

SHULAMITH FIRESTONE

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SHULAMITH FIRESTONE: CYBERNETICS AND BACK TO A FEMINIST FUTURE

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 humans beings would no longer matter culturally.”¹

—*Shulamith Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex*

If you want the truth—I know—I presume
—you must look into the technology of these matters...
You must ask two questions.
First, what is the real nature of synthesis?
And then: what is the real nature of control?²

—*The Spirit of Rathenau to the Nazi elite,*
Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow

INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I want to both pay homage to the work and life of the radical feminist and first cyberfeminist, Shulamith Firestone (1945-2012) and thematically engage with the feminist community in the ongoing polemic between sexual politics and cybernetics. Firestone instigated this polemic in her feminist manifesto *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* published in 1970. As Firestone was *the first* to propose cybernetics as a means of liberating women from the tyranny of biological determinism, she questioned why women should alone bear the reproductive labor for the *entire human* species by the very definition of their sex. For Firestone this seemed absurd and out of balance as she sought to disentangle the seemingly inseparable essentiality of women from the “mother function.” Firestone could and did problematize the state of women’s biological entrapment within the family proper simply because she saw that the preconditions

¹ Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: Quill/William Morrow, 1970. p. 19.

² Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. New York: Viking Press, 1973. p. 167.

for such a feminist revolution were within reach. She realized that the human species had reached the requisite evolutionary and technological level of sophistication for the possibility of such a change to occur. As such, the first of Firestone's "Revolutionary Demands"³ was the use of cybernetic reproduction to free women from the tyranny of their biological entrapment, becoming, unbeknownst to her, the first cyberfeminist, who would instigate a cyberfeminist movement that would arise within decades after her writings. In tandem, Firestone put forth "cybernetic communism" as another constitutive demand to ensure "*the political autonomy, based on economic independence, of both women and men.*"⁴ Therein, within her writings, she articulated and prioritized the recognition and subsequent dissolution of the sex class system, conceptualized a complex of adaptive and evolutionary processes that would result in the liberation of women and children while ensuring the social and economic future survival of the human species.

Firestone quite boldly began her feminist manifesto with the words "Sex class." As a preeminent theorist in the Second Wave Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) of the 1960s and 1970s, her analysis emphatically declared in the first line of her manifesto: "Sex class is so deep as to be invisible."⁵ A pronouncement so powerful that it stands alone in early feminist scholarship as a defining moment in which she declares—sex [is] class. In one fell swoop with this shrewd, yet superficially simplistic statement, Firestone makes visible an otherwise blindingly obvious distinction revealing not only the plight of women's oppression, but distinguishing women as a unique class.

With the use of "Sex class" Firestone is reformulating Frederick Engels and Karl Marx's earlier concept written in 1845-46, and published in 1932 in their book *The German Ideology*,⁶ and again quoted by Engels himself in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*: "The first division of labor is that between man and woman for the propagation of children."⁷ Firestone in her opening line incorporates aspects of Engel's formulation that the origin of the oppression of women began with the establishment of class within the family. Engels, resisting the superficial sentimentality that surrounds the family, pinpoints the origin in the Roman term "*famulus*" meaning

³ Firestone (1970), pp. 192-194.

⁴ Firestone (1970), p. 194.

⁵ Firestone (1970), p. 11 begins "Chapter I: The Dialectic of Sex."

⁶ Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick. *The German Ideology*. New York: International Publishers, 1970. (First published by the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute in Moscow as *Deutsche Ideologie* in 1932).

⁷ Engels, Frederick. *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. New York: International Publishers, 1942. p. 129.

“domestic slave, and *familia*,” as referring to the total number of domestic “slaves belonging to one man.”⁸ Furthermore, Engels continued to argue that the oppression of women began when the “production for use could be replaced by production for exchange and eventually for profit, leading to the rise of the first class societies some 6,000 years ago.”⁹ The very necessity for the increase of labor meant women had to increase reproduction. Engels continues to argue that:

The overthrow of [the] mother-right was *the world historical defeat of the female sex*. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children....The establishment of the exclusive supremacy of the man shows its effects first in the patriarchal family, which now emerges as an intermediate form.¹⁰

Yet, while Firestone based her work in part on Engels’—who in turn based his work on Lewis Henry Morgan’s *Ancient Society* (1877), she recognized that Engels’ analysis of the sexual class system was limited to his economic construct. In addition she recognized that women’s oppression began before “recorded history to the animal kingdom itself.”¹¹ Firestone was primarily interested in Marx and Engels’ analytical methodology rather than their position on women. It was their dialectic and historical materialist understanding of seeing the world as a dynamic “process” that made Firestone appreciate Marx and Engels’ work. She included this lineage within her revolutionary framework when she called for a feminist revolution that for the first time argued that the sex class system began with the dawn of *Homo Sapiens* and suggested, also for the first time, that cybernetics could be used to alleviate the burden of female-only reproduction. Firestone developed social and scientific strategies to enable a women’s revolution, which were always within the context of women’s reproductive choice.

Firestone wrote in and through her time as she interacted with her contemporary radical feminists who, like her, were questioning not only all of the cultural institutions within which they found themselves, “but

⁸ Engels (1942), p. 121.

⁹ Harman, Chris. “Engels and The Origins of Human Society.” *International Socialism*. Vol. 65. (Winter 1994). pp. 120-121.

¹⁰ Engels (1942), pp. 120-121.

¹¹ Firestone (1970), p. 12.

the organization of culture itself, and further, even the very organization of nature” given that the oppression of women as a class is embedded in the very idea of nature.¹² As a response to the sexist limitations, Firestone first brilliantly defined women as a class and secondly theorized how women could be released from the tyranny of their own biology—thus envisioning women freed from the mother function and biological determinism within which they were totally and wholly defined. Firestone recognized that recent developments in technology might permit such an evolutionary leap to occur. As an early activist and theoretical innovator of the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM), Firestone was the only theorist of her time to take such a bold and futuristic stance. In fact, unlike her declaration of the pre-historical origins of the oppressive sex class system, many of her feminist contemporaries considered her merger of feminism and cybernetics as a fringe element of her radical feminism.

