison Assister, *Althusser and Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 1990), 72–73.
33. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 104.
34. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 104.
35. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 105.
36. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 105.
37. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 105.
38. I skip over Firestone’s discussion of racism, which I cannot explore in detail here. It occurs to me, however, that understanding the

biological family as a real abstraction might help in understanding why Firestone puts forward such a problematic theory of race. The overarching problem with Firestone's theory here, it seems to me, is the attempt to explain racism entirely in terms of sexism, the claim that "*racism is a sexual phenomenon*" (Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 97, italics in original). She derives this from an analogy between the biological family and the "Family of Man" (122); but though the biological family may be a real abstraction, the family of man is at best a metaphor, an imaginary, ideal abstraction. Attempting to understand racism by reference to the biological family in this way is thus to attempt to apply an abstraction too abstractly; rather than a concrete account of racism, Firestone's discussion of race is too often an ungrounded and imaginary generalization of her account of sexism.

39. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 159.
40. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 159.
41. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 157.
42. Firestone's account of the development of science here is supported by the prevalence of metaphors of sexualized possession and rape in the writings of early figures in the scientific revolution, for which see Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 113.
43. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 8.
44. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 10.
45. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 10.
46. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 175, italics in original.
47. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 10.
48. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 10.
49. "Die Natur ist der *unorganische Leib* des Menschen," Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, Supplemental volume 1 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1968), 516. I quote the German here to avoid the ambiguity between "man" as the human *species* and as the human *male*, which is unfortunately present in the standard English translations, see e.g., Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 75.
50. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, chapter 5.
51. David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (New York: Wiley, 1965).
52. See the Soviet papers collected in Joint Publications Research Service, *Cybernetics at the Service of Communism* (Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Office of Technical Services, 1962).
53. Eden Medina, "Designing Freedom, Regulating a Nation: Socialist Cybernetics in Allende's Chile," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 38 (2006), 571–606.
54. Firestone, *Dialectic of Sex*, 4–5.

55. See especially Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 164–65.
56. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 174–75.
57. Besides which, the empirical situation is more complicated than this, concerning not simply the gender of those performing science, but the distribution of different roles within the scientific enterprise. Firestone equates “the absence of women from science” with her experience that women in science are likely to be found as “lab technicians, graduate assistants, high school science teachers, faculty wives, and the like” (Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, fn. 154). Firestone here may be missing a relevant question about the institutional structure of science: how is it that the significant infrastructure required by scientific research is elided in the equation of science with the figure of the isolated scientist?
58. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 154.
59. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 63.
60. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 63.
61. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 174.
62. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 64.
63. For Firestone’s rejection of attempts to ground women’s political organization in the passivity traditionally assigned to women, see her “The Jeanette Rankin Brigade: Woman Power? A Summary of Our Involvement” in *Notes from the First Year* (New York: The New York Radical Women, 1968), available online at <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/wlm/notes/#rankin>.

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Sexing the State of Nature: Firestone's Materialist Manifesto

Gillian Howie

In *The Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone appears to argue, in a very straight-forward way, that male dominance is independent of other social factors and that there is an historical correlation between this dominance and (natural) reproductive sex-roles. This model of domination, she suggests, is reiterated in other relationships of power such as those of class and race and therefore the sex-based hierarchical relationship should have analytic primacy. If we were to accept that sexual reproduction is the condition of other forms of social hierarchy it would seem to follow that by altering reproductive roles we would also be able to effect changes in the social distribution of power more generally. Her solution seems obvious: if we intervene technologically—and thereby alter roles in sexual reproduction—there will be no causal grounds for relations of patriarchy. Men will have to work much harder to preserve their hegemonic influence and, through living with these contradictions, women will be driven to a form of revolutionary class-consciousness.

For Barrett the two great advances in *The Dialectic of Sex*, whereby sex and gender are conceived as distinct theoretical categories and patriarchy is subjected to a materialist analysis, are undermined by the causal role assumed by procreative biology.¹ From this perspective, the collapse of gender into sex gives primacy to natural, sex-based, relations of (re)production and so is guilty either of reducing the one to the other or of justifying the idea of mono-causal and linear historical development where the form of sexual reproduction determines historical development. According to Segal and Rowbotham,

arguably both forms of reductionism, biological and historical, appeal to natural and so to essential qualities and necessarily lead to universalist and ahistorical forms of analysis.²

If *The Dialectic of Sex* were so profoundly mistaken and Firestone the unhappy perpetrator of biological reductionism, naturalism, and essentialism, not to mention causal reductionism and the fetishism of technology, then it might make sense to archive the project. It could be categorized, as Jean Elshtain suggests, as a cybernetic utopia where isolated human calculators of marginal utility run rampant, or as a precursor to Rubin's more charitably referenced work on the political economy of sex.³ *The Dialectic of Sex* could then be perceived as a quaint relic from the second phase of the feminist movement, focusing attention on the politics of romance and love with an elaborate rhetorical style that exhorts no nonsense rebellion.

The flamboyant and exaggerated style, the questionable anthropology, and the simple knock-down argument structure could support such critical responses to *The Dialectic of Sex*. But I suggest that we do not approach the book as a teleological, historical and literal narrative but, instead, as a political treatise. It, like the *Communist Manifesto*, was written following a period of intense intellectual and political activity and presents a new world view; a framework for grappling with contemporary political issues in a language which may be described as inflammatory. *The Dialectic of Sex* was, and remains, a political manifesto.

According to Charles Mills, the history of racial and gender subordination requires some major rethinking of political theory and contract theory in particular.⁴ *The Dialectic of Sex* may contribute something to that reconstruction. By introducing the problem of the sex-based division of labor into her materialist analysis Firestone brings into focus the difficult relationship of reproduction to production and this allows her, and us, to question the legitimacy of current forms of social organization. But Firestone does not merely identify the fact that we need to clarify the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism; rather, more strategically, she offers a way to intervene in the discourse of contemporary political liberalism. So, more contentiously, I suggest that *The Dialectic of Sex* can be read within a broader political tradition whereby pre-modern origins are postulated as a way to clarify the tensions of current political experience.

Despite the revolutionary overtones of *The Dialectic of Sex*, it remains concerned with the liberation and rights of morally valuable individuals: women. Firestone's account of the second wave of Western feminism begins with the struggle for rights and liberation at the end

of the eighteenth century and the Seneca Falls convention at the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁵ She writes that even after the Civil War more than half the United States' population were still legally enslaved.⁶ The broad claim is that within liberal capitalism, the language of freedom, individualism and autonomy disguises the *partial* character of rights and interests. It is here, I believe, that Firestone's portrayal of the division of sex-based labor in the state of nature is at its most significant and most contemporary. In considering the pre-modern origins of current forms of organization she is able to indicate the partial character of rights and interests and by doing so call into question the legitimacy of familiar institutions of the liberal state. First, then, we need to identify how her account can be read within a political tradition that deploys "state of nature" stories—conjectural accounts of how civil society and political rights were created. From this, second, we should consider how to read these state of nature stories; and what role they play for political theorists. If we take them in a non-literalist sense they may help to reveal something about modern social practices.

I shall take the first chapter of *The Dialectic of Sex* to be a version of the state of nature argument that dramatizes social relations within pre-modern or pre-political states in order to bring to our attention the legitimate purview of government. Although Firestone would not articulate it this way, I maintain that *The Dialectic of Sex* demonstrates by example—rather than by intention—how we can argue that within contemporary society consent is only hypothetical and obligation is merely prudential. Where obligation is prudential, and we obey because to do otherwise would cause us harm or because our choices are unjustly constrained, there can be no legitimate relationship—either private or public—between individuals or between individuals and state. For this reason, I believe Firestone can offer a way to refresh the concept of patriarchy with strategic relevance both to "the domestic" and "the state"; to the "private" and "public."

Echoing the words of Kate Millett, we might well say that from recent events in Afghanistan to the dowry system in India, from sexual segregation in Israel and Iran to the "purity" movement in the United States, from sex-trafficking to the language of sex in *Nuts and Loaded*, from female genital mutilation to the ongoing sex-based distribution of domestic labor, sexual oppression is still ubiquitous. Without collapsing all of this into a single perspective, feminism needs to find a way to articulate the cross-cultural and trans-historical features of this sex-based hierarchy. As a political treatise, *The Dialectic of Sex* can help to refocus a number of central questions and uncover

blind-spots within traditional political theory—particularly the relationship between “private” and “public” patriarchy—thereby providing the theoretical tools with which to tackle a number of pressing political problems.

DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM

Underpinning *The Dialectic of Sex* is an appeal to materialism. Amongst the various theories that can be described as “materialist” are physicalism, realism and historical or dialectical materialism. Firestone does not strictly identify the real world with the physical world and is therefore not a materialist in this first sense. Her materialism is closer to the second sense. It is a version of realism. A realist, as opposed to an empiricist, need not believe that there is direct access to that world nor need s/he dismiss the existence of consciousness, but she is likely to hold that a number of things exist independently of us and that these are not merely artifacts of the mind, of language or of a conceptual scheme. As a consequence we can discover facts about these things and it would be quite appropriate to include within an explanatory framework abstract entities such as “the family,” “the state,” and “culture,” taking these to designate something actual. Although Firestone concerns herself with language, emotion, and aspects of our culture, she does so as a realist. She believes that we can discern independent facts about our contemporary situation. I shall return to the question of whether her “prehistory” postulations have the same realist bite.

Firestone is certainly a materialist in the third sense: a dialectical materialist. Dialectical materialism was first fashioned by Marx and Engels as a response to Hegel’s idealism and it is to Marx and Engels that Firestone returns. Without wishing to oversimplify a term that has been deployed since Zeno of Elea, I would agree with Rockmore that a dialectical theory is one concerned with the “dynamic interaction between various factors operative within a situation which, through their interaction, brings about its transformation to a different situation.”⁷ Taking her cue from Engels’s comments in the *Anti-Dühring*, Firestone writes that to view history dialectically means to see the world “as process, a natural flux of action and reaction, of opposites yet inseparable and interpenetrating.”⁸

Marx and Engels develop this dialectical approach in dialogue with Hegel’s idealism. For them the idealist claim that “world is mind” contrasts unfavorably with the common-sense realist view that there is something “out there,” independent from the individual perceiver;

the Hegelian notion that the world is given shape through human ideas and concepts should be replaced with the idea that the world is given shape by human activity. Human activity was understood by Marx in terms of productive activity: working on the natural world to satisfy our needs. Human activity, defined as productive activity, thus “mediates” cultural forms, social consciousness, and ideas. To understand a form of consciousness one must examine the historical form of productive activity.

Productive activity takes various forms and changes over time. Consciousness, ideas, and concepts emerge from this social experience of production. As the form of production changes, the form of our social experience also changes. The precise relationship of mental content and forms of consciousness to productive relations and economic exchange has, of course, been much worried over within the Marxist tradition. But for Firestone the significance of Marx and Engels lies in their attempt to interpret historical and cultural change and the development of economic classes in terms of organic causes. Indeed she cites approvingly the infamous paragraph from Engels’s *Socialism: Utopian or Scientific* which disaggregates social activities into an economic base and a superstructure composed of legal, political, and religious institutions as well as philosophy and general ideas.⁹

Lastly, the term “materialism” in historical or dialectical materialism conveys a commitment to a scientific method of enquiry, and social science brings the other two senses of materialism together. “We must,” says Firestone with reference to Engels’s scientific materialism, “know how [a situation] has arisen and evolved, and through which institutions it now operates.”¹⁰ Social scientific hypotheses are able to include within their explanatory frameworks abstract entities such as “the family,” “the state,” and “culture” and these terms are taken to designate something actual. Economic, social, and psychological processes are also thought to be suitable material for scientific examination. Firestone concurs with this and encourages an historical analysis that traces the development of these forms.

Firestone insists that before we form political coalitions we should be clear about our interests and to be clear about “our” interests we need first to identify the underlying causal mechanisms. Clarity as to underlying causal mechanisms helps to sharpen our grasp of what counts as an interest. But she, along with most social scientists, believes that underlying causal mechanisms are not always immediately apparent and some work of excavation needs to be undertaken. Even once we have investigated underlying and, sometimes, hidden

causal mechanisms, cut through the ideological fog that confuses what appears on the surface with underlying causes, there remain two questions: which causal mechanism has analytic primacy? Which, as well as whose, interests are being served by the current social organization?

REPRODUCTION AND PRODUCTION

As a founder member of the New York Radical Women (NYRW) feminist group, then of the Redstockings and subsequently of the New York Radical Feminists, founder of the radical feminist journal *Notes* and author of numerous articles that may be described as “revolutionary,” Firestone was politically engaged and a feminist activist. Many of her articles trace the history of the Women’s Rights Movement in the United States and identify points where action around women’s liberation was submerged by or into other struggles.¹¹ Firestone believed that even in liberation movements women’s interests always took second place. One reason for this was that the explanatory framework adopted by liberation movements identified underlying causes and defined interests in specific ways. Yet, disagreements as to the identity of primary underlying mechanisms and the nature of interests were not restricted to encounters with other movements but were actually reproduced within feminist groups. The Redstockings, for example, were formed in 1969 following a split within the NYRW between socialist and radical feminists over just these questions.

For someone engaged in the radical feminist movement of that time, the pressing question was whether economic production is the primary underlying mechanism or whether economic exchange is dependent on more primary relations of reproduction. And it is this question, posed at the hyphen socialist-feminism, which resulted in disagreements that splintered activist groups. The identification of economic production as the (sole) underlying causal mechanism and the definition of interests in economic terms led to a particular political and organizational strategy which, Firestone argued, was at odds with the advancement of women’s liberation. In order to understand why this was so and why disagreements concerning productive activity had such a profound political and strategic impact, we need to return to Marx’s political economy.

In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* Marx baldly enumerates ways in which human and animal productive activity differs. An animal will produce what it needs to satisfy immediate needs for itself and its young, produce under the dominion of immediate

physical need, produce only itself and only in accordance with the standard of the species to which it belongs. Unlike animals, humans produce even when free from physical need, reproduce the whole of nature, and freely confront the objects of their labor. The origin of private property and political economy are then traced back to the estrangement of productive activity, or to what Marx calls the alienation of labor. Consciousness is affected, indeed transformed, through the estrangement of this productive activity.¹² Ideological forms of consciousness relate directly to the alienation of labor. Estrangement occurs through a form of exchange and exploitation whereby an individual finds that they are in control neither of their productive activity nor of what they produce.

