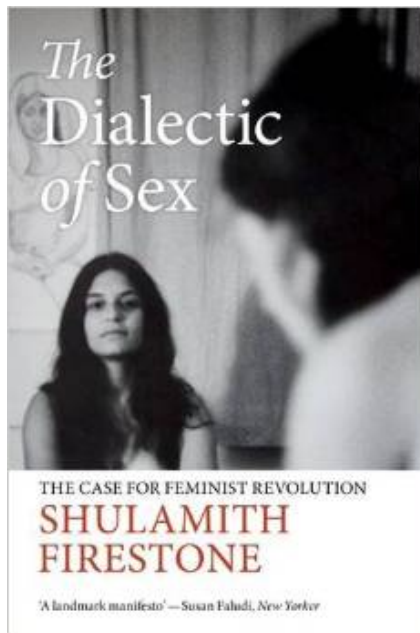


# Review: Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*

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Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* Verso 2015 £9.99

The re-publication of the feminist classic by Shulamith Firestone is very timely, now that we are experiencing another wave of feminism sweeping the globe with a whole new generation of young women taking an interest in feminist issues. The book was first published in 1970 and was described as follows by Susan Faludi in the *New Yorker* in 2014 in her obituary to Firestone:

*Dialectic* was both lauded and excoriated, often in the same review; the *Times* called its author 'brilliant' and 'preposterous.' It was ridiculed on talk shows as it climbed the best-seller list, and was cast as 'the little red book for women' while it was changing world views in un-red female America. Millett, whose book *Sexual Politics* appeared the same year as *Dialectic*, told me, 'I was taking on the obvious male chauvinists. Shulie was taking on the whole ball of

wax. What she was doing was much more dangerous.'<sup>1</sup>

Firestone attempts to analyse in-depth the nature of sexual oppression and its origins, in order to argue for the possibility of feminist revolution and how this can be achieved. Her analysis, she claims, is based on the Marxist method of dialectics, updated through the use of Freudian theory. The book also deals with the oppression of children, racism and a possible future society. She has some great and thought-provoking insights, particularly in the chapter on childhood. The book was a significant contribution to radical feminism and has remained very influential until this day. Compared to the mainstream liberal feminism of today, Shulamith Firestone's work is a breath of fresh air arguing for a complete destruction of 'patriarchy' and capitalism. There are, however, serious flaws to her method and conclusions as well as some fairly disturbing notions regarding sexuality.

Before moving on to the main review, it's important to highlight the context Firestone was writing in. The social movements in the 1960's inspired the growth of the far left in the US, as well as women's organisations and black civil rights groups. This 'New Left' included a mixed bag of student groups, anarchists and hippies, and many of its leaders were influenced by Maoism. But, by 1970, this alliance of anti-establishment forces began to break apart with some being involved in terrorism (The Weathermen) while others moved to the right towards the Democratic Party. Many young women who had got involved with the 'New Left' came up against appalling sexism, and when they began to question this type of behaviour they were dismissed and vilified.<sup>2</sup> One of these women was Shulamith Firestone, who at the age of 22 proposed resolutions on women's rights at the 1967 'National Conference for a New

<sup>1</sup><http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/04/15/death-of-a-revolutionary?currentPage=all> accessed 24/05/15

<sup>2</sup><http://disruptingdinnerparties.com/2014/05/29/breaking-away-to-come-back-new-left-sexism-radical-feminism/>, accessed 24/06/15

Politics' in Chicago and was literally given a 'pat on the head' and completely dismissed.<sup>3</sup> A few years later she was forced off a stage to howls of verbal sexist abuse. Not surprisingly, Firestone turned her back on the left and instead went on to co-found a number of radical feminist organisations, such as the Redstockings and New York Radical Women. The appalling attitude of the left and their inability to take feminist issues seriously, led Firestone to reject much of leftist ideas and Marxism. So whilst I make quite harsh criticism of Firestone's work I have sympathy for her and the path which led her to writing it.