In the subsequent forty-five years since the publication of Firestone’s feminist treatise, we have to ask whether or not the advances in feminism have in anyway chiseled away the monumentality of the sex class system? Or has the erroneous notion of living in a “classless society” culturally eroded the possibility of our realizing that we are living in a sex class system? Similarly have the increased developments in contemporary reproductive technologies come to embody Firestone’s radical feminist cybernetics? Or, have advances in reproductive technologies only further entrenched the nuclear family [hetero- or homosexual] as a Platonic ideal while simultaneously enslaving women into an *embodied* sub-class of birthing surrogates? Although feminist collectivism and activism throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries rendered numerous advances for women, the *naturalized* ubiquity of the sex class polemic still remains a major challenge for women worldwide.

RADICAL METHODOLOGY: THE DIALECTICS OF ACTIVISM + SCHOLARSHIP

A studious scholar, Shulamith Firestone was a prodigious and influential feminist theorist with the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) of the 1960s and 1970s, which she helped to found. She based her thinking on a historical analysis of earlier attempts toward liberation including: Marx, Engels, Freud, the earlier phases of the Women’s Rights Movement (WRM), and Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*.

¹² Firestone (1970), p. 12.

Coming of age in the midst of women's changing roles, Firestone found herself amid the contradictions within which she lived. The very essence of these contradictions arose out of a collision of the evolution of her consciousness as a radical feminist activist and theorist with the pre-feminist cultural construct and social expectations of what previously constituted a woman. She held a single-minded focus that she interwove with historical reflection, theoretical analysis and collective action. Firestone started the group *New York Radical Women* with Pam Allen along with other women.¹³ Firestone and Ellen Willis (1941-2006), the feminist journalist, author of *No More Nice Girls* and one of the most articulate writers of the Women's Liberation Movement, founded *Redstockings*, the radical feminist group that is still active today.¹⁴ In addition, Firestone started a third New York group with Anne Koedt called *New York Radical Feminists*.¹⁵ She continued to chronicle the Women's Liberation Movement writing and editing *Notes From the First Year: Women's Liberation and Notes From the Second Year: Women's Liberation*.

The rise of radical feminism in the 1960s and 1970s created a seismic rupture of glacial proportions. As a social movement, the Women's Liberation Movement was a populist groundswell of feminists across the country. Through Firestone's analysis of history, she understood the need to raise consciousness regarding the "everydayness" of women, children and men. Firestone recognized that embedded within the daily moments of lives lived resided the invisibility of the sex class dynamic. Her formulation of women as a "distinct social class" was based on her articulation of a needed reconfiguration of these everyday interpersonal, political and social relations and definitions. Starting from birth, young girls are proscribed into sexual limitations, inequality and rigorously oppressive taxonomies, all of which form a context, which although culturally presented as "natural," is indeed, anything but. Such oppressive forces and stereotypes, culturally reinforced in social conventions and codes of behavior, delimit the imagined possibilities of their future lives. This functions as an internalized discourse that occurs on an everyday basis. Part of this constriction is the "natural" veiling over and in the body as it forms a telos that proscribes and portends the sex

¹³ Hanisch, Carol. "Remembrances." *Shulamith Firestone 1945-2012*. An unpublished pamphlet distributed at the Memorial for Shulamith Firestone, St. Mark's Church on the Bowery, Parish Hall, September 23, 2012. p. 10.

¹⁴ Shulman, Alix Kates. "Remembrances." *Shulamith Firestone 1945-2012*. An unpublished pamphlet distributed at the Memorial for Shulamith Firestone, St. Mark's Church on the Bowery, Parish Hall, September 23, 2012. p. 14.

¹⁵ Hanisch, Carol. "Remembrances." *Shulamith Firestone 1945-2012*. An unpublished pamphlet distributed at the Memorial for Shulamith Firestone, St. Mark's Church on the Bowery, Parish Hall, September 23, 2012. p. 10.

class system and biological mother-function. This self-reflexive behavior is reinforced culturally not only in the family but in our fairy tales, toys, and in the very educational and social institutions within which young girls later come to define themselves.

For example, in the 1960s if one perused the “Want Ads” in *any newspaper* at the time in search for work, one would find a clear demarcation between what was considered *women’s* work from what was considered *men’s* work. During this time, women most often had male bosses to report to whether they worked in a factory or an office as secretaries, secretarial assistants, etc. Associative codes of behavior within the business world *almost always* subordinated women to positions that served men. Ironically, within the family, women who were full-time mothers were not considered to be working at all. Firestone sought to actively dismantle this almost invisible entrenchment of the sex class system that was and is embedded in our consciousness.

Firestone invoked lessons learned from her analysis of the first Women’s Rights Movement (WRM). It was Firestone’s contention that aside from securing the vote—an effort which took several generations to fulfill—the earlier WRM “soldout”¹⁶ their cause to other issues and most importantly never won more important rights for women. Firestone observed these tragic failings of the first Women’s Right Movement, and was determined not to repeat the same failures on her feminist watch. In Firestone’s analysis she succinctly concluded that the “WRM was indeed a radical movement from the start, which sought to dismantle the family, church and the law in the midst of the puritan Victorian era.”¹⁷ The WRM’s feminist manifesto, the “Declaration of Sentiments,” principally written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) is a radical declaration of equality for all women against the state signed by 68 women and 32 men at the First Women’s Rights Conference held in Seneca Falls, NY in 1848. Also referred to as the “Declaration of Rights and Sentiments,” this treatise of women’s rights was based on this country’s founding document, “The Declaration of Independence.” She observed that women often “sold out” feminist issues for other issues. For example, the Civil War, although unavoidable, decimated the Women’s Rights Movement, which had to be completely rebuilt after the war was over. The earlier Women’s Rights Movement used only single issue organizing rather than raising consciousness, (i.e., the alliance with the Women’s Christian Temperance

¹⁶ Firestone, Shulamith. “The Women’s Rights Movement in the U.S.: A New View.” *Notes From the First Year*. New York: New York Radical Women, 1968. p. 4.

¹⁷ Firestone (1968), p. 1.