Marx's political economy, as articulated in *Capital*, explains exchange values and prices not only of commodities but also of productive activity. Throughout history, people have worked on raw materials and produced things to sell. Within capitalism goods are exchanged for a price. The price is related to the value of labor required to produce the commodity. Indeed productive activity itself is identified as the production of commodities with exchange value. According to Marx, the value of labor is measured in terms of the time it takes to make the good. This is cashed out as a bundle of commodities the laborer requires for subsistence. Exploitation then depends on the extraction of surplus value: values produced by the worker over and above those returned to him or her as subsistence wage. The difference between the value of labor (wage) and the values created by labor (commodities produced) is the rate of exploitation. Only those who have a role within production can have surplus value appropriated and so only those who have a role in production can be exploited.

This is not to say that Marx never mentioned reproduction. According to him every form of social production is at the same time a form of social *reproduction*. The capitalist process of production, in particular, produces not only commodities, not only surplus value but also produces and reproduces the wage-labor relationship. Capitalism requires its goods to be circulated, exchanged, and consumed and so social *reproduction* is mostly associated with consumption. But although Marx offers materialist insights into the historical development of reproduction, by defining social reproduction in this way he neglected the process whereby people and their labor power are reproduced.

The transformation of wages into labor power requires more than simple and immediate consumption and sexual reproduction is more than what is meant by this definition of social reproduction. Wages have to be transformed into goods which are then worked on and

transformed into things which are useful. In addition, workers have to be fed and clothed and new workers have to be produced, raised, and looked after. The labor that occurs in the family is as necessary to capitalism as the labor in a factory. Due to this, the role of sexual reproduction and domestic labor could be said to be at the core of the reproduction of capitalism.

Marx provides a pretty convincing theory of action and an attractive relational ontology, situating sensuous, engaged individuals within social networks. But when we really begin with such sensuous activity we are led to revise his project and remove the limits imposed by the productivity paradigm. Others, such as Jürgen Habermas, have explored the limits of this paradigm but Firestone manages to articulate its *sexual* limits. The Marxist definition of productive activity constructs a political landscape where all relevant oppression is economic exploitation and all relevant production is remunerated. This has two main consequences for women: sex-based oppression is neglected and political activity becomes focused on the means of production.

First, Marx seems to confine the role of women within capitalism to the provision of cheap labor (reserve pool of labor), to the realm of consumption or to neglect it altogether. The family wage, paid to the “head of household” is supposed to include the values required to (re) produce the new workforce. Sexual (re)production and domestic labor is literally without (economic) value and so does not count as productive labor at all. As it is without economic value there can be no surplus extracted and therefore no exploitation takes place. Because productive labor is defined in terms of its economic value, domestic labor becomes invisible. Because exploitation is defined in terms of the appropriation of remunerated labor the ways in which individual men benefit from the distribution of labor within the family are also invisible.

Second, the “scientific” approach to history considers human activity to be the mediating term between “the real” and “consciousness.” Due to the definition of human activity in terms of the (re) production of exchangeable goods, the historical materialist account of development focuses on economic relations of production. As a consequence, the exchange mechanism and the wage-relation become primary explanatory principles. By identifying exploitation with the extraction of surplus value, all oppression can be captured in economic terms and revolutionary activity is, by definition, action that is designed to change the means and relations of economic production. From the vantage point of this paradigm, the Women’s Movement could quite legitimately be described as a “deviation.”

In an attempt to retain the political economy of *Capital* but to unpack the implications for women in terms of oppression and political strategy, Marxist and socialist feminists of the second wave attempted to rethink this relationship between production and reproduction.¹³ Marxist feminists, or unified systems theorists, would maintain that theories of capitalism and patriarchy describe aspects of a single social system, “gendered capitalism.” Within this framework, women are oppressed as “female workers” and within the household, but both forms of oppression are consequences of capitalist production. Therefore, a simplistic version of the argument runs, if we were to alter the mode of production we would eliminate sex-based oppression.¹⁴ Alternatively, it could be argued that capitalism is only contingently connected to patriarchy. A dual systems theorist is likely to argue that capitalism and patriarchy are two distinct historical systems that may be in conflict but today, and only contingently, intersect in “capitalist patriarchy.” Given this, an economic revolution would merely reproduce sex-based oppression. According to Firestone, the failure of the Russian Revolution is evidence enough that revolutionary analysis and activity based on economics alone will leave the real cause of oppression—the family—untouched.¹⁵

At first glance, it appears that Firestone is a dual systems theorist. There is a level of reality, she says, that does not stem directly from economics and so alongside a materialist analysis of the historical division of labor there should be a materialist analysis of sex-based division of labor in reproduction.¹⁶ Thus she supplements economic class analysis with sex-class analysis, allowing both an historical dynamic. But she is, in fact, a unified systems theorist with a twist. Like Marx she takes social productive activity to be the mediating term but by it she means something more commonly defined as “reproductive activity.” She advances the idea that there is an historical relationship between the division of labor in production and a sex-based division of labor that can be traced back to primary social relations of sexual (re)production.

Prefiguring Luce Irigaray’s account of sexuante difference, she then argues that the psychosexual roots of class antagonism can be located in the original relationship between the sexes. An unequal and—therefore—antagonistic division of reproductive labor is the condition for all divisions of labor, for economic and cultural classes and, possibly, castes. This approach could make Firestone as vulnerable as Irigaray to the accusation of cultural imperialism. But for now, I shall bracket the emerging and problematic theory of the psychology of power to concentrate on the relationship between production and

reproduction because, by drawing attention to this relationship, Firestone gets to the very heart of what critics of Marxism have described as its productivist tendencies. As a consequence of the role of productive activity within the Marxist explanatory framework domestic labor becomes invisible, as does sex-based oppression. She credits Marx with responsibility for this bias or blind spot and turns, instead, to Engels.

SEX-CLASS

Firestone finds within Engels's work a way to refine the idea of social relation that both she and Marx take to mediate consciousness and nature. By rethinking the quality of this mediating term, she intends to stand Marx on his head and to develop a "materialist view of history based on sex itself."¹⁷ Firestone discovers that in the *The Origin of the Family and Socialism, Utopian or Scientific?* Engels actually defines *two* conditions of social organization and these are the development and division of labor and the family. According to Engels, an historical account of *both* will explain different forms of social organization as well as the transitions from one form to another. But his working hypothesis is that in a needs-based economy, social structure is maintained through kinship relationships and, when the economy becomes one of surplus and wealth, these are replaced by class relations.¹⁸

Although Firestone believes that this simple historical narrative reduces the labor of sexual reproduction to an economic division of labor, she finds it still has enough explanatory potential to provoke a new form of class analysis. That said, the various suggestive and useful comments about the family found in the work of Engels do not successfully build from his insight that underlying all productive activity is a sexual substratum. It is this tension which Firestone addresses and which leads to her own account of the prehistorical sexual relations of (re)production. Once we are clear as to the sexual limits of Marx's productivity paradigm we might be in a position to consider how liberalism, specifically liberal contract theory, reproduces sexual and economic hierarchies.¹⁹

Engels historicizes the family form and thereby denaturalizes patriarchal relations within the family. Drawing on Bachofen, Morgan and McLellan, he claims that anthropological speculations, concerning the transition from mother-right to father-right patterns of social organization and inheritance, have the same theoretical significance for the history of primitive society as Darwin's theory of evolution has for biology and Marx's theory of surplus value has for political

economy.²⁰ Praising Bachofen for at least raising the issue of marriage and monogamy, Engels concentrates on the historical formation of the monogamous heterosexual family unit from its prehistorical formation of matriarchy to its historical form of patriarchy. Engels thus endorses the idea of the existence of prehistorical matriarchy and the transition from this to patriarchy. But he embellishes the transition from mother-right to father-right as a form of teleological development from savagery through barbarism into civilization. Not only does this teleological unfolding suggest that kinship organized through matriarchal lines is barbaric but also that civilization culminates in the private property relations of liberal capitalism and patriarchal monogamous family units. Civilization therefore also marks “the world historic defeat of the female sex.”²¹ One problem with this account is that it makes patriarchy an inescapable and progressive form of social organization. A second is that it leaves unexplained the forces behind the transition from one form of organization to another.

Bachofen was right, according to Engels, to suggest that this historical transition was essentially brought about by women: “at the point of economic development women must have longed for the right to chastity, to temporary or permanent marriage.” With families newly structured around heterosexual coupling the issue of inheritance became unavoidable. Assuming that “due to custom” men owned the means of labor, sources of food and slaves, Engels is comfortable in asserting that as wealth increased so did the power exerted by men within the family and this engendered the ability to alter customary kinship lines of inheritance in favor of male lineage.²² As men seized the reins of power women were degraded, enthralled, and treated as a mere instrument for breeding children. Three thousand years of subjection were encapsulated in the Code Napoléon which decreed that: “L’*enfant conçu pendant le mariage a pour père le mari.*”²³

According to Engels, the first division of labor is that of sexual reproduction, the first class antithesis is the antagonism between men and women within the monogamian marriage and the first class oppression is that of the female sex by the male sex. Indeed, Engels goes so far as to say that the well being and development of some (men) are attained through the misery and repression of others (women). The patriarchal and monogamous family did not reconcile men and women but entrenched the subjection of one sex by another.²⁴ This of course leaves open the possibility of a reconciled future. The form of argument, though, is question-begging. It assumes that

which it intends to prove and relies on the conclusion of the argument to support earlier steps. To explain the transition from one stage (matriarchy) to another (patriarchy), Engels depends on the existence of customary practices whereby men would own the means of labor, sources of food and slaves; that is, he depends on the prior existence of patriarchy to establish the transition to patriarchy. Such a mistake must raise concerns about the form any future reconciliation is expected to take.

Firestone extracts the idea that the first division of labor is sexual and extends Engels's description of contemporary patriarchal social relations to *prehistorical* sexual relations of reproduction. Subjection is not, therefore, something we arrive at through a civilizing process but is written into social relations from the beginning. Men and women have different roles in reproduction. These roles are hierarchal insofar as one is dependent on the other but the relationship is not reversible. It has to be said that an unequal distribution of power need not result in an unjust exercise of that power. There are plenty of examples of asymmetrical relations of power, such as teacher-student and doctor-client, which would not be described in terms of subjection. But according to Firestone the relationship of dependency conditions a particular psychology that she describes as "aggressive chauvinism."²⁵ There are clear parallels between the claims made here about the social context of the psychology of power and those made within the Critical Theory tradition, specifically by Fromm and Reich, concerning the organization and repression of the libido.²⁶ Indeed Firestone's articulation of the interaction between technology, empiricism, and aesthetics is similar to the account of disenchantment in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

However, Firestone's argument—that all forms of social differentiation are conditioned by an original social relation of sexuate difference—is not really convincing. It depends upon a (causal) relationship pertaining between asymmetry in power and the unjust exercise of that power. Further, it assumes that the asymmetry is primarily an ongoing relationship of dependency between two (sexed) individuals. Yet, by standing Marx on his head, within a materialist analysis of the social context of power, Firestone is able to use anthropological speculations found in Engels to focus attention on the historical constitution of current social institutions and so to denaturalize contemporary social roles. It is my contention that Firestone's prehistorical speculations perform a critical hermeneutical function and should be placed in dialogue with the "far-away" state of nature stories told by social

contract theorists. This will allow us to argue, first, that the universal claims within liberalism disguise particular interests and, second, where there is unjust exercise of power—either privately or publicly—there can be no legitimacy.

SEXING THE STATE OF NATURE

Many political philosophers have drawn on an idea of the state of nature. Philosophers, such as Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Rousseau and maybe Nozick, even Deleuze, all tell conjectural stories which outline how civil society and political rights were created from the state of nature; usually through political compact. The projection of features and relations to an earlier “far-removed” time is supposed to ensure that the political realm is deeply based and that there is moral direction to social development. It does this by drawing out what would be in the interests and motives of pre-political individuals and why they did or would consent to state authority. Their tales of compact explain why, given a specific characterization of the state of nature, free and equal citizens did agree, or would have agreed, to obey the laws of the state and thus place themselves under relations of political obligation. The assumption is that free individuals enter into contract because it is in their interests to do so. The notion of contract is taken to ground the legitimacy of power, the rightfulness of authority and political obligation. Contractarians treat social life as nothing but contract all the way down.²⁷ State authority is thereby circumscribed and the range of legitimate power adjusted accordingly.

Regardless of this variety, all social theorists, when characterizing the pre-political individual and the state of nature, are concerned with power. This may be primarily the relationship between State and individual, as with JS Mill, or between Monarch and State, as with Locke. In debate with Filmer, Locke actually articulates a new relationship of government. Rather than modeling political power (Monarch—State) on paternal power in the household, Locke focuses on the function of individual consent. Yet even he, along with every other political theorist, presumes that those forming the original compact would be “heads of households.” The hierarchical relationship between men and women within such households is either a consequence of natural subservience, as it was for Locke and Rousseau, or the result of physical force which results in compliance, as it was for Hobbes. The language and institutions of liberal democratic theory thus replace patriarchal monarchy with a fraternal public contract and private patriarchy within the family.

The fraternal contract of modern liberalism establishes two spheres of social activity: the public sphere of civil society and government and a private sphere consisting of the domestic or family and the economy. As part of the state of nature story, relationships in the family are described as consensual. This is true when contract theorists begin with independent individuals, such as with Hobbes, or individuals already within family units, such as with Locke. This has a number of consequences. First, despite the legal clauses concerning inheritance and rights, the contractual relationship between men and women is described as a private matter. Whatever occurs in the domestic sphere occurs between two consenting individuals and this means that what “takes place behind closed doors” is irrelevant to questions of civil freedom. Second, the head of household is taken to be the individual who should participate in ongoing democratic dialogue. Hence, third, the absence of women from the ongoing political contract of civil society is justified or explained in terms of original compact. Somehow, having a family precludes women from government although not from being governed.

Just as familial relationships are described as private, so too are matters of economic exchange. Exchanges of power (Hobbes) or labor (Locke) have contractual origins and for this reason remain private matters between free individuals. In Locke’s account, labor is a contract between two individuals whereby one individual sells their labor power to another and transfers the right to ownership of all that is produced through that labor. Economic exchange and accumulation based on such contract is fair and should thereby continue without interference from the state. Even minimal welfare policies or taxation could be said to interfere with what ought to be a free market. Labor performed within the family and labor exercised in the production of objects for exchange are both private matters which are outside the limits of state authority.

