

Revolutionary Feminist Shulamith Firestone: A Catalyst for  
Radical Change in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Master of Arts by Research



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## Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

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# Abstract

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there remains an unequal division between men and women. Both gender and sex inequality are still exploited for male gain, and our current feminist movement is not enough to tackle the roots of this oppression. Therefore, this thesis will present a case that to overcome all inequalities in society we must revert to a more fundamental approach. I refer to this within the radical and socialist branch of feminism of the second wave. I argue that the crucial author of this movement, is Shulamith Firestone, and her book *The Dialectic of Sex*. I present this case, through a detailed analysis of the key chapters of her work, explaining its context, its key concepts/arguments, and the radical demands it promotes that are still relevant for feminists today. By examining Firestones key strategies on uprooting patriarchal institutions, I will outline where feminism has fallen short in American history, how women are exploited because of the sex/gender system, and how patriarchy has embedded itself into society. Only through the unity of socialism and feminism, as outlined by Firestone, can offer a compelling programme for contemporary feminism.

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# Introduction

Today more than ever we need to return to the work of Shulamith Firestone. Many of the questions she addressed in *The Dialectic of Sex* have seen a resurgence in contemporary feminism. And yet, at the same time, in the wider culture, both here in the UK as well as the US, we have also seen a regression in the rights and freedoms of women. On the positive side, we have witnessed the #MeToo movement, where women have fought against sexual harassment and inequality, but equally access to abortion has been curtailed in the US. I am not arguing that significant gains have not been made by women in the past, but the question remains whether these reforms have gone far enough. Firestone demanded for a more wide-ranging revolution. Perhaps when she wrote *The Dialectic of Sex* in 1970, her demands appeared fantastical and absurd.<sup>1</sup> Yet, today, with IVF, Test-Tube babies and Surrogacy, they do not appear so at all. Moreover, the standard normal nuclear patriarchal family is less of a reality for everyone, even though this might be for social and economic reasons rather than feminist ones. If I am right, and liberal feminism has all but been completely swallowed up by capitalism, which does not care whether you are a man, a woman, black or white to exploit you, then perhaps

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<sup>1</sup> 'Preposterous' is how John Leonard described it in review in *The New York Times*. See, John Leonard, 'Books of The Times', *The New York Times*, (29 October 1970), section Archives <<https://www.nytimes.com/1970/10/29/archives/books-of-the-times-adam-takes-a-ribbing-it-hurts.html>> [accessed 23 August 2024].

we should again start listening to the voices of the radical socialist feminists of the 1970s. In particular, the uncompromising voice of Firestone.

I first came across the work of Firestone when I researched the Jewish background of American feminists of the second wave for my undergraduate dissertation. Even then I thought there was something unique about her work for its radical and revolutionary demands. It did not read to me like a mere historical curiosity. Rather, a manifesto that could still speak to women today as they have witnessed the effects of the biotechnology and experienced its false promise. Are we not still oppressed by the very sexual inequality that she so eloquently described in *The Dialectic of Sex*. Have matters changed that much over the years? Indeed, as I suggest above, there is a patent feeling that for women at least, the promise of an equal society is receding rather than advancing. Her argument is that the root of all oppression rests on gender inequality, and therefore a social economic revolution is not sufficient, since afterwards women will remain oppressed. The source of gender inequality is the family, and it seems that the only answer to this problem is through technological intervention. Women would then be free from the burden of their biology. We shall see, however, that it is not as simple as all this, and why should it be. Firestone is not the technological determinist as some might suggest, as she knew more than anyone else that if this technology was not in the hands of women, then it would only

be used to further exploit them.<sup>2</sup> Let me outline how I will explore Firestones book, *The Dialectic of Sex*, in each chapter of this dissertation.