### Firestone's method

At the very outset of the book Firestone claims to stand in the tradition of Marx utilising his dialectical method. However she immediately rejects the very foundation of Marx's dialectic - historical materialism. Historical materialism is the basis of Marxism, and it means that we understand that the world actually exists and is not just in our heads (materialism), and that society changes and develops throughout history. Firestone partially admits this, and even at certain points in the book argues this strongly. However she also rejects historical materialism in favour of a Freudian idealism combined with a crude biological determinism. She argues that:

...we are dealing with a larger problem, with an oppression that goes back beyond recorded history to the animal kingdom itself. In creating such an analysis we can learn a lot from Marx and Engels: not their literal opinions about women - about the condition of women as an oppressed class they know next to nothing, recognizing it only where it overlaps with economics - but rather their analytic method.<sup>4</sup>

In one sentence she argues '[b]efore we can act to change a situation, however, we must know how it has arisen and evolved, and through what institutions it now operates. Engels' '[We must] examine the historic succession of events from which the antagonism has sprung in order to discover the conditions thus created the means of ending the conflict'<sup>5</sup>. Here she appears to be advocating for a historical materialist analytic method but she then goes on to argue that '[t]he division yin and yang pervades all culture, history, economics, nature itself; modern Western versions of sex discrimination are only the most recent layer'<sup>6</sup> completely contradicting her earlier statement. Firestone argue that we need to look at history and the historical development of oppression but then asserts that sexual oppression is not historical but rather biological, existing even in the animal kingdom and therefore cannot be explained by looking at history.

She completely rejects Engels' theory of the development of gender hierarchy in his *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* where he links it to the rise of class society. Since the publication of *The Dialectic of Sex* a significant amount of research has been conducted by anthropologists such as Eleanor Burke Leacock and Christine Ward Gailey proving the correctness of Engels' general argument. Unfortunately at the time of writing, none of this research would have been available to Firestone. Instead, Firestone argues that sexual oppression stems only from the biological difference between male and female ie the female's ability to bear children. 'These biological contingencies of the human family cannot be covered over by anthropological sophistries. Anyone observing animals mating, reproducing, and caring for their young will have a hard time accepting the 'cultural relativity' line.'<sup>7</sup> Not only does she neglect anthropological studies of early human societies in one sentence, but she also disregards the difference between human beings

<sup>3</sup><http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/04/15/death-of-a-revolutionary>, accessed 24/06/15

<sup>4</sup>*The Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone, Verso books 2015

<sup>5</sup>*ibid*

<sup>6</sup>*ibid*

<sup>7</sup>*ibid*

and animals; the key difference being the social nature of human beings and our ability to shape and change nature.

I have shown above how she rejects the historical aspect of historical materialism but then she also goes on to reject the materialist aspect when she says: 'There is a level of reality that does not stem from economics... reality is psycho-sexual...'<sup>8</sup> The crude biological determinism which leads to an ahistorical understanding of sexual oppression goes hand in hand with the idealism of Freudianism - the theory that human beings' emotions and psyche, formed by sexual repression, creates power-structures (and subsequently oppression) in society. Her biological determinism is evident throughout the book, particularly in her discussions of love, culture and science where she among other things argue 'That men can't love. (Male hormones?? Women traditionally expect and accept an emotional invalidism in them that they would find intolerable in a woman.)'<sup>9</sup> She also claims that '...we can hardly find a relationship of women to science worthy of discussion'<sup>10</sup> apparently because '...the empirical method specifically demands the exclusion of the scientist's personality from his research.'<sup>11</sup> Firestone argues that this is because women are more engaged with emotions and therefore are unable to use 'cold' scientific methods. Her first statement about the supposed 'non-existence' of women scientists is simply factually incorrect, you only need to look at the work of Marie Curie or Lise Meitner who invented nuclear fission as examples of extraordinary talented female scientists. The second statement once again comes from her theory of the biological origin of oppression, or recently the more common expression that 'Men are from Mars - Women are

from Venus'. According to Firestone, and actually most misogynists too, gender roles are a consequence of biology and hormones, rather than society.

Despite this biological determinism (combined with Freudian idealism), which can often lead to a pessimism regarding the ability to defeat oppression because if oppression comes from biology then we would have to change our biology to achieve freedom. Firestone argues that '...the preconditions for feminist revolution exist-indeed, the situation is beginning to demand such a revolution.'<sup>12</sup> This at least gives the book a sense of hope and possibility which at times is refreshing. I will discuss her vision for a feminist revolution and a future society later.