Firestone begins with the family unit but insists that an unequally and oppressively distributed power inheres within it.²⁸ This is not a matter of natural right or understanding. She thereby reveals the problematic nature of “private” consent between two individuals and by extension any public “original compact” agreed by heads of households. She enumerates four principal facts about the family unit. The first relates to women’s biology. Due to menstruation, childbirth, wet-nursing, and care of infants, the relationship between men and women is one of enforced dependency. Second, this dependent relationship is prolonged because children are themselves dependent on the mother for long duration. Third, women are more likely than

men to be primary carers. Last, this dependent relationship is a relationship of power and leads directly to the first division of labor.²⁹ Because the family is the condition of all social activity, oppressive sexual relations condition the social world.

Given the relationship of enforced dependency, women are neither free nor equal and, as these are the primary criteria for consent, consent cannot be given to the marriage contract. The remaining option would be to argue that when a woman does not actively resist the status quo she demonstrates tacit consent. Presenting an argument against such compliance counting as consent, Firestone says that marriage is organized around and reinforces a fundamentally oppressive biological condition.³⁰ According to liberal political theory, the individual has the right to dispose of the powers in his or her body as he or she sees fit. Such a disposal of powers, or transferal of rights, can only happen in a free contract. Firestone suggests instead that women's power over their own bodies, fertility, reproduction, and labor is "alienated" or taken by another and this is to their detriment.³¹ Such a relationship does not bring benefit to the individual woman, and therefore, because her interests are not served, there is no basis for presuming tacit consent.

There are three main ways to read state of nature stories: literally, hypothetically and critically. One can take them literally and consider them to be accurate historical accounts of the formation of states. But as no-one seriously suggests that these covenants or compacts took place at precise moments in time, it may make more sense to think of them as a form of hypothetical anthropology: a more or less plausible reconstruction of what might have happened. A third approach is to take them as hypothetical and critical devices that enable us to theorize domination within contract theory itself. In this way, they provide: "a conceptual entry point for importing the concerns and aims of radical democratic theory into a mainstream apparatus."³² By revealing relations of power and oppression between men and women, Firestone reveals the patriarchal texture of the "domination" contract.

The paradox of Hobbes's individualism—which starts with free and equal subjects and ends with complete subjection—is the paradox of the market. Similarly, we could say that the paradox of citizenship in all contract theory—which begins with free and equal individuals and ends with sexual subjection—is the paradox of patriarchy. The original social contract constitutes both freedom and domination; civil liberty and sexual subjection. The structure of the arguments lead to the conclusion that the original compact is a sexual as well as a social contract; it is sexual in the sense that it is patriarchal—that is,

the liberal contract establishes men's political right over women—and also sexual in the sense of establishing orderly access by men to women's bodies.³³

In cases where one person has power over another and uses that power in his own interest and to the detriment of the other, we can say that it is the exercise of power as domination. As such, and by extension, even where there is tacit consent or compliance, power that is exerted in the interests of one individual to the detriment of another is also domination. Power exerted in this way is neither rightful nor legitimate. Where domestic relations are supported by political government or the state they too become compromised. Because “natural” value is not “human” value, any “natural” basis of sexual imbalance of power should not constrain or dictate the formation of government.³⁴ Where the state does not intervene or where the state merely protects the rights and defends the interests of the powerful, following Rousseau, we can say that we remain in a state of barbarism.

THE POLITICAL MANIFESTO

By uniting phenomenological insights into the ideology of oppression with the method of historical materialism, Firestone nudges feminist method back toward social science. By denaturalizing sex-based oppression she shows both the usefulness and limits of Marx's political economy. It helps to articulate the contradictions within liberal capitalism between the explicit talk about free contract and equal rights and the implicit way it structures and draws upon relations of domination to extract labor and accumulate surplus. But it pays scant attention to the broader structuring of social relations. Thus by reading into the state of nature a sex-based distribution of power and labor, Firestone is able to reform Marx's productivity paradigm and reveal a much richer stream of social material relating to conflict and tension at the heart of modern liberalism. This material could be the basis for a radical democratic politics at the center of which is an idea of productive activity unconstrained by the limits of Marx's productivity paradigm.

The objective outlined by Firestone at the end of the second chapter in *The Dialectic of Sex* is to secure an egalitarian social structure.³⁵ As there is no blue print for this, as we do not even have a literary image of this future society, the challenge is to think of a time when “genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally.”³⁶ In other words, how can we think a future that does not follow from our current political condition, which eliminates all

normative imperatives that seem to follow from sexed embodiment? I contend that Firestone's thought of the cybernetic future, much like Haraway's cyborg manifesto, is a hypothetical political construction, a world-changing fiction. For Haraway, liberation rests on the construction of a consciousness of oppression and from this one of possibility.³⁷ We find that Firestone provides just that construction.

This is not a psychoanalytic story of lack and absence; of a phallic mother from whom all infants must separate. Far from abandoning the story of origins Firestone reconceives the act of conception and by doing so uncovers the myths of liberalism whereby productive and reproductive labor are classified as different types of things yet both supposedly based on free contract whilst, all the time, being appropriated for the benefit of others. Rather than, as Haraway advocates, taking pleasure from a cybernetic confusion of boundaries, *The Dialectic of Sex* uses this originary fiction to direct shards of light onto the hidden presuppositions of sex and reproduction within liberalism. This approach resonates with Jean Hampton's belief that, suitably attenuated, the descriptive side of contract theory should be revived as it provides imagery which provokes the understanding that "authoritative political societies are human creations," "conventionally-generated."³⁸

But as with any original myth, state of nature stories reconstruct the past through the fault-lines of the present. The hypothetical and critical approach is unable to lay aside the characteristics of the historical time in which it is born. As such it acts as mirror, refracting its own social context into an imagined historical past. To get to the state of nature, Hobbes, for example, was able to set aside law but not the socially acquired behavior and desires of men. The description of "natural" behaviors and relations correlates to the behaviors and values of seventeenth-century England, captured in terms of an emergent and possessive market.³⁹ Locke's flawed account of the ownership of labor, the accumulation of wealth and private contract reveals what Fredric Jameson might describe as the political unconscious of emergent capitalism. If the political unconscious of the *Leviathan* resonated with the beliefs, values and drives of seventeenth-century modernity then the political unconscious of *The Dialectic of Sex* was excited by the dissonant experiences of late modernity and the language of liberation. This is why the original sexuate relationship has normative content: it is expressed as a relationship of oppression and domination. *The Dialectic of Sex* offers a critique made for the sake of the rationality and freedom which modernity promised yet had not—indeed, has not—fulfilled.

Firestone identified a historical story which could demythologize the naturalness of her present and at the same time throw into question the hold of past. The present produces the past and more specifically the immediate past of its own present, which is now stigmatized as archaic, old-fashioned, mythic, superstitious, obsolete or simply “natural.” Pre-modern origins are postulated as a way to clarify tensions of contemporary political experience and to hold the presuppositions of government at an analytical distance. She expresses the dissonance of political experience; the fears, and anxieties of oppression and dreams for the future. To the extent that the distribution of labor and the power of “private” patriarchy remain real and global concerns for feminists in the twenty-first century, we would be well advised to return to Firestone’s claim that the myth of emancipation confuses “real with apparent freedom.”⁴⁰

NOTES

1. Michèle Barrett, *Women’s Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* (London: Verso, 1984), 11.
2. For a discussion of Firestone’s reception see Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 65–67.
3. Jean Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 219.
4. Carole Pateman and Charles Mills, *Contract and Domination* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 79.
5. See also Shulamith Firestone, “The Women’s Rights Movement in the USA” (1968). CWLU Herstory Archive. [Http://www.cwluherstory.com/CWLUArchive/womensrights.html](http://www.cwluherstory.com/CWLUArchive/womensrights.html).
6. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (originally New York: William Morrow, 1970; this edition New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 17.
7. Tom Rockmore, *Marx After Marxism: The Philosophy of Karl Marx* (London: Blackwell, 2002), 187. Dialectical thinking is also concerned with the mutual involvement of subject and object, with mediation. Roy Bhaskar draws a distinction between epistemological, ontological and relational dialectics. See Roy Bhaskar, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (London: Verso, 1993) and his entry under “Dialectics” in Tom Bottomore, ed., *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).
8. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 4.
9. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 5–6.
10. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 4.
11. Firestone, “The Women’s Rights Movement in the USA.”
12. Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow and London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1981), 68–69.

13. See, for instance, Lydia Sergeant, *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: A Debate on Class and Patriarchy* (London: Pluto Press, 1981).
14. Unified systems theorists are rarely this unsophisticated. Lise Vogel, for example, is extremely careful to identify the advantages gained by individual men, even working class men, from the current form of social organization. See Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Towards a Unitary Theory* (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 147, 170.
15. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 190.
16. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 6–7.
17. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 7.
18. Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (London: Elecbook, 2001), 6.
19. According to Pateman and Mills (*Contract and Domination*, 15) contract is the central modern mechanism for the reproduction of sexual and racial hierarchies. This may be a way to dissolve some of the tensions resulting from the description of sex relations of reproduction as the original model of domination.
20. Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 20.
21. Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 67.
22. Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 62, 67.
23. Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 81. “A child conceived during marriage has for its father the husband.”
24. Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 79, 78.
25. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 13.
26. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 41.
27. Pateman and Mills, *Contract and Domination*, 18.
28. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 9.
29. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 9.
30. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 202.
31. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 11.
32. Pateman and Mills, *Contract and Domination*, 83.
33. Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 2.
34. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 10.
35. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 37.
36. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 11.
37. Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” in A. Herrman and A. Stewart, eds., *Theorizing Feminism: Parallel Trends in the Humanities and Social Science* (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1994), 424.
38. Pateman and Mills, *Contract and Domination*, 85.
39. Charles Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1962), 22, 61.

40. Firestone, “Women and the Radical Movement” (1968). MIA Special Archive: Women and Marxism: Shulamith Firestone. <http://www.marxists.org/subject/women/authors/firestone-shulamith/radical-movement>.

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The Dialectic of *The Dialectic of Sex*

Stella Sandford

Late in 2006 I chanced across a copy of *The Dialectic of Sex* in the £1.00 bargain bin of my local second-hand bookshop in North London. I was pregnant; third trimester. Perhaps this influenced my decision to buy it. Like many other students of the history of feminism (my formal feminist education began in the late 1980s) all I knew of Firestone was that she argued for the abolition of biological reproduction, as the necessary condition for freeing women from the natural basis of their oppression. This was why, I presumed, she was consigned to the bargain bin. I had never read *The Dialectic of Sex*, of course.

Why did the history of feminism effectively erase the fact that one of the main aims of Firestone's radical feminism was to "attack sex distinctions themselves"?¹ Firestone seems to have already had the answer to this in 1970, partly anticipating her historical fate: "the reaction of the common man, woman and child—'That? Why you can't change *that!* You must be out of your mind!'"² Perhaps, however, the time for Firestone's untimely meditations has arrived.

In this essay, after an exposition and analysis of the main theses of *The Dialectic of Sex*, I will suggest that one reason for the neglect of Firestone's radical treatise has been a failure to appreciate her implicit attempt to specify a conception of sex such that it could be posited as the basis of women's oppression without being the basis for the justification of its continuation. In so doing Firestone in fact employs two different and contradictory concepts of sex, the relationship between which constitutes, I argue, the real dialectic of *The Dialectic of Sex*. After the introduction of the sex/gender distinction in feminist theory, and the widespread criticisms of the biologism of sex-based

theories, any feminist discourse reliant on the concept of sex—and especially one that identified sex oppression as natural—was bound to seem outdated or regressive. But, as this essay aims to show, one of the most significant themes to emerge from Firestone’s text is precisely the problematization of the meaning and status of the concept of “sex.” *The Dialectic of Sex* therefore stages, in a particularly stark form, one of the major problems in the contemporary philosophy of sex, and it is for this reason, I argue here, that *The Dialectic of Sex* claims our attention today.

TWO THESES

What is the relation between biological and social reproduction? What is the relation between biological reproduction and the historical oppression of women, given that it is hard to deny that there is *any* relation at all? These are the central problems for Marxist feminism, and *The Dialectic of Sex* is one of the most explicit and thoroughgoing attempts in the history of feminist theory to answer these questions.³ Firestone addressed the problem of a properly *feminist* materialist analysis of sex by reformulating it. Rather than asking how to fit sex and biological reproduction into materialist analysis, she asked how materialist analysis must be adapted when sex is prioritized. Firestone’s aim was “to develop a materialist view of history based on sex itself,” a project she conceived as a transformative expansion of historical materialism, claiming to follow the analytic method of Marx and Engels. “We shall need a sexual revolution much larger than—inclusive of—a socialist one to truly eradicate all class systems,” Firestone wrote, and as the theoretician of this revolution she claimed to take the class analysis of Marx and Engels one step further, “to its roots in the biological division of the sexes.”⁴ In the attempted theoretical fulfillment of this aim *The Dialectic of Sex* is the working out of two, twinned theses. First, the biological division of sex is the “real basis” for any economic or political analysis of society. Radical feminism, Firestone argued, was the first truly materialist analysis of socio-economic forms and their forms of oppression because it was the first to acknowledge this real basis. Second—and most controversially—the biological reality of sex division is in itself fundamentally oppressive, such that “[t]he immediate assumption of the layman that the unequal division of the sexes is ‘natural’ may be well-founded.”⁵

Many readers, I suspect, do not make it past these two theses before putting the book down. In their blunt form they are both—and the second especially—so much at odds with the subsequent

theoretical trajectories of second and third wave feminisms that the relative obscurity into which *The Dialectic of Sex* has fallen is perhaps not surprising. It has been Firestone's fate to merit a mention in histories of feminist thought, but little more. This is no doubt because, in broad terms, the general judgment on Firestone's theses is that they are simply wrong.