Union in order to secure women's right to vote), and most importantly, the WRM never won women's rights regarding sexual, labor, financial and legal matters. Studying the radical aspirations as well as the failings of the Women's Rights Movement, Firestone's final assessment of the nineteenth and twentieth century Women's Rights Movement (WRM) was that it had "dynamite revolutionary potential...was indeed a radical movement from the start, [and] that it was tied up with the most radical movements and ideas of its day, and even to the bitter end."¹⁸

Firestone's studies of the first Women's Rights Movement (WRM) informed the initial stages of her activism and infused the ongoing process of her dialectical evolution. Internal and external movement informed each dimension of Firestone's theoretical formulations. The tensions between these poles generated a transformation in thinking and acting with her scholarship and activism. Of Engels, Firestone wrote:

Engels did observe that the original division of labour was between man and woman for the purposes of child-breeding; that within the family the husband was the owner, the wife the means of production, the children the labour; and that reproduction of the human species was an important economic system distinct from the means of production.¹⁹

Anthropologist Eleanor Burke Leacock wrote in her introduction to Engels' opus, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, "women's power of child-bearing ha[d] been a focus for awe...as in the Upper Paleolithic, judging from the fertility figurines that date from that period. This point is easy to overlook, for the ability to bear children has led in our society not to respect but to women's oppressed status."²⁰ Leacock's statement underscores Engels' formulation that "the subjugation of the female sex was based on the transformation of their socially necessary labor into a private service through the separation of the family from the clan. It was in this context that women's domestic and other work came to be performed under conditions of virtual slavery."²¹

¹⁸ Firestone (1968), p. 4.

¹⁹ Firestone (1970), p. 14.

²⁰ Leacock, Eleanor Burke. "Introduction." *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. By Frederick Engels. New York: International Publishers, 1972. p. 40.

²¹ Leacock (1972), p. 41.

Although Firestone acknowledged Engels' construct of the sex class division, she also warned of its inherent limitations due to Engels' assertion that the sex class originated and was caused by the emergence of private property. He contended that the nuclear family unit, separated from the clan created a class structure in which both the woman and subsequent children were considered private property under the patriarchal structure of the economic familial unit.

Firestone argued that Engels and Marx were misguided in their singular emphasis of the economic causality of women's oppression. She cited that it is their *methodology* that should be emulated not their analysis of women's subordination or liberation. For Firestone, sex class predated the family and its dissolution was much bigger than the economic structure, which they claimed was the cause of the disparity. Firestone was not disabusing Marxism but rather saw it as part of and contingent to a larger feminist revolution.

Twenty years later, the social philosopher Stanley Aronowitz contextualizes Firestone's mission in "Chapter 4: The Question of Class" in his 1990 book *The Crisis of Historical Materialism*:

Some recent feminist theory insists that women are a class whose formation cannot be subsumed under the Marxist schema of historical periodicity because patriarchy is nearly as old as society—and is the mode of structuration of social relations. This suffers, of course, from an error common to Marxism. Patriarchy predates capitalism, but class are effects of concrete struggles conducted by groups whose political emancipation has assumed a powerful place within contemporary political life, outside the realm of contemporary political life, outside the realm of the labor process as well as within it. The heart of the women's movement, transcending particular struggles for equality, is the demand for new sexual relations, or to be more precise for the politicization of the sexual. The simple demand from the self-control of women's bodies ask that the mind/body split at the heart of the domination of nature be healed. When women no longer surrender to scientific manipulation, to patriarchal normative structures that prescribe a certain relation of biology to culture, the infrastructure of social reproduction is impaired. Feminist struggles have the possibility for contributing to a new configuration of classes within contemporary society because they go beyond the limits of economic self-interest. In Marx's own terms, they are conducted *in*, but not *of*, society. The implied demand of feminism for the abolition of patriarchy—which implies the configuration of what we mean by "Western culture"—could have truly revolutionary effects.²²

²² Aronowitz, Stanley. *The Crisis of Historical Materialism: Class, Politics and Culture in Marxist Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990. pp. 111-112.

Thus Firestone, as an organic intellectual and theoretical prodigy, understood the fissures of historical materialism yet simultaneously recognized its intrinsic import as a theoretical methodology and armature upon which she could mold and transform blatant sexism into a liberatory conceptualization for radical feminist agency. This became her mission and her accomplishment.

FIRESTONE'S SYNTHESIS OF "MARXIST" AND ENGELS' DIALECTICS

Firestone prefaces her book with a quote from the second chapter "Dialectics" of Engels' book *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, in which Engels describes the inter-penetrability of the changing contradictions of the dialectical process as an anti-theological formation of his "Dialectics of Nature." He wrote:

When we consider and reflect upon Nature at large or the history of [hu]mankind or our own entanglement of relations and reactions, permutations and combinations, in which nothing remains what, where, and as it was, but everything moves, changes, comes into being and passes away."²³

That is, Engels' use of the term dialectics incorporates "the science of the general laws of change, not only in society and in human thought, but in the external world which is mirrored by human thought."²⁴ Engels himself writes in Chapter Two of his *Dialectics of Nature*, entitled "Dialectics:"

It is, therefore, from the history of nature and human society that the laws of dialectics are abstracted. For they are nothing but the most general laws of these two aspects of historical development, as well as of thought itself. And indeed they can be reduced in the main to three:

The law of the transformation of quantity into quality and *vice versa*;
The law of the interpenetration of opposites;
The law of the negation of the negation.²⁵

²³ Firestone (1970), pre-numbered pages.

²⁴ Haldane, J. B. S. "Preface." Engels' *Dialectics of Nature*. 1939. Web. 21 June 2013. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/don/preface.htm>>

²⁵ Engel, Frederick. "Chapter Two: Dialectics." *Dialectics of Nature*. Web. 27 June 2013. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marxworks/1883/don/ch02.htm>>. First published in Russian and German in the USSR in 1925, Transcribed by Sally Ryan, 1998/2001.

Firestone saw the dialectic in the contradictions of the sex class system embodied in the longstanding oppressiveness of the everyday social relations between women and men. She acknowledged that Marx and Engels' analytical method of understanding history dialectically enabled them to see "the world as process, a natural flux of action and reaction, of opposites yet inseparable and interpenetrating."²⁶

Thus, drawing a direct historical lineage from the radicality of the first Women's Rights Movement (WRM), as most notably articulated by Stanton and Anthony, Firestone forefronted the "feminist issues not only as *women's* first priority, but central to any larger revolutionary analysis."²⁷ Based on Engel's *Dialectics of Nature*, Firestone constructs her theoretical analysis of radical feminism as a *process* that would transform nature and eliminate the sex class system. She argued that the ideology of radical feminism far exceeded that of the leftist movement of her time precisely because the former's analysis was outdated and limited to the *economic* class system, whereas the latter, radical feminist analysis was much more socially and politically inclusive, i.e., in numbers alone, women as a class, cross every strata of society and make up 51 percent of the human species; radical feminism effectively commingled the 'personal' and 'political' in the everyday lives of women and men; and furthermore, that radical feminism in combatting the sex class system, incorporated a much more egalitarian social structure between women and men in their everyday lives.²⁸

Firestone sought no less than to use Marx and Engel's dialectical methodology for change just as other forms of social relations had run their course and became integrated into the society. This was the historical and cultural moment to change the sex class system as strategized in *The Dialectic of Sex*. To this end, Firestone adopted Marx and Engels' dialectical and materialist method of analysis to view the historicity of women's oppression as a class. She then modified the analytical method of historical materialism by and through radical feminism, which she synthesized with the feminist work of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*.