## A history of the women's movement

Firestone's book attempts to deal with a broad range of issues around feminism, sexuality and oppression and she also outlines the history of the women's movement and its various components. She correctly criticises many of the conservative feminists throughout history and argues that their 'stress on equality with men - legal, economic, etc., within the given system - rather than liberation from sex roles altogether..' is not only useless in terms of achieving real results in the here and now, but also that it will never go to the heart of the problem. She further outlines how the early suffragette movement only achieved their aim, winning the vote for women, following the involvement of radical feminists taking militant actions.<sup>13</sup> Then follows a brief history of the movement from the eroticism of the 'Roaring Twenties' with the re-popularisation of marriage to the War

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> 'Militants had to undergo embarrassment, mobbings, beatings, even hunger strikes with forced feeding, but within a decade the vote was won. The spark of radical feminism was just what the languishing suffrage movement needed to push their single issue.'

<sup>14</sup> 'In the twenties eroticism came in big. The gradual blurring together of romance with the institution of marriage began ('Love and marriage... go together like a horse and carriage...'), serving to repopularize and reinforce the failing institution...'

effort and women in the factories up until the 1960's.<sup>14</sup> However, throughout this fairly interesting description of events, there is something glaringly missing: the class struggle. In her attempt to divorce sexual oppression from economics, Firestone completely omits the working class struggles and their influence on the women's movements. She puts down the winning of the vote for women to the involvement of radical feminists, rather than seeing it as a result of a period of working class revolutions and revolts, in conjunction with a women's movement, in the period following the First World War. Her only reference to the enormous changes to women's lives in the early period just following the revolution in Russia is where she says that '...Russia at this time was experimenting at doing away with the family.'<sup>15</sup> But no mention of the working class revolution that made this 'experimenting' possible in the first place.

## Freudianism

It is the chapter on Freud and Freudianism that is the most important and the most problematic in the book. Here Firestone outlines her main theoretical framework for the understanding of sexual oppression; the 'patriarchal family' and the sexual repression that comes with it. She takes Freud's theory of the Oedipus and Electra Complexes in children and uses it to explain sexual oppression.

The Oedipus Complex basically relates to the male child, where his first loyalty (and identification) is to his mother in his shared oppression (by the hands of the father) with her, but he eventually develops sexual desire for the mother (as the closest female), which has to be repressed, and as he becomes an adult he must leave behind his shared oppression, develop a disdain for her (and all women's) inferiority and take on the oppressor role of the father (the man).<sup>16</sup> (The term

'Oedipus Complex' comes from the Ancient Greek story where Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother.) The Electra Complex, on the other hand, relates to the female child, who first identifies with her mother, then develops sexual desire for her father, together with a longing for the freedom of the father, but in the end she has to repress her sexual desires and accept her inferior position together with her mother.

Not only is this theory problematic in the sense that it attempts to explain something that has its origins in society through individual experience in the family, but it also has some more disturbing consequences, particularly in relation to homosexuality. She says: 'Homosexuality is only what happens when these repressions don't take as ought to - that is, rather than being thoroughly suppressed, allowing the individual to at least function in society, they remain on the surface, seriously crippling that individual's sexual relationships, or even his total psyche.'<sup>17</sup> It would seem possible that her intention here is to show how or why homosexuality has been (and still is, but to a lesser extent) vilified by society, however further on her real argument becomes more clear. She goes on: 'male homosexuality could result from the refusal by the child at five or six to make the transition from 'mother-centeredness' to 'father-centeredness' - often from a genuine love for the mother and a real contempt for the father.'<sup>18</sup> And later she writes: 'Homosexuals in our time are only the extreme casualties of the system of obstructed sexuality that develops in the family.'<sup>19</sup> Her opinion reveals itself in that statement, where the logical conclusion is that following the breakdown of the 'patriarchal' family and the feminist revolution, homosexuality would disappear since it is a result of the 'misfiring' of this sexual repression in the family. Another statement confirms this: '...the incest taboo and the resulting Oedipus and Electra Com-

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

<sup>16</sup> 'It is no wonder that such a transition leaves an emotional residue, a 'complex'. The male child, in order to save his own hide, has had to abandon and betray his mother and join ranks with her oppressor. He feels guilty.'

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*

plexes, and their common misfiring into sexual malfunctioning, or, in severe cases, into what is now sexual deviation.<sup>20</sup> Her language describing homosexuality such as ‘casualties’, ‘sexual malfunctioning’ and ‘deviation’ can’t be regarded as anything less than homophobic, as is her very conclusion.