I agree that Firestone was wrong. I agree with Mary O'Brien that Firestone tends to "substitute generic determinism for economic determinism,"⁶ a tendency that is most egregious and indeed offensive in the fifth chapter of *The Dialectic of Sex*, which offers an analysis of racism as nothing but "*sexism extended*."⁷ I agree with Michèle Barrett (with reservations, as discussed below) that *The Dialectic of Sex* cannot ultimately escape a form of biological determinism, and that the category of the "biological family"—so central to Firestone's analysis—is woefully inadequate.⁸ I agree with Donna Haraway that *The Dialectic of Sex*, despite its celebration of polymorphous sexuality and its longing for non-deformed and non-pathological possibilities for love, cannot hide its female-body dysphoria, and that it suffers from an instrumental view of the human relation to nature.⁹

But the reasons *why* Firestone was wrong are, I contend, more complicated, more interesting, and more instructive than these standard criticisms allow. To explain this we need to return to the basic categories of analysis and explanation in *The Dialectic of Sex* for a deeper consideration of their forms and meanings. What is "sex" and what is "sex class"? What is the "natural biological family"? *What is the "dialectic of sex"?*

TWO CONCEPTS

Sex, according to Firestone, is "a fundamental biological condition,"¹⁰ a natural material condition of human existence, but not one that constrains and limits all human beings equally. To the extent that being a female means having a particular role in the biological reproduction of the species, the female, Firestone argues, is fundamentally biologically disadvantaged in being a female. More, the female is *oppressed* in the fact of her being-female; nature itself is her first oppressor.¹¹ Let me be blunt, Firestone writes: "Pregnancy is barbaric . . . the temporary deformation of the body of the individual for the sake of the species." For this reason revulsion at the sight of the pregnant female body, the waning of male sexual desire for the pregnant woman, is, she says, a wholly natural phenomenon, not a cultural habit.¹² If, for Marx, the human species first distinguishes itself

from other animals through the social production of the means of subsistence (social-historical reproduction), for Firestone women are stuck in the prehistory of the species because of their role in biological reproduction, effectively still fettered to a predominantly animal mode of being.

This natural-biological problem becomes a political (and indeed “moral”) problem when our capacity to overcome it exists but is not exploited: “now, for the first time in history, technology has created real preconditions for overthrowing these oppressive ‘natural’ conditions, along with their cultural reinforcements.”¹³ Existing (natural) relations of reproduction will soon be in conflict with the material (artificial) means of reproduction at our disposal, creating the conditions for a sexual revolution, the transformations of which are necessary for the liberation of all, not just women. For the first time it has become possible “to question fundamental biological conditions.”¹⁴ Accordingly, Firestone’s first revolutionary demand is “*The freeing of women from the tyranny of reproduction by every means possible, and the diffusion of the child-rearing role to the society as a whole, men as well as women.*”¹⁵ In the post-revolutionary period, when we will discover whether such a thing as the “instinct for pregnancy” really exists—and Firestone doubts that it does—“pregnancy . . . would be indulged in, if at all, only as a tongue-in-cheek archaism.”¹⁶

It is the thesis of the inherently unequal nature of the sex distinction as the natural basis of oppression that sets Firestone apart from the mainstream—indeed, the central and defining thrust—of most Second and Third Wave feminism. It is not hard to see why *The Dialectic of Sex* became, in Ann Snitow’s phrase, “a demon text”¹⁷ of feminism. Michèle Barrett’s vehement criticism of Firestone sums up what many saw as the central insult of the book. For Barrett, as for so many feminist theorists, “one of the early triumphs of feminist cross-cultural work” was in establishing the distinction between a biological category of sex and a “social” category of gender.¹⁸ In identifying a causal link between sex division and social oppression Firestone’s analysis undid this distinction, Barrett argues, and fell back into pre-feminist assumptions, speaking against its own professedly feminist aims. For Barrett, the fundamental problem for Marxist feminism—the combination of “the analysis of social reproduction with an analysis of patriarchal human reproduction”—must, contra Firestone, be addressed through the category of gender, analytically distinguished from sex.¹⁹

Although the terminology of the sex/gender distinction is, strictly speaking, absent from *The Dialectic of Sex*, it is there conceptually in

the form of the distinction between the biological division of the sexes and the “cultural reinforcements” of the “oppressive ‘natural’ conditions.”²⁰ But the concerted emphasis on sex cannot be explained in terms of terminological immaturity; it is quite deliberate in the articulation of Firestone’s second thesis. Firestone insistently speaks of “sex” as if of a purely biological phenomenon, such that the “natural” pole of the sex/gender distinction appears in *The Dialectic of Sex* in a more explicit and forthright manner than in perhaps any other feminist text of the twentieth century. Sex, for Firestone, is reducible to the duality male/female in so far as these terms conventionally refer, biologically and zoologically, to the different functions of different organisms of the same species in sexual reproduction. This is important because it allows Firestone to distinguish, implicitly, between her avowedly *natural* account of the oppression of women and various anti-feminist, *naturalistic* accounts to the extent that the latter tend to postulate a causal relation between the difference in reproductive function and the “natural” psycho-social differences between males and females that allegedly explain differences in capabilities, aptitudes and behaviors.

As this is important, let us be quite clear here. Firestone’s analysis only makes sense on the basis of a distinction between a *natural-biological* and a *naturalistic* conception of sex. Firestone assumed that her natural-biological concept of sex was an established scientific fact. As she indicates, it was also a popular belief: there simply *is* sex duality and that duality is naturally determined. This may be contrasted today with the idea that “sex” is a cultural or discursive construction, as Judith Butler’s work is often interpreted as arguing, although this contrast is not what determines the content of the natural-biological concept. The *naturalistic* concept on the other hand, against which Firestone’s analysis is implicitly directed, is the natural-biological (and/or the disciplinary biological concept) *plus* the view that the natural-biological sex division *determines* aspects—sometimes even *all* aspects—of human psycho-social existence and behavior, from the choice of play objects, to the choice of sexual objects; from the way we walk and talk and think to the way we compose lonely hearts advertisements. That is, the naturalistic concept takes sex to be naturally *determining* as well as naturally *determined*.

Firestone’s claim that oppression is “natural” may seem, at first sight, to align her with naturalistic justifications for patriarchy, but her conception of the ultimate aim of sexual or feminist revolution sharply distinguishes her from them. According to Firestone, if the different functions of male and female in reproduction were made

irrelevant through artificial reproductive technologies, the human beings we would become would no longer be distinguished culturally as male and female, although biologically, scientifically, it would still be possible to so distinguish us. The current observed psycho-social differences between male and female are, according to Firestone, the result of the system of *oppression* that is based on the differences between the natural reproductive functions of the male and the female. If there were no natural reproductive functions there would be no oppression and therefore no psycho-social differences, or at least not those psycho-social differences that are now ascribed to the allegedly natural difference between men and women. To this extent the overcoming of sex is the necessary condition for the overcoming of oppressive gender relations, indeed oppressive gendered existence.

It is usually presumed that the political advantage of the explanatory category of gender over that of sex is the mutability of gender, and thus its openness to transformation, in contrast to the fixity of sex. Criticisms of Firestone thus tend to berate her capitulation to the reactionary weight of sex, which drags the struggle for women's liberation back into the pre-feminist bog of biologism. But the clear presumption of *The Dialectic of Sex* is that quite the opposite is the case. The foundation of Firestone's radical politics of change is the mutability of sex itself, the urgent conviction that the natural is more immediately and radically changeable than the social. Forty years after the publication of *The Dialectic of Sex* it begins to look like she may have had a point. The ostensible mutability of gender may turn out to be the adaptive reactions of a gender system resistant to fundamental transformation; certainly the new desublimated repressive forms of gender conformity suggest this. The recent hyper-gendering of babies, children, and young adults in the most advanced capitalist areas gives a clue to the interests at stake in gender, beyond what Firestone calls the "sex wars." That is, the assumption of gender is not only bound up with the assumption of identity but also the consumption of commodities in a feedback loop that has produced—theoretical optimism to the contrary notwithstanding—a powerfully rigid system. The pink things we buy for our girls are not just signifiers of gender, they are its guarantee; they have become *necessary* as a mark of girlhood.²¹

The contemporary phenomenon of hyper-gendering and the enthusiastic mass capitulation to it may make us think wistfully of more revolutionary days, may turn us back toward the firebrand Firestone for inspiration. However, the thesis of the inherently unequal nature of the sex distinction as the natural basis of oppression

is not an *obvious* revolutionary feminist starting point, and Firestone's insistence on the overwhelmingly monolithic nature of natural sex oppression suggests that nothing had significantly changed from pre-history to the second half of the twentieth century. Until 1970, Firestone writes, "to question fundamental biological conditions [i.e., sex class] was insanity. Why should a woman give up her precious seat in a cattle car for a bloody struggle she could not hope to win?"²² All this makes it difficult to understand what a "dialectic of sex" could possibly be, given the usual understanding of a dialectical process. Firestone admires what she calls Marx and Engels's dialectical method of analysis because it allowed them, she writes, to see "the world as process, a natural flux of action and reaction, of opposites yet inseparable and interpenetrating" which allowed them to avoid the "stagnant 'metaphysical' view that had trapped so many other great minds."²³ And yet in her own account of biological oppression the female *is* stagnant, mired in sex, and sex does not change or develop, at least until the post-revolutionary period.

Firestone offers no explicit explanation or definition of the meaning of "the dialectic of sex." One may extrapolate, from the few passages in which the sense of dialectic more generally is at issue, that this meant little more to her than a relation between opposite things. She speaks, for example, of "interplay" and "interaction," leading ideally to a "merging" of opposites—which is not, in fact, a *dialectical* relation of any sort.²⁴ Nevertheless, it is possible to interpret various aspects of the implicit account of the dialectic of *sex*, specifically. At times Firestone seems to suggest, first, that there is a "natural" dialectic, or a blind dialectic of nature—a natural productive antagonism between male and female that would operate independently of the individual consciousnesses of men and women and of any *historical form* of consciousness. A natural dialectic of this kind would have to be posited at work in nature quite generally, not just in human nature. And indeed Firestone accommodates this possibility from the other direction, as it were, in projecting the human instance of the natural dialectic back into the animal kingdom, refusing the human any exceptional status. Sex class, according to Firestone, is "an oppression that goes back beyond recorded history to the animal kingdom itself,"²⁵ a claim that implies the intelligibility of talk of oppression in or between other species too. In this case the idea of a "dialectic of sex" belongs to an implicit philosophy of nature. To the extent that the utopian vision of *The Dialectic of Sex* imagines an androgynous future this implies a metaphysical fault, an alienation or split in nature itself: "the sex schism" or "the schism of reality itself," overcome in

the post-revolutionary period “with the marriage of the divided male and female principles.”²⁶

Second, the dialectic of sex is also presented as the productive antagonism between the two “sex classes.” In appropriating Marx and Engels’s concept of class in the category of “sex class,” Firestone obviously transforms its orthodox definition. In *The Dialectic of Sex* sexes are classes in the classic sense to the extent that they are social groups in unequal and antagonistic relation to each other, the existence of each being dependent on the existence of the other, and to the extent that the antagonism between these classes is the motor of history, to put it crudely. They are not, however, defined in terms of their relation to the means of production (they are not “economic classes”²⁷), but in terms of their function in relation to the species’ means of biological reproduction: “[u]nlike economic class, sex class sprang directly from a biological reality: men and women were created different, and not equal.”²⁸ Thus the “natural” inequality between the sexes refers not to a natural inequality of ability or intelligence, but to the natural basis of the unequal relations between them, the natural biological disadvantage of the female. (Again, this relies on an implicit distinction between a natural-biological and a naturalistic conception of sex.) According to Firestone, the different reproductive functions of the sexes *necessitated* the development of the sex class system,²⁹ and the sex class system remains inevitable so long as its natural basis is not eliminated. Sex class, Firestone, suggests, is more fundamental than and indeed underpins economic class. There is “a whole sexual substratum of the historical dialectic” that Marx and Engels perceived only dimly, if at all. Accordingly, the first thesis of *The Dialectic of Sex* reformulates Engels’ definition of historical materialism as follows: “The sexual-reproductive organization of society always furnishes the real basis, starting from which we can alone work out the ultimate explanation of the whole superstructure of economic, juridical and political institutions as well as of the religious, philosophical and other ideas of a given historical period.”³⁰

In other words, according to Firestone, the “dialectic of sex,” is the “great moving power of all historical events.”³¹

This aspect of the dialectic of sex plays out at the level of consciousness, not nature, such that the analysis of the dialectic is the “analysis of the dynamics of sex war.”³² This *is* species specific, and could not be projected back onto the animal kingdom except as vulgar anthropomorphism. The dialectic of sex in this sense is based on and still supported by “the sexual division itself”³³ but it is not merely

the dialectic *of that* division. Although this may be experienced at the level of individual consciousnesses (“sex war”), the dialectic of sex in this sense is more importantly the *world historical* dialectic of sex class antagonism, the productive historical contradiction between *forms* of consciousness and their corresponding social forms. Thus, for Firestone, matriarchy is a “long stage of cultural history” in the sex dialectic;³⁴ patriarchy another.

Third, the dialectic of sex operates at the level of what Firestone calls “culture.” If culture is “*the attempt by man to realize the conceivable in the possible*”—that is, to imagine “objects and states of being” that do not exist and then attempt to bring them into existence—two “modes” of culture may be identified, according to Firestone. In the idealistic/aesthetic mode “man” projects the conceivable in fantasy; in the scientific/technological mode he imposes it on reality:³⁵

In the first [idealistic mode], the individual denies the limitations of the given reality by escaping from it altogether, to define, create, his own possible . . . In the second type of cultural response the contingencies of reality are overcome, not through the creation of an alternative reality, but through the mastery of reality’s own workings: the laws of nature are exposed, then turned against it, to shape it in accordance with man’s conception.³⁶

According to Firestone, “the correspondence of these two cultural modes with the two sexes respectively is unmistakable.” The aesthetic response is feminine (“subjective, intuitive, introverted, wishful, dreamy . . . emotional, even temperamental [(hysterical)]”); the technological response is masculine (“objective, logical, extroverted, realistic . . . rational, mechanical, pragmatic and down-to-earth, stable.”)³⁷ Thus periods dominated by the aesthetic response (e.g., that of the Renaissance) are feminine periods, and periods dominated by the technological response (e.g., the “scientific” seventeenth century) are masculine periods.

The characterization of the Renaissance as “female” shows that at the cultural level of the dialectic of sex “male” and “female” cannot be understood in the natural-biological terms of Firestone’s usual category of sex: thus a feminine artist need not necessarily be a biological female. And yet, to the extent that the natural division is the “real basis” from which all analysis must begin, every aspect of the cultural dialectic of sex *is* determined in the last instance by “the sex duality” understood in natural, biological terms. The psycho-sexual organization of each of the two sexes,³⁸ the psychological, emotional and intellectual differences between the two sexes, must be explained in

the same way. But, to repeat, this is not the kind of biological determinism that animates various apologies for patriarchy and arguments for the futility of feminism. It does not *straightforwardly* claim a direct, unmediated, natural causal link between biological sex difference and masculine and feminine psychology, for example. For Firestone the link between biology on the one hand, and patriarchal social form, culture and psychology on the other, is *mediated by the relation of oppression*, albeit a relation with a natural basis. If the basis of this relation of oppression were removed (the abolition of distinct male and female functions in biological reproduction) the whole social, cultural and psychological landscape would be transformed. This is what makes the ultimate aim of the abolition of sex difference intelligible, as it is not—quite the contrary—for the usual apologists for patriarchy:

The end goal of feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just the elimination of male *privilege* but of the sex *distinction* itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally... The reproduction of the species by one sex for the benefit of both would be replaced by (at least the option of) artificial reproduction: children would be born to both sexes equally, or independently of either, however one chooses to look at it...³⁹

THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF “SEX”

As I hope I have shown, it is thus possible to reconstruct the logic of *The Dialectic of Sex* in such a way that the ultimate revolutionary aim that it proposes—the elimination of sex distinction itself—can be rendered consistent with its two initial animating theses. But this rests on a major presupposition: that the concept of sex with which the book begins is and remains a purely natural-biological one, that it can resist any conflation with the naturalistic concept of sex in anti-feminist apologies for the inevitability of patriarchy. But it cannot.