²⁶ Firestone (1970), p. 12.

²⁷ Firestone (1970), p. 43.

²⁸ Firestone (1970), p. 43-45.

FINDING A MENTOR IN SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S *THE SECOND SEX*

Although a generation separated them, Firestone's passion for feminist scholarship brought her into contact with Simone de Beauvoir's writing. Their mutual writings were propelled by their individual searches for their authentic female selves and to forever dispel the notion of women as second-class citizens due to their biology. Firestone continued to chronicle the Women's Liberation Movement in her writings and attempted to personally deliver *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation* directly to Simone de Beauvoir but unfortunately was detoured by the concierge in de Beauvoir's building and a personal meeting between Firestone and de Beauvoir was not to be. However, the concierge's efforts to block such a meeting did not dissuade Firestone from leaving a package for de Beauvoir, which proudly included her *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation* along with pink roses and the following note—written on the outside of the envelope—Firestone wrote:

“For Simone
who fired my youthful ambitions at age 16; and whom now I shall
never meet...”

Inside the envelope, Firestone's note to de Beauvoir read as follows:

“Undervalued, or valued for the wrong things, your contribution to
The Revolution will manifest ever more clearly as the generations
pass...you held the line for integrity of ethics against the forces
of evil in our time, growing denser just before the millennium,
when the struggle seemed most hopeless, you gave us hope &
strength of valor.”

[signed] *Shulamith Firestone*

The above note gives anyone who reads it a window into the longing that Firestone had for the mentorship, which de Beauvoir provided her. It was through de Beauvoir's ideas that Firestone felt solace and mutuality of purpose that enabled her to pursue her own singular journey.

Firestone dedicated her book *The Dialectic of Sex* to Simone de Beauvoir with the inscription “to Simone de Beauvoir who endured”²⁹ and began her manifesto as an extension of de Beauvoir's 1949 feminist treatise *Le Deuxième Sexe*.³⁰ Indeed, it was Firestone's insistence on women's mastery over the mother function and the burden of their labor for reproducing the entire

²⁹ Firestone (1970), pre-numbered pages.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

species, that was in alignment with, and influenced by de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* in which she writes:

Artificial insemination completes the evolutionary advance that will enable humanity to master the reproductive function. These changes are of tremendous importance for women in particular; she can reduce the number of pregnancies and make them a rationally integral part of her life, instead of slave. During the nineteenth century woman in her turn emancipated herself from nature; she gained mastery of her own body. Now protected in large part from the slavery of reproduction, she is in a position to assume the economic role that is offered her and will assure her of complete independence.³¹

At the time de Beauvoir cited that artificial insemination or (AI) was an evolutionary advancement for humanity as a whole precisely because it functioned as a liberatory aid that would enable women a sense of mastery over their reproductive destiny. However, the history of artificial insemination belies this sense of empowerment for women. In 1883, the first woman to be artificially inseminated was not even informed that she was to undergo such a procedure, let alone allowed to give her permission. That was, of course, the purview of her sterile husband³² who was fully knowledgeable of the procedure as would have been customary for the time, to give his permission for such a procedure to be performed on his *property*, err, *wife*. Nonetheless, de Beauvoir concluded that women could only and finally achieve liberation through supremacy over their own biology and thus destiny.

Fortified with de Beauvoir's analysis, Firestone synthesized both de Beauvoir's liberatory schema, made possible via women's control of their own biology, with the methodology of historical materialism to formulate the theoretical foundation of radical feminism, i.e., the acknowledgement of the sex class system and its subsequent elimination via cybernetics and cybernetic communism. Most importantly, this should not be misconstrued as either de Beauvoir or Firestone advocating genetic or biological determinism. Intrinsic to this concern, which may not be readily apparent is the centrality of reproductive choice for women. Firestone clearly made the choice not to have children.³³

³¹ de Beauvoir, Simone. *Le Deuxième Sexe*. (The Second Sex). Trans. and Ed. By H. M. Parshley. New York: Vintage Books, 1989. p. 121.

³² "Letter to the Editor: Artificial Impregnation." *The Medical World*: April 1909. pp. 163-164. Also cited in Gregoire, A. and R. Mayer, R. "The Impregnators." *Fertility and Sterility* (1964). Vol. 16. pp. 130-134.

³³ Similar to Firestone, the author considers her works of art and writing as her progeny.

FIRESTONE'S CYBERNETIC COMMUNISM

Firestone was a proponent of Wilhelm Reich, the German psychiatrist and sexual libertarian who proposed the dissolution of the patriarchal and authoritarian family structure precisely because, in his analysis, the family structure led to sexual repression and character disorders. His goal was the liberation of humanity through the natural biologic expression of the individual and collective life force. In *The Dialectic of Sex* Firestone advances her own radical version of communism, which deconstructs and reassembles two constitutive elements of human and social life: the family and the Freudian unconscious, further informed by Reich's analysis. Through a radical reformulation of the family and its associative repressions and limitations commingled with a Freudian analysis, Firestone proposes *cybernetic communism* in order to liberate women from the sex class system, the biological tyranny of reproduction, ongoing child-rearing and domestic slavery, which would be replaced with collective childcare and political and sexual freedom for women and children. As a Reichian, such a move for Firestone would dissolve the sex class system, thus liberating women and children. Although the sexual liberation for children was part of the package that Firestone proposed, she also seemed to indicate that the incest taboo should be likewise abolished. Although, I too support the sexual liberation of children, the dissolution of the incest taboo, or taken further, sex between children and adults is a component of Firestone's theoretical treatise that I completely disavow.