Her attempt in this chapter is obviously to uncover the underlying reason for the repression of sexuality which took place mainly from the Victorian Era up until recent times, much of which is being eroded today (and instead being replaced by a commodification of sex). However, once again, her ahistorical method and Freudianism leads her to find the origins of oppression in the family, but not in the family as a social structure shaped by the needs of the capitalist system, but instead in an individual’s psyche, leading her to a very disturbing, and ultimately unhelpful, analysis of sexual oppression.

Instead, the Marxist explanation for sexual repression, including the vilification and criminalisation of homosexuality, lies in the role of the family as the main place of reproduction of the current and next generation of workers under capitalism. In the nineteenth century, following industrialisation, working class families began to change with women and children taking part in factory work. This led to a situation where high infant mortality, extremely low life expectancy and young men and women working collectively in the factories began to break down the ‘traditional’ family structures. In order to ensure the existence of a future workforce as well as a stable social structure, the ‘family wage’ was introduced as a way to take women and children out of the factories. It also served the purpose of reinforcing the myth of traditional gender roles, the passivity and caring role of the woman as housewife and the aggressive and assertive role of the man, and this sexist ruling class ideology that came with it.

Despite the fact that the form of the fam-

ily today has changed, with a large number of lone parent families as well as same-sex parents, it still serves the purpose of reproducing the next generation of workers as cheaply as possible. Only at specific periods of economic growth, such as the Post-War boom, have we seen any changes in relation to the role of the family, such as free childcare and communal facilities. Hence the ideology of ‘marriage, 2.5 children and a mortgage’ still serves as the norm which we all (including same-sex couples) should strive for. As Firestone correctly remarks: ‘Today this contract based on divided roles has been so disguised by sentiment that it goes completely by millions of newly-weds, and even by most older married couples.’<sup>21</sup>

However, Marxists also understand that the family can be a place of refuge for the worker. It is the only place where she/he can feel some sense of control over her/his life -since this control has been removed from the public life of the workplace there is an attempt to assert this control in the private life of the family. Unfortunately, the family can never live up to the glorified myth but instead becomes both a ‘haven and a hell’ as Marx described it.

## Childhood

The chapter on childhood was very interesting, possibly because many of her points and arguments were new to me. Firestone begins by stating that ‘... we will be unable to speak of the liberation of women without also discussing the liberation of children, and - vice versa’<sup>22</sup>. She argues that children are oppressed within the modern family in a way which they were not in the past. In addition, she argues that the very concept of childhood did not exist until very recently. She writes: ‘In the Middle Ages there was no such thing as childhood. The medieval view of children was profoundly different from ours.’<sup>23</sup> And goes on to argue that ‘Children were so little differentiated from adults that there was no special vocabulary

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid*

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*

to describe them: they shared the vocabulary of feudal subordination...'<sup>24</sup>

The reason behind this non-existence of the concept of childhood is two-fold; the first being that children generally took part in the same labour as adults (mainly light agricultural work). Secondly, children took part in the same daily life as adults as part of a larger extended family household, they were not separated off into schools or 'childcare facilities' nor cared for solely by their own parents.<sup>25</sup>

This led to a different relationship between parents and children, where '...they ... did not 'need' their children - certainly children were not doted upon. For in addition to the infant mortality rate... parents reared other people's children for adult life. And because households were so large, filled with many genuine servants as well as a constant troupe of visitors, friends and clients, a child's dependence on, or even contact with, any specific parent was limited...'<sup>26</sup>

So rather than childhood being something natural, Firestone argues that: 'The concept of childhood developed as an adjunct to the modern family. A vocabulary to describe children and childhood was articulated.. (Since then it has been expanded into an art and a way of life. There are all kinds of modern refinements on baby talk: some people never go without it, using it especially on their girlfriends, whom they treat as grown-up children)'<sup>27</sup> So the modern notion of childhood arose only with the development of capitalism. It was only in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that special clothing for children were invented, as well as particular 'children's games'. Previously, games would have been played by adults and children alike.