To distinguish herself from this kind of anti-feminism Firestone would need to argue, as I have said, that there is no *direct* causal relation between the sex distinction itself and the social, psychological and cultural forms of patriarchy; rather, the two must be mediated by the relation of oppression which “caus[es] specific psychosexual distortions in the human personality,”⁴⁰ introduces the “warp” of “a sexually biased culture”⁴¹ and indeed explains the one-sidedness of patriarchy itself. The site of this mediating relation of oppression is, according to Firestone, “the biological family—the basic reproductive

unit of male/female/infant, in whatever form of social organisation,” common to every form of society.⁴² For Firestone the patriarchal nuclear family is just one of the social-historical forms that the natural biological family may take,⁴³ and the limitations (“from the radical feminist viewpoint”) of the various social experiments discussed in *The Dialectic of Sex* are due to their (historically inevitable) failure to eliminate the biological family, whatever the novel form of their alternative social families.⁴⁴

For Michèle Barrett, the idea of the biological family in *The Dialectic of Sex* was the clearest example of the general tendency of a certain kind of radical feminism to biologism, the reactionary retreat into the naturalization of historical-cultural forms that are then posited as natural causes.⁴⁵ To the extent that Firestone fails to distinguish convincingly between the biological family unit of male/female/infant and the zero form of the historical-cultural patriarchal nuclear family unit of male/female/infant Barrett’s criticism is clearly just. In isolation, the idea of the biological family does have to be rejected as a useful general category of analysis.⁴⁶ But for an analysis of *The Dialectic of Sex* it is crucial. For the dialectic of *The Dialectic of Sex* becomes apparent in the relations between the components of the idea of the biological family.

The idea of the biological family both rests on and reinforces the rigorously natural-biological or zoological concept of sex that *The Dialectic of Sex* needs, to the extent that it identifies, without remainder, sex division and the relation between the sexes in biological reproduction, a reduction (in the non-pejorative sense) that is constitutive of the natural-biological concept. At the same time, however, the convergence of sex, biological reproduction and sex class in/as the biological family implicitly posits a different, *non*-natural-biological concept of sex. It is the unresolved contradiction between these two concepts of sex that drives Firestone’s analysis in *The Dialectic of Sex*.

Let us look at this in more detail. Firestone’s insistence on a purely natural-biological concept of sex is motivated, as I have said, by the conviction that the natural is more immediately and radically amenable to change than the social. Nature, not culture, is the potential site of revolution, which is why Firestone rests her faith in scientific transformations and not consciousness raising. To maintain that there exists this revolutionary potential in relation to nature—to sex—it is crucial for Firestone that the natural-biological concept of sex is not confused with the naturalistic concept. Sex, for Firestone, may be the natural-biological *ground* upon which oppression rests, but it has no causal efficacy or expressive power beyond its being, initially, such a

ground. The naturalistic concept of sex, on the other hand, ascribes an on-going causal power to the natural-biological ground, seeing the efflorescence of psychology and culture as expressive determinations of sex, rather than—as for Firestone—the consequences of oppressive relations. It is this naturalistic, and not the barely natural-biological, concept of sex that was and is the real target of criticism in the formulation of the sex/gender distinction; it was, specifically, the naturalistic concept of sex that the explanatory category of gender was intended to displace. And Firestone's case rests on the possibility of keeping the natural-biological and the naturalistic concepts of sex apart: "to grant that the sexual imbalance of power is biologically based is not to lose our case. We are no longer just animals. And the kingdom of nature does not reign absolute. . . . the 'natural' is not necessarily a 'human' value. Humanity has begun to transcend Nature."⁴⁷

But the central tension in *The Dialectic of Sex* arises because it is *impossible* to keep the natural-biological and the naturalistic concepts of sex apart, especially if the former is given *any* explanatory role in the analysis of society or culture, let alone when it is posited as the "real basis" for the "explanation of the whole superstructure of economic, juridical and political institutions as well as of the religious, philosophical and other ideas of a given historical period."⁴⁸ There is simply no explanation for the move from the instance of sex as the natural-biological ground of oppression to the social relation of oppression itself unless sex has causal efficacy, that is, unless sex is understood naturalistically. Either the natural-biological concept of sex has no role at all to play in the analysis of the social relation, or it must play that role in naturalistic terms.

It may be that, in an attempt to avoid the naturalistic trajectory, Firestone intends the category of "sex class" to mediate the move from the natural instance of sex to the relation of oppression, as if this was a category that straddled nature and society, inscribing sex as the natural ground while denying it causal efficacy. But to the extent that the account of sex class is harnessed to the category of natural-biological sex it either merely highlights the explanatory poverty of the purely natural-biological concept (effectively identifying sex class with sex itself, still begging the question of the move from the natural to the social)⁴⁹ or concedes its inevitably naturalistic explanatory function anyway. The opening page of *The Dialectic of Sex* suggests that sex class itself is "a fundamental biological condition,"⁵⁰ analytically inseparable from sex (that is, the purely natural) itself. A few pages later Firestone writes that sex class "*sprang directly from* a biological

reality,”⁵¹ separating the social effect (sex class) from its biological ground (sex) analytically but positing a causal relation (the naturalistic concept of sex). When mortgaged to the natural-biological concept of sex, “sex class” is thus not a mediating category, merely a contradictory one.⁵²

However, in the actual process of analysis in *The Dialectic of Sex*, and in positing the ultimate aim of feminist revolution, the category of sex class becomes separated from the natural-biological concept of sex. Firestone’s rewriting of Engels—the position we might call her “sexual materialism”—claims that it is the “sexual-reproductive *organization of society*,” not the fact or the nature of the sex duality itself, that “always furnishes the real basis, starting from which we can alone work out the ultimate explanation of the whole superstructure of economic, juridical and political institutions as well as of the religious, philosophical and other ideas of a given historical period.”⁵³ Here sex class *is* the “sexual-reproductive organization of society” and its terms—male and female, or man and woman (Firestone does not distinguish)—are internal to it, which is to say that here “sex” itself is a *political* concept. Similarly, the end goal of “the elimination of . . . the sex *distinction* itself” is not to envisage a technologically assisted *biological* transformation of the human species. It is to envisage a *political* situation in which “genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally.”⁵⁴ If this is the elimination of “the sex distinction itself” then “the sex distinction itself” is a political one. It is thus a political concept of sex that animates and makes intelligible the ultimate aim of feminist revolution.

As a political concept, “sex” is not a natural thing or a natural relation. It refers positively to a specific hierarchical social relation and a definite form of existence and thus to something quite real, something actual and effective. As a category of analysis it functions critically in relation to the natural-biological concept of sex to the extent that any attempt to deploy that concept in the explanation of social, cultural or psychological phenomena is inevitably naturalistic. That is, in asserting the priority of the political form of sex we simultaneously expose and deny the naturalistic explanatory pretensions of the natural biological concept of sex. This is not contradicted by the fact that the actual social content of sex—the everyday understanding of sex, the everyday functioning of the idea of sex—is predominantly driven by naturalistic presumptions; that is, by the fact of the cultural, historically effective actuality of naturalistic presumptions. Indeed “sex” as a political concept bears critically upon this content. If this were not the case there would be no need for a

political concept of sex—which is precisely Firestone’s point with the aim of the abolition of sex itself.

This is not to say that a correct reading of *The Dialectic of Sex* demands that we understand all references to the apparently natural-biological concept of sex as, in fact, the surreptitious workings of the political concept. For the natural-biological concept is uneliminably there in the talk of “fundamental biological conditions,” “biology itself,” “biological reality,” “the natural reproductive difference between the sexes,” “the biological dualism,” freeing women from their biology or “their biological destiny,” and so on.⁵⁵ The dialectic of *The Dialectic of Sex* is in the unresolved contradiction *between* its operative natural-biological and political concepts of sex. This contradiction is most evident in the thesis of the inherently unequal nature of the sex distinction as the natural basis of oppression and the revolutionary demand that follows from it (the freeing of women from the tyranny of biological reproduction) on the one hand, and the revolutionary feminist aim of the elimination of the sex distinction itself on the other.

The identification of this contradiction is not a negative evaluation of *The Dialectic of Sex*, but what allows us to specify its relevance in the context of the contemporary philosophy of sex. Firestone failed, inevitably, to isolate a natural-biological concept of sex, free from any naturalistic consequences, but the competing, political concept of sex in *The Dialectic of Sex* emerged from this failed attempt. In failing to pin down a purely natural-biological concept of sex Firestone unwittingly reveals the complex and contested nature of the concept, a complexity to which the blanket rejection of Firestone’s essay remains blind.

Of course, feminist theorists have argued over the meaning of “sex” since the 1970s. The debate, especially in philosophy and the philosophically inflected disciplines, has tended to take the form of different claims about the status of the thing “sex.” Early on Christine Delphy and Monique Wittig (notably) argued that “sex” is a political category, naming a relation of oppression between men and women that is fundamentally economic. The natural-biological concept of sex, they argued, is an ideological fog, its function being to mask the nature of the relation of oppression through naturalizing it. There is, thus, no “thing” itself. For Delphy (in “Rethinking Sex and Gender,” 1993) this meant that “sex is a sign”—not a natural fact preceding the hierarchical division of gender but the marker of this social division. Sex “serves to allow social recognition and identification of those who are dominants and those who are dominated.”⁵⁶ This marker “is

not found in a pure state, all ready for use . . . [T]o be used as a dichotomous classification, the [several and variable] indicators [of sex] have to be reduced to just one.” Although there exist “anatomical sexual differences”⁵⁷ it is a social act to reduce these to the existence of an irreducible dichotomy (the production of the sign) correlating with the functional differences between participants in biological reproduction (remembering that “participants in biological reproduction,” even potential participants, are a subset of the set of all human beings and not identical with that set). Thus even “male” and “female” are social categories denoting membership of a class—a sex class—which is both constituted by and maintains a relation of exploitation: the appropriation of the labor of one group (“women”) by another (“men”).

Even more explicitly Wittig famously claimed that “there is no sex. There is but sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses. It is oppression that creates sex and not the contrary.”⁵⁸ For Wittig the apparently natural fact of sex is an ideological production of social life: the effect, masquerading as the cause, of the exploitation of the compulsory domestic and reproductive labor of women—women who are at the same time defined precisely *as* women through the social obligation to perform this kind of labor. As such sex is, for Wittig, “a category of dominance,”⁵⁹ naming an oppositional relation between socioeconomic groups (or classes), the reality of which is masked by its naturalization.

The political concept of sex developed by Delphy and Wittig was articulated to displace the traditional natural-biological concept of sex through the revelation of its ideological functioning. Given Wittig’s claim, in “The Category of Sex,” that “there is no sex” it is not surprising that objections to this claim have tended to be couched in the terms of a natural-realist ontology. Do we, or do we not, find a thing called “sex” in nature? Does sex (by which is meant “biological sex”) exist, or does it not? The current debate in feminist philosophy over the existence or reality of sex now seems to be mortgaged to these terms, even in the positions that deny its reality or existence. Thus the competing positions can be very generally characterized as falling into one of two tendencies: 1. the reassertion of the natural-biological concept of sex, albeit in much more sophisticated versions than those that animate anti-feminism and the Papal fear of gender theory (“yes, sex does exist”);⁶⁰ 2. assertions of the fundamentally discursive or socially and culturally constructed nature of “sex”—assertions indebted, if not always true to, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (“no, sex does not exist”). But in reducing itself to these

alternatives the debate unwittingly forecloses the possibility or intelligibility of other conceptions of sex (notably Wittig and Delphy's political conception) and other, non-natural-biological conceptions of the reality or social existence of sex.

In the context of the contemporary philosophy of sex, the productive contradiction between the competing conceptions of sex in Firestone's *Dialectic* may be theoretically reconfigured as the constitutive tension *within* a still emergent political concept of sex. That tension is, as indicated earlier, the relation between the articulation of its political form or critical function, and the actuality of the social effect (the social reality) of the natural-biological concept upon which the political concept is brought critically to bear. To this extent the political concept of sex bears the natural-biological concept within it as its dialectical counterpart.

There is only a dialectic of "sex." Forty years on, this is what *The Dialectic of Sex* reveals.

NOTES

1. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 16.
2. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 3.
3. Another is Mary O'Brien's *The Politics of Reproduction* (Boston, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).
4. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 12. See also 4, 7.
5. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 12.
6. O'Brien, *The Politics of Reproduction*, 79.
7. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 97.
8. Michèle Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* (London: Verso, 1980), 195–97, 199.
9. Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), 10.
10. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 3.
11. "Nature produced the fundamental inequality—half the human race must bear and rear the children of all of them." Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 184.
12. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 180.
13. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 175.
14. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 3.
15. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 185.
16. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 216.
17. Ann Snitow, "Feminism and Motherhood: An American Reading," *Feminist Review* 40, (Spring 1992), 34.
18. Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today*, 13.