As such, Firestone proposes the dissolution of the nuclear family in form and function—socially, culturally and economically—as well as the separation of the mother function from the female through “functional adaptation” of cybernetics.³⁴ Cybernetics, a term originated by the polymath Norbert Wiener, involves systems theory—either biological or mechanical—and the governance of said system via the command and control of information and feedback. Cybernetics intertwines adaptive modifications, and as Weiner

³⁴ The formation of the interdisciplinary field, subsequently named “cybernetics” was initially formed at a set of meetings called “The Macy Conferences” initiated by the neurophysiologist Warren McCulloch and the Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation, which took place from 1946 to 1953. The topics of the conferences included “Self-regulating and teleological mechanisms;” “Object perception's feedback mechanisms;” “Analog vs. digital approaches to psychological models;” “The formation of 'I' in language;” “Memory;” “An appeal for collaboration between physics and psychology;” “ Language and Shannon's information theory;” Analog vs. digital interpretations of the mind;” “Information as semantic;” “Decision theory;” and the relation of cybernetics at the microlevel to biochemical and cellular process.” <<http://www.asc-cybernetics.org/foundations/history/MacySummary.htm>> Web. 4, January 2011.

correctly argued, just as “we have modified our environment so radically that we must now modify ourselves in order to exist in this new environment.”³⁵ Gregory Bateson highlighted the homologous nature of different fields of study that might be considered “‘symmetrical’ and ‘complementary’”³⁶ as self-organizing systems—such as the human biological system.

This is and was of its time. At a congressional session on May 25, 1961, President Kennedy announced his “ambitious goal of sending an American safely to the moon before the end of the decade.”³⁷ At this time, research scientists Manfred Clynes and Nathan S. Kline were working on the adaptability of the human species traveling and living in space. They wrote in their 1960 article “Cyborgs and Space” published in *Astronautics*:

In the past evolution brought about the altering of bodily functions to suit different environments. Starting as of now, it will be possible to achieve this to some degree without alteration of heredity by suitable biochemical, physiological, and electronic modification of [hu]man’s existing modus videndi.³⁸

Perhaps, just as the ghost of the holistic arbiter of industry Walter Rathenau challenged his final executors in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* by asking them intrinsic questions fundamental to the essence of cybernetics: “What is the real nature of synthesis? And then, what is the real nature of control?”³⁹—Firestone predated this line of questioning as she developed an analysis that the “history of culture mirrors the sex dichotomy in its very organization and development. Thus, there is not only a horizontal dynamic, but a vertical one as well: each of these strata forms one more story of the dialectics of history based on the biological dualism.”⁴⁰ Through cybernetics’ use of feedback

³⁵ Wiener, Norbert. *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*. New York: Avon Books, 1950; 1954. p. 66.

³⁶ Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. p. 155.

³⁷ “The Decision to Go to the Moon: President John F. Kennedy’s May 25, 1961 Speech before a Joint Session of Congress.” National Aeronautics and Space Administration, NASA History Office. updated 7 August 2012 by Steve Garber, NASA History Web Curator. Web. 15 July 2013 <<http://history.nasa.gov/moondec.html>>.

³⁸ Clynes, Manfred E. and Nathan S. Kline. “Cyborgs and Space.” *Astronautics*. September 1960. p. 26. A longer version was later published as “Drugs, Space, and Cybernetics: Evolution of Cyborgs.” *Psychophysiological Aspects of Space Flight*. Ed. by Bernard E. Flaherty. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961. Both part of the “Symposium of Psychophysiological Aspects of Space Flight held May 26 – 27, 1960.

³⁹ Pynchon, (1973), p. 167.

⁴⁰ Firestone (1970), p. 179.

and control, its theory of adaptation, types of regulation, its law of requisite variety, and amplification of regulatory capabilities as self-organizing systems, women were for the first time at the intersection of scientific and technological advances that could permit the sexual liberation dynamic that Firestone was about to propose.

As the field of cybernetics was birthed and developed by many of the greatest minds in their fields forming an interdisciplinary matrix including Weiner, Mead, Bateson, et al., it was Firestone who brought feminist concerns and issues to that of cybernetics. This was a major contribution.

Firestone was the first and only feminist of the Second Wave Women's Liberation Movement of the mid-1960s to mid-1970s to propose cybernetics as a means of liberating women from the sex class system and the tyranny of gender discrimination and biological determinism. In her mission to culturally eradicate the polarity of gender dualism while recalibrating the very definition of what it means to be a woman, Firestone wanted to reposition the *mother function* in relation to how women were and are defined. Firestone regarded pregnancy and childbirth as barbaric and anachronistic in light of modern technological advances, which she thought could and should liberate women from having to endure the act of childbearing. With the theoretical confidence and clarity of all who contributed to her analysis, Firestone indeed made her position quite clear that although artificial reproduction would smash the status quo of the familial social unit, it was "not inherently dehumanizing."⁴¹ Rather, artificial reproduction would set the course for freedom and economic independence for women and completely integrate them into the society at large from which they have for so long been denied.

What Firestone was proposing quite literally was "cybernetic communism." Considering cybernetics as self-regulating, complete with internal feedback to adjust for imbalances in either the input to the system or the system itself, Firestone called for an *economic and non-gender specific system*, one that would eradicate the sex class system and, which would successfully operate through the self-regulation of cybernetics. Suggesting that with the use of technology she could redefine and free herself and all womankind from the primordial mother function: bearing and bringing into life, quite literally, the whole species—as all members of the culture bore the responsibility of carrying on the reproductive functions of the whole of the society via the expansion

⁴¹ Firestone (1970), p. 189.

of who or what could perform the mother function (artificial wombs, etc.), shared child-rearing and collective living. This is where Firestone was completely ahead of her time, and indeed, completely surpasses the conservative living conventions of our time. To this end, Firestone examined and critiqued three failed experiments of communal living. Albeit, not all of these models held up the proponents of Firestone's cybernetic communism, which in her words were "a very rough plan in order to make the general direction of a feminist revolution more vivid: reproduction and production would both be, simultaneously, reorganized in a non-repressive way."⁴² The aim to redefine women's participation within the social environment beyond the mother function is crucial and for Firestone this meant a total reevaluation of the nuclear family.

Firestone's scholarship was profoundly multilayered traversing multiple disciplines and temporality while her contributions to feminist theory portends her conceptual radicality into future praxis. The significance of Firestone's first commingling of cybernetics and feminism is strangely unmentioned in the annals of "cyberfeminism." Similar to cybernetics itself, which existed decades before Norbert Weiner's nominal coinage, so too did Firestone's commingling of feminist theory, Marxism and cybernetics precede decades of cyberfeminist discourse.