In addition, with the development of a working class tied to the factory, a level of discipline was required in order to keep machinery going round the clock as well as to increase productivity. Firestone correctly

argues that "Discipline' was the keynote to modern schooling, much more important finally than the imparting of learning or information.'<sup>28</sup> Basic schooling for working-class children became necessary to instil discipline in the future workforce, as well as to teach the minimum skills required for factory work. Firestone argues that 'As a result they (children) remained economically dependent for longer periods of time; thus family ties remained unbroken.'<sup>29</sup>

She makes some interesting parallels between the oppression of women and of children, remarking on the belittling of women as children in sexist language, as noted in the passage further up. She also argues later that 'The pseudo-emancipation of children exactly parallels the pseudo-emancipation of women: though we have abolished all the superficial signs of oppression... there is no question that the myth of childhood is flourishing in epic proportions, twentieth century style... special toys, games, baby food, breakfast food, children's books and comic books, candy with child appeal etc.'<sup>30</sup> If this was true in 1970 it is even more so today. But today it is not enough to separate children from adults in terms of commodities, but then there has been a further separation of children between the genders with gendered toys, clothes and even sweets. Firestone remarks on this commodity fetishism but offers no explanation for it, nor does she make any links to the capitalist system's constant need for new consumer markets in order to increase profitmaking.

However, Firestone goes on to touch on something crucial in terms of understanding the family, and childhood, under capitalism; the role played by alienation. She says that '...the key word to the understanding of modern childhood is happiness'<sup>31</sup> and that '...it is every parent's duty to give his child a childhood to remember... This is the Golden Age that the child will remember when he grows up to become a robot like his father. So ev-

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<sup>25</sup> '...children were never segregated off into special quarters, schools or activities.'

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*

<sup>31</sup> *ibid*

ery father tries to give his son whatever it was he missed most himself in what should have been a most glorious stage of his own life.<sup>32</sup>

Under capitalism childhood has become glorified as our only chance of freedom and Firestone rightly says: ‘In a culture of alienated people, the belief that everyone has at least one good period in life free of care and drudgery dies hard. And obviously you can’t expect it in old age.’<sup>33</sup> Though she articulates some understanding of the role of alienation she never delves deeper into the subject, nor does she attempt to give a reason for the existence of it.

So whilst (partly) understanding the reason for this glorification of childhood by adults, she firmly argues for the necessity to free children from this myth and allows them to take part in society on an equal basis. Pre-empting the accusation of her supporting child labour she argues that ‘[w]hat we ought to be protesting, rather than that children are being exploited just like adults, is that adults can be so exploited. We need to start talking not about sparing children for a few years from the horrors of adult life, but about eliminating those horrors. In a society free of exploitation, children could be like adults... and adults like children...’<sup>34</sup>

## The future

At times it would seem that Firestone was really a socialist; that she wanted to see a world free from exploitation and oppression. However, her theory and her method lead her down a quite bizarre path with regards to how what she terms a ‘feminist revolution’ would happen and what type of society would come in its place.

As I explained in the introduction, despite her biological determinism Firestone is optimistic regarding the possibility of a feminist revolution. How could this be possible if her very argument is that oppression comes

from the biological division of male/female? She argues that modern technology for the first time in history gives us the tools to free ourselves from biology through artificial reproduction (i.e. test-tube babies) and contraception. This is one of the reasons, she argues, that revolutions in the past have failed.<sup>35</sup> This new reproductive technology, she says, will enable humans to remove the need for pregnancy and parenthood, leading to the destruction of the ‘patriarchal family’ and even capitalism itself (which, according to her, is a *result of the sex division*) to an age of ‘cybernetic communism’. Machinery and technology can not only liberate humankind from the monotony of labour but also from the pain and misery of childbirth and child-rearing.

## Conclusion

One would have to admire Firestone’s attempt to analyse the origins of oppression and her courage to write her theories, which at the time must have seemed even more outrageous than they do today. But as a Marxist, I have several problems with this book, both in terms of underlying homophobia and racism (the latter a topic which I had no space to deal with in this review) but more importantly Firestone’s flawed method based on a crude biological determinism mixed with a load of Freudian nonsense. It is this ahistorical method, based on an upside-down understanding of the relationship between class and gender - the argument that the ‘sex division’ came first and class developed as a consequence out of this<sup>36</sup> - that ultimately is the cause of the seriously problematic conclusions. Though one can understand her frustrations with her contemporary American so-called Marxists and revolutionaries, with their Stalinism and sexism, but her dismissal of Marxism ends up being detrimental to her attempts at understanding oppression and its origins.

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<sup>32</sup> *ibid*

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*

<sup>35</sup> ‘We shall soon have a triplicate set of preconditions for revolution, the absence of which is responsible for the failure of revolutions of the past.’

<sup>36</sup> ‘just as we have assumed the biological division of the sexes for procreation to be the fundamental ‘natural’ duality from which grows all further division into classes, so we now assume the sex division to be the root of this basic cultural division as well.’