19. According to Barrett, Marxist feminism “must identify the operation of gender relations as and where they may be distinct from, or connected with, the processes of production and reproduction understood by historical materialism” (*Women’s Oppression Today*, 9). For a discussion of the problems with Barrett’s use of the category of gender see Stella Sandford, “Sexmat Revisited,” *Radical Philosophy* 145 (Sept/Oct 2007): 28–35.
20. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 175.
21. On the retrenchment of aspects of traditional gender stereotypes see Caroline Bassett’s contribution to this volume, “Impossible, Admirable, *Androgyne*: Firestone, Technology and Utopia,” pp. 85–110.
22. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 3.
23. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 4.
24. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 158. *The Dialectic of Sex* is, as Mandy Merck puts it “dubiously dialectical.” Mandy Merck, “Prosthetic Gestation: Shulamith Firestone and Sexual Difference,” *New Formations* 46 (Spring 2002): 137.
25. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 4.
26. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 152, 169.
27. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 4. This distinguishes Firestone’s category of “sex class” from that of, for example, Christine Delphy, for whom sex class is an economic category, as discussed below.
28. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 8.
29. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 8–9.
30. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 13.
31. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 4.
32. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 12.
33. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 8.
34. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 159.
35. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 154–55.
36. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 156–57.
37. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 157.
38. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 121.
39. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 11.
40. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 10.
41. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 150. See also 165 on “the warpings of the male personality in the extreme.”
42. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 9, 65.
43. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 44.
44. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 196.
45. Barrett, *Women’s Oppression Today*, 195.
46. For a different view of Firestone’s concept of the biological family see Tim Fiske’s contribution to this volume, “Technology, Nature and Liberation: Shulamith Firestone’s Dialectical Theory of Agency,” 197–214.

47. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 10. Firestone quotes Simone de Beauvoir approvingly: "Humanity is not an animal species, it is a historical reality. Human society is an antiphysis—in a sense it is against nature; it does not passively submit to the presence of nature but rather takes over the control of nature on its own behalf."
48. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 13.
49. O'Brien (*The Politics of Reproduction*, 81) makes a similar point in her discussion of Firestone: "The connection between the biological base and its conceptualization as a power relation remains obscure."
50. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 3.
51. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 8, emphasis added.
52. Still later (Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 116) the "sex class system" is said to be "based on the unequal power distribution of the biological family": a contradictory category based on a contradiction in terms.
53. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 5–6, emphasis added.
54. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 11.
55. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 3, 8, 9, 171, 185.
56. Christine Delphy, "Rethinking Sex and Gender" (1993), trans. Diana Leonard, in Kelly Oliver, ed., *French Feminism Reader* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 69.
57. Delphy, "Rethinking Sex and Gender," 69, 71.
58. Monique Wittig, "The Category of Sex" (1976/1982), in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 2.
59. Wittig, "The Category of Sex," 5.
60. "Speaking on Monday [December 22, 2008], Pope Benedict XVI warned that gender theory blurred the distinction between male and female and thus could lead to the "self-destruction" of the human race." <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7796663.stm> (accessed February 26, 2009). For an example of a sophisticated defense of a natural, realist concept of sex, against Delphy and Wittig, see Alison Stone, "The Incomplete Materialism of French Materialist Feminism," *Radical Philosophy* 145 (September/October 2007). See also, for a reply to this, Stella Sandford, "Sexmat, Revisited," also in *Radical Philosophy* 145.

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Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations

Elizabeth Freeman

Do you identify up, or down?

Anonymous, in personal conversation, circa 1992

As a graduate student teaching my first solo course in Lesbian and Gay Studies in 1993, at a moment when “identity” was rapidly morphing into cross-gender identification, I told an anecdote I thought would illustrate this crossing: “I wear this T-shirt that says ‘Big Fag’ sometimes, because lesbians give potlucks and dykes fix cars. I’ve never done well at either, so ‘Big Fag’ feels more appropriate.” A student came to see me in office hours, quite upset. She was in her early twenties, a few years younger than I, but she dressed like my feminist teachers had in college. She stood before me in Birkenstocks, wool socks, jeans, and a women’s music T-shirt, and declared that she felt dismissed and marginalized by my comment, that lesbians-who-give-potlucks described her exactly, and that I had clearly fashioned a more interesting identity with her own as a foil. I had thought I was telling a story about being inadequate to prevailing lesbian identity-forms, or about allying with gay men, or perhaps even about the lack of representational choices for signaling *femme*. But it turned out that I was telling a story about anachronism, with “lesbian” as the sign of times gone by and her body as an implicit teaching text.

Momentarily displaced into my own history of feeling chastised by feminisms that preceded me, yet aware that this student had felt

disciplined by my joke in much the same way, I apologized, and a long conversation about identification between students and teachers followed. But what interests me now is the way that that student's self-presentation ruptured any easy assumptions about lesbian generations and registered the failure of the "generational" model to capture political differences between two women who had race, class, nationality, and sexual preference in common. The temporal incongruity of her body suggested that she simply did not identify with what I would have taken to be her own emergent peer culture of neopunk polymorphs, Queer Nationals, Riot Grrrls, and so on—nor with my culture of neo-butch/femme, consumerist sex radicalism. Her body's "crossing," then, was different than the gender crossings that queer studies was just beginning to privilege. It was a crossing of time, less in the mode of postmodern pastiche than in the mode of stubborn identification with a set of social coordinates that exceeded her own historical moment.

Let us call this "temporal drag," with all of the associations that the word "drag" has with retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past upon the present. This kind of drag, as opposed to the queenier kind celebrated in queer cultural studies, suggests the gravitational pull that "lesbian" sometimes seems to exert upon "queer." In many discussions of the relationship between the two, it often seems as if the lesbian feminist is cast as the big drag, drawing politics inexorably back to essentialized bodies, normative visions of women's sexuality, and single-issue identity politics. Yet for those of us for whom queer politics and theory involve not disavowing our relationship to particular (feminist) histories even as we move away from identity politics, thinking of "drag" as a temporal phenomenon also raises a crucial question: what is the time of queer performativity?

In formulating her landmark theory of queer performativity, Judith Butler's answer to this question seems to be that its time is basically progressive, insofar as it depends upon repetitions with a difference—iterations that are transformative and future-oriented. In *Gender Trouble*, an identity-sign such as "lesbian" is most promising for the unpredictable ways it may be taken up later. Repetitions with any backward-looking force, on the other hand, are merely "citational," and can only thereby consolidate the authority of a fantasized original.¹ The time of ordinary masculine and feminine performativity is even more retroactive: the "original" sexed body that seems to guarantee the gendered subject's authenticity is in fact a back-formation, a hologram projected onto earlier moments. The political result of these temporal formulations can be that whatever looks newer or

more-radical-than-thou has more purchase over prior signs, and that whatever seems to generate continuity seems better left behind. But to reduce all embodied performances to the status of copies without originals is to ignore the interesting threat that the genuine *past*-ness of the past sometimes makes to the political present. And as other critics have pointed out, the theoretical work of “queer performativity” sometimes (though not always) undermines not just the essentialized body that haunts lesbian and gay identity politics, but political history—the expending of actual physical energy in less spectacular or theatrical forms of activist labor done in response to historically specific crises.²

Though “temporal drag” is always a constitutive part of subjectivity, exteriorized as a mode of embodiment it may also offer a way of connecting queer performativity to disavowed political histories. Might some bodies, in registering on their very surfaces the co-presence of several historically specific events, movements, and collective pleasures, complicate or displace the centrality of *gender*-transitive drag to queer performativity? Might they articulate instead a kind of *temporal* transitivity that does not leave feminism, femininity, or other “anachronisms” behind? I ask this not to dismiss Butler’s work—which has facilitated all kinds of promising Cultural Studies projects that depend upon the decoupling of identities and practices—but rather to use her to think specifically about the history of feminism, bringing out a temporal aspect that I think is often overlooked in descriptions of her important turn from performativity to what she calls the “psychic life of power.” As I will go on to argue, Butler does indeed provide a way of thinking about identity relationally across time, of “drag” as a *productive* obstacle to progress, a usefully distorting pull backward, and a necessary pressure upon the present tense. But the form of drag I would like to extrapolate from her work moves beyond the parent-child relation that has structured psychoanalysis, and might therefore usefully transform a “generational” model of politics. For though some feminists have advocated abandoning the generational model because it relies on family as its dominant metaphor and identity as the commodity it passes on,³ the concept of generations linked by political work or even by mass entertainment also acknowledges the ability of various culture industries to produce shared subjectivities that go beyond the family. “Generation,” a word for both biological and technological forms of replication, cannot be tossed out with the bathwater of reproductive thinking. Instead, it may be crucial to complicate the idea of horizontal political generations succeeding one another, with a notion of

“temporal drag,” thought less in the psychic time of the individual than in the movement time of collective political life.

SHULIE

Recently, I encountered a video artist’s meditation on radical feminism in which this project seems central. In Elisabeth Subrin’s short experimental video *Shulie* (1997), a queer vision of embodiment intersects with some feminist concerns about generationality, continuity, and historicity. Some background: *Shulie* is a shot-by-shot remake of an unreleased 1967 documentary film with the same title. The earlier *Shulie* examined a then-unknown twenty-two-year-old student at the Art Institute of Chicago named Shulamith Firestone, who went on shortly after the documentary’s completion to organize the New York Radical Women in 1967, the Redstockings in early 1969, and the New York Radical Feminists in the fall of 1969, and eventually to write the groundbreaking feminist manifesto *The Dialectic of Sex* in 1970.⁴ Rather than reworking *Shulie* (1967) into a documentary that links the post-adolescent art student with the pioneering radical feminist she became, Subrin restaged the original film and meticulously duplicated its camerawork, adding a montage sequence at the beginning and framing the piece with several explanatory texts. We learn that in 1967, four male Chicago art students were commissioned to portray the “Now Generation” of the late 1960s, among them Firestone. The title card reads “Shulie, ©1967,” as if what we are about to see is the original film. But the 1997 video ends with a text explaining that it is an adaptation of the 1967 film and crediting its makers, then announcing that Firestone moved to New York shortly after the filming to found the radical feminist movement and write *The Dialectic of Sex*.⁵ The final framing text puts Firestone into a feminist genealogy, claiming that her ideas about cybernetic reproduction anticipated many postmodernist analyses of the relationship between technology and gender. *Shulie* (1997) also honors the way Firestone herself paid homage to her predecessors: *The Dialectic of Sex* is “for Simone de Beauvoir, who endured”; after Subrin’s credits comes a dedication “for Shulamith Firestone, who has endured,” perhaps more in the contemporary feminist political unconscious than on Women’s Studies syllabi. Indeed, despite this evocation of a feminist legacy, *Shulie* (1997) consistently undermines the idea that an intact feminist world has been handed down from older women to younger ones. Further complicating its work as a feminist historical document, the video is also infused with the

vicariousness and self-conscious theatricality that have become the hallmarks of queer cultural texts.

The montage sequence of the 1997 *Shulie* opens with a sign that condenses the eroticism of recent lesbian-queer revivals of gender play, and the historicism that is an often unacknowledged but constitutive part of queer performance. Subrin's first shot, lasting twenty-four seconds, shows a set of empty train tracks leading into downtown Chicago, a part of the skyline in the background. In the foreground, we see a shabby warehouse—itsself an index of industrial capitalism now often located rhetorically in the nation's past. The side of this warehouse reads “New Packing Co.” This sign acknowledges that the video itself is a reshoot, and alludes to the repackaging of collective feminist activism into individual, consumerist style in the 1980s and beyond. Yet in the context of a video about Second Wave feminism, the phrase also momentarily reminds at least some audience members of the central role that “packing”—the wearing of dildos—had as radical separatist feminism metamorphosized into the sex wars of the 1980s. Finally, the warehouse sign is the sign of an ellipse: Subrin has reshot a film that was never released because Shulamith Firestone asked its makers never to show it.⁶ What the contemporary audience can see, instead, is a repackaging of feminist history's outtakes, which turns out to pack a punch.

This convergence of a decrepit icon of manual labor and a phrase that suggests style, eroticism, and consumer pleasures, prefigures the way that Subrin's remake eventually disorients the postfeminist “now” of its own moment. As the camera lingers on the “New Packing” sign, fragments of sound fade in: the clacking of train wheels, chants of “2, 4, 6, 8,” a staticky broadcast of a black male voice declaring, “thousands of young people are being beaten in the streets of Chicago” as the camera moves away from the sign, revealing a recognizably 1990s Chicago whose streets look empty. While the image track accumulates shots of still buildings, deserted streets, and hollow underpasses shot in the present, the soundtrack spills forth more political detritus from the late 1960s: among them, a male voice demands, “Am I under arrest? Am I under arrest?,” a crowd chants “Peace now,” a warbling tenor sings “Miss America.” Over this, sirens from the past sound an alarm that seems aimed directly at the current moment. The title card marks the beginning of the video's diegetic time and of its cinematographic merger with the prior film. Yet the first words of its interviewee, Shulie, undermine the soundtrack's prior suggestion that the Chicago of the 1960s may be a lost political utopia: “I don't like Chicago,” Shulie begins, and anyone who has

lived there understands the combination of hope and pessimism that she says the city inspires in her.

In fact, for Shulie, 1967 seems just as politically empty as the video's presentation of 1997. Within the diegetic boundaries of the video that follows the montage, even though the camerawork and action exactly follow the 1967 original, we see little evidence of the earlier period's activism. Instead of a documentary history of radical feminism, a biopic of Firestone's entire life, or an explicit comparison of feminisms "now" and "then," Subrin delivers a series of throwaway observations and incidents in the life of a depressive, very smart young Jewish female in her final year at the Art Institute. Listening to Shulie's commentary, which is startlingly *à propos* to our own moment, audience members are forced to confront the fact that the prehistory of radical feminism is very much like its aftermath, that we have a certain postmodern problem that no longer has a name—or rather, whose names are under increasing erasure. And Shulie is clearly a figure for Subrin; the videomaker herself is also a very smart, middle-class Jewish female artist whose prior work is about depression, and who had just graduated from the Art Institute when she began shooting.⁷ History reappears as neither monument nor farce, but as the angel face of a twenty-two-year-old ("so young!" moans one of Shulie's teachers), a promise not yet redeemed for the thirty-something videomaker, thirty years later.