CRITIQUE OF CYBERFEMINISM

As the first cyberfeminist Firestone anticipated the arrival of cyberfeminism, and in the forty-five years since her writing subsequent writers have not even come close to her insights, let alone surpass her. If anything there seems to be a conscious deletion of her major contribution on the primacy of the sex class system and the cybernetic solution she theorized to eradicate such a system. Firestone saw cybernetics as a means towards feminist liberation, not the other way around. In fact, I doubt if Firestone would have ever preceded feminism with that of an adjectival descriptor that would constrain feminism to a type or token of cybernetics.

A brief and broadly stroked historical timeline of cyberfeminism would, of course first begin with Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* for which she anticipated the arrival of subsequent women, who very loosely are referred to as cyberfeminists. Very few have the prodigious blend of Firestone's theoretical

⁴² Firestone (1970), p. 224.

insight, historical analysis, and an activist sense of urgency to inspire a radical feminist revolution. Second, would be Donna Haraway's 1985 "A Cyborg Manifesto." Third, throughout the 1990s artists, scholars and theorists, as individuals or as collectives, self-identified as cyberfeminists each with their own constitutive definitions, which more often than not is purposefully varied in style, rigor and substance, such as: the British cultural theorist Sadie Plant, the Australian collective VNS Matrix, the Old Boys Network (OBN), etc. The concept of cyberfeminism as a consistent and unifying movement is antithetical in its essence. Rather it is more accurately characterized by its intentionally conflicting meanings in which difference is more important than its cohesion. As the prefix "cyber" seems to be a floating signifier with multiple significations, it's hard to see how a revolution could be forthcoming without the direct intervention of Shulamith Firestone's work.

Although I hold Donna Haraway's brilliant analysis and cultural critique of the link between the field of primatology and colonialism in high regard, I find her response to Firestone's work lacking. Hugely influenced by Firestone, yet loath to give her a shred of acknowledgement, the biologist and historian of science Haraway wrote "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" in 1985, fifteen years after Firestone's treatise. The title alone would have annoyed Firestone to no end as she would have taken issue with Haraway's often used preemption of "socialist" as a prefix to feminism. In fact, Firestone minimized the importance of this category of ideological persuasion often referring to those who hold this position as "feminist politicians"[who adhere to] a leftism with feminist overtones.⁴³

By the end of the first paragraph of Haraway's manifesto, she has ensconced herself in her own brand of technobabble as she valorizes blasphemy, irony and the image of the cyborg, without a clear explanation or attribution. There is a disparity between Firestone's use of cybernetics as a contextualized solution to dismantle the sex class system and the everyday oppression of biological determinism and Haraway who has no such insight or plan to solve the real world problems of women. In fact, Haraway argued "there is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state of 'being' female..."⁴⁴ Haraway claimed that "social reality is lived social relations....The international women's movements have *constructed* [italics

⁴³ Firestone (1970), p. 41.

⁴⁴ Haraway, Donna J. "A Cyborg Manifesto." *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991. p. 155.

mine] 'women's experience', ...this experience is a fiction and fact of the most crucial, political kind."⁴⁵ Well, what is it, a fact or a fiction? I dare say, the oppression of women is hardly a fiction.

Throughout her essay, Haraway is much too cavalier and nonsensical to be taken seriously. In fact, she betrays her biological training to such a degree [say 180°] that she clearly positions herself as a technological determinist to no reasonable end. Haraway continues to argue against any kind of unifying coherence among women. Perhaps she has read too much science fiction to be a meaningful critic of feminism and cybernetics. In direct opposition to Firestone, Haraway certainly doesn't see cybernetics as a solution to reproduction when she cites in "A Cyborg Manifesto" that "cyborg replication is uncoupled from organic reproduction."⁴⁶ What Haraway really seems to be uncoupling here is feminism, biology and cybernetics, and again to no reasonable end or purpose.

We learn in the second paragraph in Haraway's 1985 opus that "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism..." again, however, without any citation, context or explanation. Let's set the record straight, mentioned previously, in this article Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline coined the word cyborg by conflating cybernetic organism as they were experimenting with lab animals to ensure the feasibility of human adaptability to space flight. Thus, they were augmenting the biological being with physical prosthetics. Prosthetics, which were at the time, not cybernetic systems in and of themselves but amplification or diversion mechanisms added to the sensory system of the sentient being. Put a different way, Marshall McLuhan wrote that "The wheel is an extension of the foot, the book is an extension of the eye, clothing an extension of the skin, electric circuitry an extension of the central nervous system."⁴⁷

In fact, Haraway seems to be missing the *everydayness* of the sex class system of women's oppression in the *real* world need for feminism. Her understanding of cybernetics, and the notion of the cyborg, seems to lack coherence and substance, i.e., when she writes: "The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics."⁴⁸ Most alarmingly, Haraway's entire essay is endlessly problematized by these meaningless statements that if addressed individually would lead us completely adrift from the intention of this writing.

⁴⁵ Haraway (1991), p. 149.

⁴⁶ Haraway (1991), p. 150.

⁴⁷ McLuhan, Marshall and Quentin Fiore *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*. NY: Bantam Books, (1967). pp. 30-39.

⁴⁸ Haraway (1991), p. 150.

Similarly, disabuses cybernetics and cyborgs in a videotape by Paper Tiger Television entitled *Donna Haraway Reads The National Geographic on Primates* when she clearly argued that the “space race is coded male.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, Haraway quite nonsensically argues that “modern war is a cyborg orgy, [so why does she aspire to be one? while repeatedly rejoicing in its glories] “C3I, command-control-communication-intelligence.”⁵⁰

Haraway ends her “The Cyborg Manifesto” by decreeing in one fell swoop, and without a single citation or attribution to Firestone or any other feminist that “she would rather be a cyborg than a goddess.”⁵¹ Haraway, perhaps an earnest victim of postmodern pastiche, was foolhardy enough to imagine technology as derived in any other way than the very production of *human* intelligent endeavors, however hard it is to understand that a scholar of the history of science and technology could be so conceptually disingenuous.

In another essay, Haraway faults Firestone for “physiological reduction[ism] of the body politic to sex.”⁵² Haraway continues to disabuse Firestone as “locat[ing] the flaw in women’s position in the body politic in [their] own bodies, in [their] subservience to the organic demands of reproduction” while accusing Firestone of defining women’s “personal bodies as the ultimate enemy.”⁵³ Thus, Haraway continues her misguided argument that Firestone is setting the stage for “the logic of the domination of technology—the total control of now alienated bodies in a machine-determined future.”⁵⁴ It is almost unfathomable that the same writer who celebrates the mechanization of a cyborg existence to that of a flesh and blood goddess could possibly accuse Firestone and her analyses of technological determinism. The feminist activist Renate Klein questions Haraway and her bravado in her article “The Politics of CyberFeminism: If I’m a Cyborg rather than a Goddess will Patriarchy go away?” “My question is simple; can the theories and practices of cyberculture amount to a CyberFeminism which leads, in one way or another, to a feminist future?”⁵⁵

⁴⁹ *Donna Haraway Reads The National Geographic on Primates*. Narr. Donna Haraway Paper Tiger Television, 1987.

