

Lisa Downing

Further Adventures of The Dialectic of Sex: Critical Essays on Shulamith Firestone, edited by Mandy Merck and Stella Sandford (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 286 pp., ISBN: 9780230100299, £58 hardback.

This collection offers up-to-date insights into the best known, but still critically ignored and often under-valued, work by second-wave feminist Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970). It seeks both to redress flaws in existing Firestone criticism and to explore the relevance of this incendiary manifesto for twenty-first-century feminist concerns. The book comprises a co-authored editors' Introduction, a Prologue by Mandy Merck, and nine chapters. These are organised into three sections; namely: 'Technology', 'Sex, Love, and the Family', and 'Dialectics'. Finally, an Epilogue by Elizabeth Freeman concludes the collection.

As this review is for a journal specifically concerned with the role of the maternal, in what follows I will focus particular attention upon the chapters in which authors consider Firestone's radical re-evaluation of gender, reproduction, child-bearing, and the condition of childhood, and upon the editors' treatment of these issues. Firestone's attitude towards the biological processes of reproduction and the social institutions that oppress children are encapsulated in such uncompromising statements as 'pregnancy is the temporary deformation of the body of the individual for the sake of the species. Moreover childbirth *hurts*. And it isn't good for you',ⁱ and 'children [...] are not freer than adults. They are burdened by a wish fantasy in direct proportion to the constraints of their narrow lives; with an unpleasant sense of their own physical inadequacy and ridiculousness; with constant shame about their dependence, economic and otherwise.'ⁱⁱ More than thirty years before Lee Edelman's anti-reproductive queer polemic, *No Future*,ⁱⁱⁱ which is conspicuous for its lack of interest in the negative impact of pro-reproductive ideology specifically on women and children, Firestone penned a devastating critique of the biological imperative of reproduction for women and the deleterious psychological effects of the nuclear family on the children it produces. Edelman's failure to acknowledge Firestone as an intellectual influence and predecessor is typical of a trend identified by the editors of this collection, who write in their Introduction that 'despite

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its pioneering critique of binary gender, *The Dialectic of Sex* is [...] missing from the bibliographies of Queer Theory' (p.1).

Moreover, the editors show how the hostility that Firestone's manifesto received – from other feminists and social conservatives alike – may be attributable to Firestone's rejection of the maternal role and insistence upon the necessity of freeing women from the dual work of physical childbearing and the prolonged, privatized labour of caring for a family. Feminists accused Firestone of being 'male-identified' and 'child-hating', in a particularly prophetic pre-echo of the so-called 'mommy wars' and the wrangles between the 'childfree' and parents that beset our contemporary feminism, especially in its online manifestations in the 'blogosphere'.

Sarah Franklin's chapter addresses directly the means by which Firestone proposed to liberate women from the biological processes associated with reproduction; namely by harnessing technology. This is one of the most intriguing and controversial of Firestone's ideas and it was also, as Franklin points out, one of her most 'historically prescient' (p.30), since IVF treatment and other reproductive technologies have become science fact, rather than the science fiction they were taken to be in Firestone's day. Franklin's chapter offers a careful and nuanced reading of Firestone's views, taking to task those whose indignation at her attack on the shibboleths of womanhood led them to caricature and misrepresent Firestone's actual position on technological advance, ignoring her oft-repeated careful caveat that 'without a revolutionary transformation of society's views of gender, kinship, and marriage, new reproductive technologies would be more likely to further subordinate women than to liberate them' (cited on p.31).

In Stevi Jackson's chapter on the heterosexual family, the author suggests taking seriously Firestone's identification of the 'connections between women's location within heterosexual relations and the social shaping of childhood' (p.114). She also offers, however, the valuable corrective insight that Firestone's 'inability to think outside a heterosexual frame' (p.114) led to a bias in her evaluation of the potentialities of family dynamics. Taking onboard the changes in patterns of marriage and divorce, average childbearing age, and kinship organisation, including the (arguable) 'queering of the family', that have taken place since the 1970s, Jackson argues for revisiting Firestone's provocations in our contemporary moment. Nina Power takes further the critique of Firestone's 'anti-family' argument, focusing on the materialism – in its multiple philosophical and political senses – intrinsic to Firestone's understanding of the bodily realities of sexed difference *and* the gendered nature of labour

relations under patriarchy. Mandy Merck's chapter is a fascinating exploration both of feminism's borrowings from, and debts to, the civil rights movement, and of Firestone's vision of a genderless or androgynous future. While Firestone's treatment of race has often been highlighted as a political problem of *The Dialectic of Sex* (Merck explains how 'her argument for racism's origins in sexism is itself racist in conception', p.164), Merck nevertheless makes a case for the importance of Firestone's adoption of the term 'integration', borrowed from the language of race relations, to describe her call for abolition of the 'sex class' – the primary factor of female oppression – and the creation of a new 'androgyny' for all human citizens. The chapter places these arguments in dialogue with discourses of intersex and the recent case of the 'gender verification' policing of South African athlete Caster Semenya to ascertain her 'real' genital, chromosomal, and endocrinal sex identity. Merck argues for the relevance of *The Dialectic of Sex* in understanding the ways in which sexism and racism intersected in the 'castigation' of Semenya. Merck's application of Firestone's work to this contemporary event and the debates it provoked is paradigmatic of what Elizabeth Freeman will punningly describe in her Epilogue as 'temporal drag', where 'drag' carries meanings both of time lapse and gendered/sexed performance. Freeman persuasively writes of the benefits for feminism of feeling 'the tug backwards as a potentially transformative part of the movement itself' (p.272).

Owing to the constraints of word length, I have not been able in this review to provide detailed commentary on every chapter of the collection, but I can honestly say that there is not a weak link in the book. The editors have done an excellent job of bringing together contributions that are individually scholarly and detailed and that, when taken together, provide a comprehensive overview of Firestone's *œuvre*. Without being overly celebratory, or erasing the problems and omissions in Firestone's tract, they seek to do justice to the originality and extraordinary brilliance of a thinker and activist who completed *The Dialectic of Sex* at the age of only 25. As has been pointed out, contributors also explain and demonstrate where and how misunderstandings of Firestone have tended to occur. In her chapter on dialectics, Stella Sandford perhaps sums up best what is important about Firestone's vision of sex, and why it has been so misconstrued. She describes Firestone's 'attempt to specify a conception of sex such that it could be posited as the basis of women's oppression *without being the basis for the justification of its continuation*' (p.235, my italics). Many critics have recognized in Firestone's insistence on the oppressive quality of the biological female role only the first half of Sandford's formulation.

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To conclude on a personal note, as a feminist who both strongly questions the still largely unchallenged belief in the naturalness of a female ‘maternal instinct’ and who is concerned about the broader ethical implications of continuing to reproduce the species (views for which I am often considered eccentric at best and a ‘bad feminist’ at worst), I have long cherished the unique perspective of Shulamith Firestone. I therefore greeted the publication of Merck’s and Sandford’s collection of critical essays on her manifesto with excitement; an excitement which proved to be wholly justified on reading the text. I would unreservedly recommend this collection as invaluable reading to anyone who wishes to be introduced to, or to learn more about, this too-often-ignored feminist luminary and gain insight into how contemporary debates about gender identity, social organisation, and family structures might be illuminated by a reconsideration of her work.

ⁱ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* [1970](London: Paladin, 1972), pp. 188-9.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p.101.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2004).