Of course this video is completely different from a drag performance. If anything, the purportedly humorless radical feminist is the political subject-position that has seemed most at odds with the drag queen. But in its chronotopic disjunctiveness, Subrin's work does partake in a temporal economy crucial to queer performance and harnesses it to movements that go beyond the shimmyings of individual bodies and to the problematic relationship between feminist history and queer theory. Moving from an opening landscape that features the evacuated warehouses of 1990s post-industrial Chicago to follow Shulie through the junkyards she photographed in the 1960s, and ultimately toward the question of what Second Wave feminism might mean to those who did not live through it except possibly as children, the video partakes in the love of failure, the rescue of ephemera, that constitutes the most angst-ridden side of queer camp performance. As Andrew Ross and Richard Dyer have argued, the camp effect depends not just upon inverting binaries such as male/female, high/low, and so on, but also upon resuscitation of the obsolete cultural text.⁸ This multi-temporal aspect of camp seems to inform Subrin's use of what she elsewhere calls Shulie's "minor, flawed, and non-heroic" experience

at the Art Institute and even the video's willingness to redeploy radical feminism as a failed and yet also incomplete political project.⁹

Shulie's investment in cultural castoffs and potentially embarrassing prehistories resonates also with a crucial turn in Butler's work: not the turn from theatricality to material bodies that marks the movement from *Gender Trouble* to *Bodies That Matter*, but the shift from a non-narrative, futuristic model of "iteration" to a narrative, historicist model of "allegorization," in which the material by-products of past failures write the poetry of a different future. As Butler suggests at the end of "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" and amplifies in *The Psychic Life of Power*, normative gender identity may itself be melancholic, emerging when a subject is forced to renounce her desire for her same-sex parent and then compensates by assuming as her own body the one she has been forced to give up wanting sexually.¹⁰ Preserving the lost object of improper desire in the form of a properly gendered subjectivity, the manly man or womanly woman is, as Butler eloquently puts it, "the archaeological remainder...of unresolved grief." She goes on to suggest that drag performance "allegorizes *heterosexual melancholy*, the melancholy by which a masculine gender is formed from the refusal to grieve the masculine as a possibility of love; a feminine gender is formed (taken on, assumed) through the incorporative fantasy by which the feminine is excluded as a possible object of love, an exclusion never grieved, but "preserved" through heightened feminine identification."¹¹ In this revision of the Oedipus complex, the lover's gendered identity takes shape not only through the melancholic preservation of the same-sex beloved as an object of identification (as in Freud), but also as the lover's outward inscription of the beloved onto her own body in the form of gendered clothing, gesture, and so on.

Though her focus here is not queer performance but heterosexual embodiment, Butler's use of the term "allegorize" in a discussion of how drag might expose the psychic machinery of normative gender identification is key, for allegory itself has an affinity with ritual. Both engage with *temporal* crossing, with the movement of signs, personified as bodies, across the boundaries of age, chronology, epoch. But to use an even more old-fashioned literary critical term, if drag works allegorically, normative masculinity and femininity might actually be *symbolic* in their attempt to fuse incommensurate temporal moments into a singular and coherent experience of gendered selfhood.¹² Turning identification into identity, ordinary gender must perforce erase the passage of time, because it can only preserve the lost object of homosexual desire in the form of the lawfully gendered subject by

evacuating the historical specificity of the prior object. For instance, if I renounce my mother and wear her body as my “own” gender, I certainly don’t wear it as *she* did at the moment of my renunciation, circa 1969. If I disseminate my mother’s body in all its anachronistic glory onto the surface of my own, though, I don’t look normative at all. As “Mom, circa 1969,” my appearance writes onto my body not only the history of my love for my mother (or even the spending of her youthful body on the making of my own), but also at least two historically distinct forms and meanings of “womanhood.” This kind of temporal drag uses disruptive anachronisms to pivot what would otherwise be simple parody into a montage of publicly intelligible subject-positions lost and gained. For many committed to both butch/femme and feminism, play on the flesh with prior, “tired” models of gender performs just the kind of temporal crossing that registers a certain queerness.

Butler’s momentary reference to allegory also goes beyond psychoanalysis to commit to the culture-making work of queer performativity. For allegory is the form of *collective* melancholia. Melancholia is inward, and involves the preservation of the lost object as an aspect of one grieving person’s subjectivity. But allegory traffics in collectively held meanings and experiences, pushing the melancholic’s rather solipsistic introjection back outward in order to remake the world in a mock-imperialist gesture: its narrative “cure” can never be merely personal. The primary work of queer performativity, rethought as complexly allegorical, might be to construct and circulate something like an embodied temporal map, a political archive for a contingent form of personhood.

This ethic deeply informs Subrin’s casting and costuming in *Shulie* (1997), which insists upon the presence of a shared feminist repository in the 1990s queergirl.¹³ Lead actress Kim Soss’s performance of Shulie, and Subrin’s direction of that performance, neither pass as perfect reconstructions nor explode into hyperbolic deconstructions. Instead, they traffic in the kinds of anachronisms that disrupt what might otherwise be a seamless, point-by-point retelling of the prior text. For instance, playing the part of Shulie, Soss wears a rather obvious wig and glasses that look contemporary. Some of the video’s critics have also commented that the main difference between Soss and the Firestone of the 1967 *Shulie* is affect—a reviewer who has seen both works focuses on the contrast between Firestone’s rather tortured emotional intensity and Soss’s “colorless, guarded, emotionally vacant” delivery.¹⁴ There are also several historically anomalous objects in the 1997 video, including a sexual harassment policy

statement in the post office that Subrin used to remake the scenes of Shulie at her day job, a Starbucks coffee cup, and a cameo appearance by Subrin herself. But these anachronisms of costuming, affect, props, and character, which break the 1960s frame, do not function as parody. They are neither excessive nor particularly funny. They are simultaneously minor failures of historical authenticity and the sudden *punctum* of the present. The idea that Shulie's pigtails, wacky glasses, mini-dresses, and depression might be all that is left of the movement she founded is a sobering reminder that political contexts morph rapidly into commodified subcultures. Or perhaps it is inspiring, insofar as she looks a bit like a Riot Grrrl, that this movement has reinvigorated some important precepts of radical feminism. But the subtle 1990s touches work against the neoconservative tendency to consign to the irretrievable past anything that challenges a dominant vision of the future—and remind us that social progressives have a tendency to be too easily embarrassed by earlier political moments. Shulie's "now" clearly resonates with our own, and since hers was about to detonate into a political future, the video implicitly asks, why not ours?

In short, *Shulie* (1997) suggests that there are iterations, repetitions, and citations which are not strictly parodic, in that they do not necessarily aim to reveal the original as always already a copy, but instead engage with prior time as genuinely elsewhere. Nor are they strictly consolidating of authority, in that they leave the very authority they cite visible as a ruin. Instead, they tap into a mode of longing that is as fundamental to queer performance as laughter is. Reanimating cultural corpses, *Shulie's* iterations suggest, might make the social coordinates that accompanied these signs available in a different way.

This strategy both extends and modifies an earlier tradition of the feminist reshoot pioneered by artists such as Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, and Barbara Kruger, who imitated high cultural masterworks or popular generic codes, forcing viewers to speculate upon what female re-authorship (for all three) or the insertion of a "real" female body into these frameworks (for Sherman and Kruger) might reveal about their ostensibly universal representational stakes.¹⁵ Both Subrin and Firestone herself do the same for the documentary genre. The anachronistic touches which remind us that the Shulie of 1997 is *not* a historical documentary also temporally reframe Firestone's struggle to resist her position as a woman in the arts and to subvert the demand that she represent the "Now generation" of 1967, putting her instead into a dialogue with feminist artists who followed her. In a scene that sets the terms for her later critique of the representational politics of the "generation," Shulie takes her artwork into the painting

studios at the Art Institute for a final critique. Though her paintings look expressionist and somewhat abstract, her five male teachers mistake her for a realist, insisting that several works “are what they are.” They also turn Shulie into a documentarian, insisting that “the theme behind” all of her photographs is “the same, is your interest in people, and the lives...” This is a manifestly ludicrous assessment of even the most flatly “realistic” photographs, since the central object her art examines is clearly the male body: male nudes, seated figures, construction workers, little boys, and civil servants crowd her works. Even the 1967 filmmakers seem to catch this irony, for they shoot Shulie painting a male figure from behind the canvas, so that she seems to look back and forth at the camera as she paints, as if the cameraman himself were her model. (Late in the sequence, the “real” model finally appears.) Firestone thus explored the fragilities and cultural distortions of male embodiment long before “masculinity studies” hit the academy. And even the four male documentarians of 1967 seem to have realized that Firestone was clearly painting against the male gaze while a total of nine men looked at “Shulie.” Her teachers do not seem to have been so bright. Dismissing this work with the male body and the male social subject as “grotesque,” “a little on the dreary side,” and “very indecisive,” the art faculty pushes her toward filmmaking, claiming that cinema is a more direct treatment of reality.

The irony of this is palpable too, since Firestone is clearly already working at and in the medium of film by performing the part of the “documentary” subject Shulie, all the while undermining the assumptions behind the documentary genre. As if to contradict her professors’ banal assessment of her artwork, the glimpses we can see of Firestone’s engagement with the filming process stubbornly take issue with the idea that representations can ever be “what they are.” She emphasizes her commitment to depicting and deforming the male body while she herself is framed both by the original male documentarians and by the faculty members who critique her, and it is unclear whether these male grotesques represent an act of revenge against patriarchal conventions of representation or her own gender-transitive self-figuration as male. She describes her decision not to photograph an elderly woman, stating firmly that “sometimes you just reach a point where you can’t use people’s situations as subject matter,” which suggests that she herself may not be revealing much. And she offers only one coherent reading of her own canvases. “This is a civil service exam,” she explains, and immediately links that painting to the very scenario she is in: “or any classroom situation... a certain dehumanization and alienation that people have to go through in their work,”

linking the use of the female body in high art, her own position as a female art student in an all-male critique, and her status as the object of the documentary gaze.

Yet Subrin also refuses to simply reinstall Shulamith Firestone into a linear feminist art history. In a complicated and confusing scene that follows the art critique, Shulie herself goes on to explicitly repudiate the cultural logic of reproduction whereby “generation” is an unquestionable figure either for continuity or for complete rupture—and by repeating this scene, the 1997 video complicates the relationship between Shulie and her reanimator, younger and older, pre-feminist and postfeminist. In the 1997 version, Subrin (who plays the on- and off-camera part of the original documentarians), asks Shulie if her feelings of connection to outsiders relates “to this question of being a generation.” Coming from a man as it did originally, this question would sound narrow-minded, for it misrecognizes as a generation gap what Shulie’s artwork has already clearly rendered as a gender gap. But because Subrin herself takes over the documentarian’s authoritarian, misguided voice, gender does not simply trump generation, linking women across time. The scene also captures the failure of two *women* to constitute a meaningful political cohort, of Second Wave and Generation X to merge smoothly into some timeless Generation XX. Shulie repeats the question about “being a generation” in surprise. The documentarian says, “I mean, this is something that’s very strong among so many people your age, that they see themselves to be part, very importantly, a part of an important generation.” Because Subrin’s impatient voice comes from the 1990s, “your age” is ironic, suggesting her own slight irritation with “60s radicals” as perhaps the most self-consciously “generational” cohort, paying wry homage to the fact that women from the “important generation” of the 1960s now make major decisions about the careers of women like Subrin herself, and implying that age is often simply a metaphor for institutional power.

But Shulie retorts, “Well, I wouldn’t say that there are so many who feel alienated from it,” apparently shifting the pronominal referent from mainstream society to the “Now generation” itself and thereby dismissing even shared outsiderhood as a form of groupthink. Here, she seems to hold out for a feeling of alienation that might lead to something besides a generation gap, as indeed the subsequent departure of many feminists from the traditional left acknowledged. The documentarian reiterates, “I’m saying that there are many who feel part of it, not who feel alienated, but who feel very much a part of it.” “Oh,” says Shulie, “You said that they feel part of it, and I said I

didn't." The documentarian assents. "Well," Shulie says, apparently giving up on pursuing her discomfort with the idea of a collectivity whose main claim to politics is being born within a few years of one another or witnessing the same events together, "Yes, you know. That's true." But she does not seem to mean this any more than she does when she gives up and agrees with the cruel dismissals of her work in her art critique.

This conversation about generations adds another layer of irony: though Shulie could not possibly feel a part of Subrin's generation, Subrin's address to the past suggests that Shulie might have done better "here." For Firestone's later insistence on cybernetics as the key to feminist liberation is more in keeping with the anti-essentialist theories in which Subrin was trained in the 1980s and 1990s than with what has been critically associated with "Second Wave" feminism. Subrin, on the other hand, seems to feel herself more part of Shulie's "pre"-feminist moment than her own "post"-feminist one: there is something about the rawness of expression, the lack of terms with which Shulie has to think about her own experience, that the video captures as a mode of political possibility. B. Ruby Rich insists that Subrin's version of Shulie "completes a certain cycle: the first generation of feminist theory as revisited, fetishized, and worshipped by the new generation."¹⁶ But I am not sure the language of worship does justice to the profound ambivalence of the video, which is as accusatory as it is reverential, as much about the lack of a genuinely transformed context for women born into the 1970s and 1980s as it is about an admiration for ideas that came earlier. If anything, Subrin *refuses* to fetishize, to disavow what is not present in her primal encounter with Shulie (at the very least, the "real" Firestone, a fully available past, a coherent origin for radical feminism, and an intelligible political doctrine) or to cover up that lack with the false totality of interviews with Firestone's friends or with her own voice-overs.

The conversation between Shulie and the documentarian about generations bridges a scene emphasizing the uselessness of the "Now generation" concept that the original documentary's patrons aimed to promote. Originally a 1960s "be-in," the scene was reshot at a demonstration against the 1996 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The 1990s demonstrators mill about, painting each other's faces and banging drums rather languorously, flanked by equally idle policemen. One wonders whether the original be-in was this lackadaisical, or whether the relaxed silliness of the 1990s version holds different promises than the original event. Shulie's voiceover suggests that the be-in, like the free-form demonstration Subrin substitutes,

relied on the politics of “generations,” whereby belonging to a specific historical moment—marked by age stratification, homogeneous fashion, a vague awareness of the politics they are supposedly there to contest, and indulgent supervision by the police—is somehow equated with doing something in it. As the scene rolls by, Shulie reiterates her feeling that she is not part of the very generation the documentary insists she is representing, “Well, I know that’s not very hip. I’m sorry, it just happens to be true.” The documentarian asks urgently, “Why? What’s hip? What’s your definition of hip?” Shulie replies, “To live in the now.” “To live in the *now*?” the documentarian reiterates. “Where’s that?”

This is perhaps *the* crucial Cultural Studies question—and the one Subrin is clearly trying to answer for 1990s feminism. In the video’s only moment of genuine parody, Shulie replies by rattling off the mantras of live-and-let-live hippiedom. “Don’t worry about tomorrow, live in the now. . . . Life is fun, life is pleasant, we enjoy friends and drinking and smoking pot. . . . why should we worry about anything?” In the same breath, she emphatically rejects this outlook: “Sure, that’s fine, good for them. I don’t care. I want to give it some form.” Here and in other parts of the documentary, she seems to be speaking only of artistic form: she says that “Reality is a little chaotic and meaningless, and unless I give it some form, it’s just out of control”; she declares that “I hate any date that goes by that I haven’t made some kind of landmark. . . . I hate the shapelessness of it. . . . It’s not enough for me to just live and die; I don’t like it enough.” But it turns out that her interventions were already collective, political, and historicist, and not just individualist and aesthetic in the way her comments imply. For the documentarians of 1967 picked the wrong locale for “Now,” and the “Shulie” character does not clue them in to what Firestone was apparently doing during the film’s production.