⁵⁰ Haraway (1991). p. 150.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 181.

⁵² Haraway, Donna J. “A Political Physiology of Dominance.” *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991. p. 10.

⁵³ Haraway (1991). p. 10.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Klein, Renate. “The Politics of CyberFeminism: If I’m a Cyborg rather than a Goddess will Patriarchy go away?” *Cyberfeminism: Connectivity, Critique + Creativity*. Eds. Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein. North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1999. p. 186.

Moving into the third grouping of cyberfeminists, we can begin with British cultural theorist Sadie Plant. While Plant is an extensive researcher who incorporates the feminine in her work, her writings and theories are almost diametrically opposed to Firestone. Firestone wasn't interested in prioritizing one sex over the other whereas Plant wants to prove the superiority of women over "Big Daddy Mainframe" as she infuses techno-magical thinking by proposing that technology alone will create the feminist revolution for women. She writes:

As media, tools and goods mutate, so the women begin to change, escaping their isolation and becoming increasingly interlinked. Modern feminism is marked by the emergence of networks and contacts which need no centralized organization and evade its structures of command and control.⁵⁶

For Plant the intermingling of machines and women is a passive interaction; there is no room for feminist agency. For Firestone the radical feminist revolution called for direct action to change the material conditions of women and men's everyday lives. Firestone wanted to dissolve the sex class system.

It has been with some bravado that many cyberfeminists have joined its ranks precisely because they didn't know what it means *to be a cyberfeminist*. At the first Cyberfeminist International, the self-proclaimed cyberfeminist of Webgrrrls, Corrine Petrus argued that she did not identify herself as a *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."⁵⁷

Similarly, the author Susanna Paasonen points out in her article "From Cybernation to Feminization: Firestone and Cyberfeminism:"

[N]umerous 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 feminists 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.'⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Plant, Sadie. "On the Matrix: Cyberfeminist Simulations." *The Cybercultures Reader*. Eds. Barbara M. Kennedy and David Bell. New York: Routledge, 2000. pp. 326, 328.

⁵⁷ Petrus, Corrine. "Webgrrrls." *First Cyberfeminist International*. Eds. Cornelia Sollfrank and Old Boys Network. Hamburg: OBN, 1998. p. 75.

⁵⁸ Paasonen, Susanna. "From Cybernation to Feminization: Firestone and Cyberfeminism." *Further Adventures of The Dialectic of Sex*. Eds. Mandy Merck and Stella Sandford. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010. p. 75.

This reactionary disengagement with feminism proper must be reoriented to reject the purposeful conservative retrenchment that the second wave of feminism has come to mean to the cyberfeminist.

In the global intersection of feminism and technology, Firestone is hardly documented. Even the context of the claimed coinage of the term “Cyberfeminist” is strangely attributed to the Australian collective “VNS Matrix.”⁵⁹ To call attention to the term’s condensation from cybernetic feminism to cyberfeminist pales in comparison to Firestone’s *real* contribution, as noted above, of bringing feminist concerns to the field of cybernetics. The brilliance of Firestone’s sex is class formation is completely absent in the annals of the theoretical writings of cyberfeminism. Most importantly, it is apparent that there must be a re-engagement, re-reading and re-orientation of Firestone’s work to the very meaning of cyberfeminism if it is to mean anything at all. The immanently ironic and slippery posturing of postmodern thought where meaningful investigation of historical moments ring hollow, inauthentic and superficial must be challenged.

THE URGENCY OF RETURNING TO AND REVITALIZING FIRESTONE

As Firestone invoked lessons learned from Marx, Engels, Freud, the first Women’s Rights Movement (WRM), Simone de Beauvoir and the radical feminist activism of her day, so too do we have to return to Firestone to revisit her writings and theoretical formulations in order to change the everydayness of the cultural and political context. To this end, Firestone defined culture as “the realization of the conceivable in the possible.”⁶⁰ She formulated that culture consisted of two constitutive and interlocking components. One was the consciousness of the historical past with the imaginative future. Using the male pronoun as the normative convention of the 1960s, Firestone wrote:

Man’s consciousness of himself within his environment distinguishes him from the lower animals, and turns him into the only animal capable of culture. This consciousness, his highest faculty, allows him to project mentally states of being that do not exist at the moment. Able to construct a past and future, he becomes a creature of time—a historian and a prophet. More than this, he can imagine objects and states of being that have never existed and may never exist in the real world—he becomes a maker of art.

⁵⁹ <<http://www.sysx.org/gashgirl/VNS/TEXT/PINKMANI.HTM>>

⁶⁰ Firestone, (1970), p. 164.

But man was not only able to project the conceivable into fantasy. He also learned to impose it on reality: by accumulating knowledge, learning experience, about that reality and how to handle it, he could shape it to his liking. 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...

These two different responses, the idealistic and the scientific do not merely exist simultaneously: there is a dialogue between the two...Culture then is the sum of, and the dynamic between, the two modes through which the mind attempts to transcend the limitations and contingencies of reality. These two types of cultural responses entail different methods to achieve the same end, the realization of the conceivable in the possible.⁶¹

For Firestone, the dialectics of sex, and the gendered interrelatedness of the female and male human species, especially in the one sided nature of reproduction, was a "realization of the conceivable in the possible."⁶² As Engels had predicted in his analysis of the dialectics of nature, this interpenetrability of the opposite to subsume and co-exist with the contradictions, male and female reproductive capabilities were about to undergo a change. At the time, change seemed to be the only constant as the advancement in technology would serve to aid in fulfilling what Firestone foresaw. And yet, though technology has advanced, issues raised by the contemporaries of Firestone still ring true today.