NOT YET PAST, NOT ENTIRELY PRESENT

In fact, Firestone seems to have hidden from the 1967 documentarians her activities with Chicago’s Westside group, the first radical feminist group in the country.¹⁷ These activities appear only in her vague statements that sexual involvements with men who agree with her on “these sorts of things” have not been a problem, and that men “don’t agree with this, still.” In both the 1967 and the 1997 versions, the question remains open whether the “things” in all of these statements were, at the moment of the filming, her individual pursuit of artistic or intellectual work, her private views about gender roles, or her

activities in a movement. Even in the original film, the crucial political referent is missing.

Though she seems to be speaking the language of the alienated, resolutely anti-communal, formalist artist, Shulie also gives a clue to the historical method she herself employed a short time later and that Subrin herself reworks: she says she would like to “catch time short, and not just . . . drift along in it.” And by the time Firestone wrote *The Dialectic of Sex* in 1970, she had fleshed out her relationship to the generational logic she resisted in *Shulie* (1967). In her manifesto, she describes “Woodstock Nation, the Youth Revolt, the Flower and Drug Generation of Hippies, Yippies, Crazies, Motherfuckers, Mad Dogs, Hog Farmers, and the like, who [reject Marxist analysis and techniques] yet have no solid historical analysis of their own to replace it; indeed, who are apolitical.”¹⁸ To make alienation genuinely political, she insists, one must have a relationship to history. But *The Dialectic of Sex* is evolutionary, linear, and monocausal in a way that other feminisms have decisively rejected, for it narrates a history of gender as the foundational basis for oppression, one that predates class and upon which capitalism still feeds.

In a countermove, however, the Firestone of *The Dialectic* also disrupts the “revolutionary” presentism of her own feminist peers. She claims that that “feminism, in truth, has a cyclical momentum all its own.”¹⁹ For Firestone, this momentum involves the freeing of women from biology by science, the development of political ideas from the sense of possibility engendered by technological liberation, and inevitably, a decades-long backlash that reduces those political ideas to a demand for equal rights rather than the remaking of social relations. While her biological determinism and faith in technology feel untenable today, her use of feminist history is more promising. She claims that the radical feminist position of the late 1960s and early 1970s is the “direct descendant of the radical feminist line in the old movement” and rehabilitates the very activists whom her own feminist peers rejected. She describes the early American Women’s Rights Movement (which she calls the W.R.M.) as a radical grassroots agenda bent on transforming Family, Church, and State, and eventually overwhelmed by the “frenzied feminine organizational activity of the Progressive Era” and the single-issue suffragists.²⁰ Of course this rehabilitation was in many ways no different from any back-to-the-roots resurrection of lost political moments; Firestone merely asked her fellow activists to think in terms of radical and conservative versions of the politics that travel under the sign of feminism, rather than in terms of horizontal generational breaks with the past.

But in her sense of a disaggregated, cross-temporal identification, Shulie was not unlike the student who intervened upon my own complacent sense of a coherent political now. For she also avoided what Julia Creet has analyzed as the S/M fantasy of intergenerational contact between feminists, where outlawism is practiced primarily in relation to older women.²¹ While this model was clearly informing Firestone's peers' rejection of the W.R.M., Firestone introduced a different politics of the gap: rather than the inevitable "generation gap" that supposedly aligns members of a chronological cohort with one another as they move away from their predecessors, she concentrated on the amnesiac gaps in consciousness that resulted from the backlash to the first W.R.M. Elliptically relating the earliest W. R. M. to her own moment just as Subrin elliptically relates the moment preceding radical feminism to our own, Firestone let a former feminism flare up to illuminate the Second Wave's moment of danger, which was indeed played out in the reduction of radical feminism to the E. R. A. movement.

In an important point of contrast to Firestone herself, though, Subrin resists the rehabilitative gesture that would position the former as a heroic figure upon whom a better future feminism might cathect. For Subrin deploys the figure of a woman younger than herself, complicating that figure's situation earlier in time: in *Shulie* (1997), the elder is also a younger. Neither political foremother, nor peer, nor wayward daughter, Shulie, like "Now," is multiply elsewhere. This elsewhere is particular to Subrin's own moment and to the political context in which *Shulie* (1997) was produced and is currently received, in which the figure of the young girl illuminates so many 'zines, manifestoes, and other cultural productions.²² The middle-aged Firestone has refused to cooperate with and so far will not comment upon *Shulie*, but Subrin's insistence on taking the younger Firestone seriously as a political thinker and an object of obsession, represents a commitment to the "girl" icon of her own contemporary political context.

The deployment of the girl in recent queer/feminist videos, 'zines, song lyrics, and so on, implicitly critiques radical feminists' repudiation of their own 1950s girlhoods as false consciousness, allowing the politicized adult a more empathetic and even erotic relationship to her former vulnerabilities and pleasures: "girl" embraces an embarrassing past as the crucial augur of a critical, yet also contingent future. The "girl revolution" implicitly critiques any lesbian and gay movement politics that would disavow children's sexuality. Instead these works willingly expose the fantasies, desires, and sexual

experiments of childhood, and seem to epitomize Eve Sedgwick's suggestion that a genuinely queer politics must refuse to abject even the most stigmatized child-figure from formulations of adult political subjectivity.²³ But the "girl" revolution also refuses to locate the "girl" as the beginning of either identity or politics; instead, she represents what Elspeth Probyn calls "a political tactic . . . used to turn identity inside out."²⁴ The girl-sign acknowledges an uncontrollable past, the uncontrollability of the past, its inability to explain the present—and the promising distortions effected when the past suddenly, unpredictably erupts into the present forms of sexual and gendered personhood.

Yet the sign of the girl is more than just that of an individual woman's personal past or unruly unconscious. Refusing distance from the child-self becomes a means of critiquing contemporary public culture in the 1997 *Shulie*, in Subrin's other recent videotape *Swallow*, in the works she has produced with Sadie Benning,²⁵ and in the 'zines and videos of the 1990s. In these texts, "girl" is a gendered sign of longing for the cultural reorientation that Firestone advocated in *The Dialectic of Sex* and that the 1970s took more seriously than subsequent decades have: the constitution of children as members of a distinct public, whose socialization and demands might be thought collectively.²⁶ "Girl" productions often reference "Free to Be You and Me," Schoolhouse Rock, Head Start, Amy Carter, and other signs of a culture that was, for at least a brief moment, genuinely hopeful about the relationship between children and the mass media. Reappropriations of 1970s culture are more than mere nostalgia on the part of a cohort born after 1965: the dissemination of "girl" as a political identity implies that the liberal feminist turn toward rethinking the politics of bringing up baby might have represented a turn away from the broader social contexts in which parenting occurs. Texts operating under the sign of "girl" also speak insistently of a feminized, eroticized children's public sphere *beyond* even the most "progressive" productions made by adults for children. In a sense, the "girl" icon seizes the iconography of missing children and childhoods, which Marilyn Ivy has persuasively read as a sign of the privatization of culture,²⁷ but uses it to disseminate children's and adolescents' public cultures. The queer girl icon demands the transformation of sentimental love for the "inner child" into both an acknowledgment of children as sexual subjects and a collective reorganization of the conditions of childhood itself. In *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone saw radical feminism as incomplete unless it included the political and sexual liberation of children, and Subrin's

unsanctioned revivification of her elder in the form of a younger self becomes the sign that *that* revolution may indeed be in the works.

Shulie is not a child, yet her costuming and confusion contribute to a childlike aspect that the 1990s “girl revolution” has transformed into a body praxis at once allegorical and performative. The slogan of this movement might be “regress for redress”: adults in kidswear, emotions as political expressivity, juvenalia as political tract. Neither is Shulie a sexual icon, yet Subrin’s illicit recreation of her resonates with the slightly sadistic culture of queer fandom, in which stars’ most vulnerable younger (or aging) selves become the nodal points for shared feelings of shame, defiance, and survival.²⁸ Finally, Shulie’s status as not-yet-identified (as “adult woman,” as “feminist,” as “lesbian,” as the representative or symbol of a completed movement) allows Subrin a point of entry into the contemporary moment in terms other than “post.” Subrin’s intervention offers a corrective to the idea that we can ever be in a genuinely post-identity politics moment—unless “post” can somehow signify the endless dispatches between past and present social and subjective formations.

Shulie’s promise lies in what the language of feminist “waves” and queer “generations” sometimes effaces: the mutually disruptive energy of moments that are not yet past and yet are not entirely present either. Shulie in 1967 is a figure who has not yet entered her own “history.” As such, she forces us to reimagine our historical categories, rethinking our own position in relation to the “pre-historical” rather than in relation to the relentlessly “post.” The messy, transitional status of Shulie’s thinking asks us to imagine the future in terms of experiences that discourse has not yet caught up with, rather than as a legacy passed on between generations. Reflecting on her own relationship to Marxism in *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone writes, “If there were another word more all-embracing than *revolution*, we would use it.”²⁹ She claims the word “revolution” not as inheritance, but rather as a placeholder for possibilities that have yet to be articulated.

Queer theory has illuminated the ways in which conventional masculinity and femininity are themselves the “afterlife” of foreclosed same-sex desires. *Shulie* (1997) points us toward the identities and desires that are foreclosed within *social* movements, illuminating the often unexpected effects of such deferred identifications. The film animates melancholia for both a collective political past and an individual subject’s child-self, suggesting that there may also be a productive afterlife to identities that seem foreclosed within the filmmaker’s own present tense: second-wave feminist, girl-child of the 1970s, even student.

Subrin's "improper" attachment to the figure of Shulie suggests how contemporary sexual and gendered publics, in refusing to mourn properly and instead preserving melancholic identifications, might propel us toward a barely imagined future. If identity is always in temporal drag, constituted and haunted by the failed love-project that precedes it, perhaps the shared culture-making projects we call "movements" might do well to feel the tug backward as a potentially transformative part of movement itself.

NOTES

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1. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge 1990).
2. Sue-Ellen Case, "Towards a Butch-Femme Retro-Future," in Dana Heller, ed., *Cross-Purposes: Lesbians, Feminists, and the Limits of Alliance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 210. In the context of an argument that queer performativity represents the gay movement's dismissal of an earlier Left commitment to socialism, Sue-Ellen Case writes that "'performativity' links 'lesbian' to the tarnished, sweating, laboring, performing body that must be semiotically scrubbed until the 'live' lesbian gives way to the slippery, polished surface of the market manipulation of the sign."
3. Judith Roof, "Generational Difficulties; or, The Fear of a Barren History," in Devoney Looser and E. Ann Kaplan, eds., *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 71–72. Dana Heller, "The Anxieties of Affluence: Movements, Markets, and Lesbian Feminist Generation(s)," in *Generations*, 322.
4. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003). On Shulamith Firestone's activities from 1967 to 1970, see Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1989). For the purposes of clarity, I use "Shulie" to designate the fictive subject of both documentaries, and "Firestone" the historical agent beyond the 1967 documentary's imagination. Similarly, "video" refers to Subrin's production, and "film" to the 1967 original. Wherever possible, I have also distinguished

- between the earlier and later works with dates in parentheses. *Shulie*, dir. Elizabeth Subrin (Video Data Bank, 1997). Screenings or purchase of *Shulie* (1997) can be arranged through the Video Data Bank, 112 South Michigan, Chicago, IL 60603; (312) 345-3550.
5. *Shulie* (1967) was made by Jerry Blumenthal, Sheppard Ferguson, James Leahy, and Alan Rettig. The earlier film remains unavailable for viewing.
 6. Elisabeth Subrin, personal conversation, fall 1999.
 7. *Swallow*, DVD. Directed by Elizabeth Subrin (Chicago: Video Data Bank, 1995). *Swallow* concerns the links among depression, anorexia, the acquisition of language, and the experience of growing up in the context of 1970s feminism.
 8. Andrew Ross, "Uses of Camp," in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 135-70; see also Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's 1987).
 9. Elisabeth Subrin, "Trash: Value, Waste, and the Politics of Legibility" (paper presented at the College Art Association Annual Conference, Los Angeles, February 1999).
 10. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1997).
 11. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 133, 146.
 12. The classic work on the distinction between allegory and symbol is Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); see also Walter Benjamin, "Allegory and Trauerspiel," in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB 1977), 159-235.
 13. Again, a few rather plodding remarks on terminology: neither "lesbian" nor "dyke" cover, precisely, the commitment to playing with age that, as I discuss further on, marks *Shulie* and many other recent cultural productions made by queer females. Yet "queer" remains frustratingly gender-neutral, and does not do justice to the specifically femme sensibilities also at work in some of these texts. Hence, some neologisms.
 14. Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Remaking History," review of *Shulie, Chicago Reader*, (November 20, 1998) sec. 1: 48-49.
 15. Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 13-29; also, more generally, see the early 1980s debates on postmodernism in the pages of the journal *October*.
 16. B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 384.
 17. Echols, *Daring to be Bad*, 65-66.

18. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 36.
19. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 29.
20. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 35, 19.
21. Julia Creet, "Daughter of the Movement: The Psychodynamics of Lesbian S/M Fantasy," *differences* 3, no. 2 (1991): 135–59.
22. Needless to say, self-published 'zines move faster than academic publishing, but a representative sampling of mid-1990s girls 'zines can be found in *A Girl's Guide to Taking Over the World: Excerpts from the Girl 'Zine Revolution*, ed. Tristan Taormino and Karen Green (New York: St. Martin's, 1997).
23. Eve Sedgwick, "How to Bring your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys," in *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 153–64.
24. Elspeth Probyn, "Suspended Beginnings: Of Childhood and Nostalgia," in *Outside Belongings* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 99.
25. *Judy Spots*, DVD, directed by Sadie Benning and produced by Elisabeth Subrin (Chicago: Video Data Bank, 1995).
26. For a seminal meditation on the politics of mourning for lost public cultures that also insists upon maintaining clear distinctions between generations, see Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51 (1998): 3–18.
27. Marilyn Ivy, "Have You Seen Me? Recovering the Inner Child in Late Twentieth-Century America," in Sharon Stephens, ed., *Childhood and the Politics of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 79–102.
28. Richard Dyer, "Judy Garland and Gay Men," in *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's, 1987), 141–94.
29. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 1.

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