The writer Pat Barr articulated her choice in her article "The Case for Remaining Childless" originally published in the *New York Times* and later reprinted in *Women Speaking*⁶³ as a self-actualizing choice to remain childless. Barr wrote that "in the growing debate about young women's freedoms of opportunity, action and self-fulfillment, one factor is often overlooked; it is seldom the married state *per se* that hinders so many women from following a full-time and interesting career, but the bearing and bringing up of children."⁶⁴ She continued to write that she has not been ill affected socially or emotionally and has received a great deal of letters of positive reinforcement from women who felt they lacked the maternal instinct and were so delighted that she had the courage to write of her position. Surprised by the overwhelming response,

⁶¹ Firestone (1970), pp. 162-164.

⁶² *Ibid.* p. 162.

⁶³ Barr, Pat. "The Case for Remaining Childless." *Women Speaking*. (January to March 1971) Vol. 2. Essex: Hutton Brentwood, (1971), pp. 12-13.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Barr hadn't realized that so many women felt forced to become mothers. Yet, Juliet Mitchell in the abstract to her article "Procreative Mothers (Sexual Difference) and Child-Free Sisters (Gender)" purports that:

With the achievements of feminism as a political vanguard and the demographic transition as its socioeconomic base, women were no longer defined by the family; their definition ceased to depend on procreation.⁶⁵

Surprisingly, it is the same Juliet Mitchell who brilliantly penned the article "Women: the Longest Revolution," first published in the *New Left Review* in 1966 who, in her 2004 writing above, seems to be living in another universe than most women of today. One wonders if contemporary women really feel that they have the choice to follow in the path of de Beauvoir, Firestone or Barr to *not* procreate.⁶⁶

In addition, several women of the 1960s Women's Liberation Movement are still actively engaged and have begun to revolt against the slow but powerfully, if not hostile, take-over of Women's Studies by Gender Studies, which of course include men.⁶⁷ In a recent manifesto "Forbidden Discourse: The Silencing of Feminist Criticism of 'Gender'" by Carol Hanisch, Kathy Scarbrough, Ti-Grace Atkinson, and Kathie Sarachild, the authors write:

We, the undersigned 1960s radical feminists and current activists, have been concerned for some time about the rise within the academy and mainstream media of 'gender theory,' which avoids naming men and the system of male supremacy as the beneficiaries of women's oppression. Our concern changed to alarm when we learned about threats and attacks, some of them physical, on individuals and organizations daring to challenge the currently fashionable concept of gender.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Mitchell, Juliet C. W. "Procreative Mothers (Sexual Difference) and Child-Free Sisters (Gender)." *European Journal of Women's Studies*. Vol. 11. No. 4. London: SAGE Publications, 2004. p. 415.

⁶⁶ Also surprisingly, the concept of Choice, and women's right to choose their own reproductive trajectory seems to have implied when rather than to directly and specifically question women's adherence to the *mother function* and their role in the procreation of the species.

⁶⁷ The recent release of "Forbidden Discourse: The Silencing of Feminist Criticism of "Gender," an open statement initiated by Carol Hanisch (NY), Kathy Scarbrough (NJ), Ti-Grace Atkinson (MA), and Kathie Sarachild (NY). Email to author, August 2, 2013.

⁶⁸ Hanish, Scarbrough, Atkinson and Sarachild, (2013). p. 1.

The manifesto questions the culture within which we live and the state of contemporary women.⁶⁹ So feminist activists and scholars once again came together on Saturday, October 5, 2013 for the *Shulamith Firestone's Memorial On What Is to Be Done*.⁷⁰ I doubt that she would be surprised by the recent argument by many early radical feminists that "gender studies" has taken the "women" out of "Women's Studies."⁷¹

This strongly indicates the necessity to redirect our thinking to Firestone's original text as a living document and acknowledge that we must again re-read and re-think her vibrant treatise. As Paasonen recognizes:

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 is an intellectual challenge, one may begin to see...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.⁷²

As a radical feminist provocateur, Firestone questioned the very notion of what it meant to be a woman and warned that the first challenge was to see the sex class system within the intricacies of the cultural patterns and conventions where it remained and remains imperceptible. Another provocateur and sister-in-arms of Firestone, Ellen Willis succinctly summed up the cultural impact of the WLM when she wrote:

It was radical feminism that put women's liberation on the map, that got sexual politics recognized as a public issue, that created the vocabulary ('consciousness—raising,' 'the personal is political,' sisterhood is powerful,' etc.) with which the second wave of feminism entered popular culture.⁷³

⁶⁹ I along with my sisters signed the Manifesto and continue to challenge the encroachment of gender studies replacement of women's studies.

⁷⁰ Organized by Redstockings, a group that Firestone and Willis initiated, see <http://www.redstockings.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=94>. Accessed 20 September 2013.

⁷¹ The recent release of "Forbidden Discourse: The Silencing of Feminist Criticism of "Gender," an open statement initiated by Carol Hanisch (NY), Kathy Scarbrough (NJ), Ti-Grace Atkinson (MA), and Kathie Sarachild (NY). August 2, 2013.

⁷² Paasonen (2010), p. 75.

⁷³ Willis, Ellen. "Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism." *No More Nice Girls: Countercultural Essays*. Hanover; London: Wesleyan University press, 1992. P. 118.

Willis underscores Firestone's emphasis on the need for radical feminism to permeate popular culture in order to change the intrinsic *everyday* elements of women's lives via a radical feminist political agenda.

As this polemic unravels, retrieves and reactivates Firestone's essential contributions to radical feminism within our contemporary cultural and political feminist context, it becomes evermore urgent to return to Firestone's theoretical work if we are to move out of our current morass. Firestone's analysis of history, her scholarship and her radical feminist activism led her to her formulation of women as a "distinct sex class." She saw technology as a means to eradicate the biological underpinnings that held women within the sex class system. Firestone's thinking really resets the compass in feminist thought by igniting the past limitations. The originality of her work provokes us to honor her outsider stance, which she took in order to prevent her subversive work from easy integration into the system where it would become governmental policy. This integration would only serve to conceal her core issue of the sex class system into greater invisibility.

It is in this vein, I have written this essay to reorient the radical questions toward a possible way out from a contemporary feminism centered upon an economic focus while downplaying the cultural and biological issues that face women. My intention is to problematize the ahistorical disregard for the brilliance of the work of Shulamith Firestone as she was the first to bring feminism to cybernetics and to present an irresistible argument that stimulates a new dialogue that revisits Firestone's radical work while reawakening the activism, energy and triumphant spirit of the 1960s and 1970s Women's Liberation Movement and its provocateurs.

Through her work we must again return to her call to rise out of our current malaise, to re-read and to revitalize Firestone's brilliant work, and return—*Back to a Feminist Future.*

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