In the first chapter, 'Radical Socialist Feminism', I will describe the context of Firestone's work within the history of American feminism and what was specific to the project of radical and socialist branches. Firestone saw her work within the tradition of feminism, but she also knew what she was demanding went much further. For instance, it was not sufficient to demand for the vote, and access to the workplace, if sexual oppression remained. I will examine the history of feminism through the periodicity of waves. I am aware that there are disadvantages of using this approach, since not all women's experiences can be inserted within historical periods. As well as the differences and specificities of each wave can be exaggerated. Yet, I think it is a useful heuristic device to understand what is new about Firestone's approach. What I particularly want to highlight is located within the first and second waves due to the radical nature of their political project, which was imagined as a communal and social effort. Perhaps it is this kind of socialism that is lacking in the ambition of contemporary feminism and why we need to return to Firestones work. For this reason, I will argue that her theories are not just a past curiosity or only for academic interest but can stand before us as our future. The

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<sup>2</sup> Isobel Marcus writes that 'It is strikingly and painfully clear that Shulamith Firestone's utopian vision has no purchase among contemporary scholars. Liberation has not come through contemporary use of reproductive technologies'. Yet this seems to me to be a complete misreading. Technology in itself is not liberatory for Firestone. It requires a social revolution in order to be so. See, Isabel Marcus, 'A Sexy New Twist: Reproductive Technologies and Feminism', *Law & Social Inquiry*, 15.2 (1990), pp. 247-69. (268).



importance of her work is the ambition of reimagining the possibilities of women in a total social transformation.

In chapter two, 'Shulamith Firestone's Voice', I will focus on the third chapter of *The Dialectic of Sex*, 'Freudianism: The Misguided Feminism'. This section is the most crucial methodological chapter of the book, which is why I called my chapter 'Shulamith Firestone's Voice'. It is where she expresses the most unique and revolutionary idea that the root of sexual oppression is the family and all other social injustices flow from this discrimination. Firestone uses Freud's Oedipus Complex to explain the logic of patriarchy, but she takes this much further than Freud himself. She is not concerned with a literal translation of his complex, which she finds frankly absurd, but as a metaphorical schema to interpret the power dynamics of the patriarchal nuclear family. I will support Firestone's interpretation through Gayle Rubin's concept of the 'sex/gender system' and her reading of Levi-Strauss through a feminist lens. What is radical in Firestone's approach is the demand to imagine different ways of being kin (and here she has much in common with the thought of Donna Haraway, which I shall return to later in the thesis). If she uses the Oedipus Complex, then it is only to break it apart, like opening the triangle of oppression to the winds of social change.

As I said in the opening of this introduction, I came to Firestone through my undergraduate dissertation, where I found a connection between Judaism and progressive radical feminists of the second wave. Therefore, this will be the focus of chapter three, 'Judaism and Firestone'. In terms of literature concerning Firestone, there is little mention of her Jewish background, apart from a minor biographical note. But I argue that it is an important feature which needs to be highlighted. As I

will explore, this is the same for many feminists of the 1960s/70s as it influenced their feminist development. Indeed, in terms of research on Firestone, it is perhaps the most original part of my dissertation, since there is so little written on it. I do not believe that this was merely a historical contingent fact that many of the most progressive feminists of the 1960s were Jewish. They experienced both antisemitism from the post-war US society, but also the patriarchal oppressiveness of their Judaism (though of course there was also the radical history of Judaism through the Yiddish tradition, and the socialism of the Bund). This background, I would argue, allowed them to be at the vanguard of a more radical feminism within the second wave, and had a particular influence on Firestone's work. This was the case for many liberationists during the early stages of the movement, even though at the time, many of them suppressed their Jewishness. Although they struggled with their own ambivalence and anger towards the religion as well as the social customs that intended to marginalise them, they were inevitably shaped by their common inheritance. The primary source which I will use for this chapter is Joyce Antler's *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement*.<sup>3</sup> The reasoning why I rely on this source for this chapter is the fact that Antler is one of the few historians who has collected firsthand personal accounts from many of these Jewish pioneers of the second feminist wave. As well as outlined the correlation between their progressive feminist methods and the impact of their Jewishness. The chapter will conclude by emphasising the importance of acknowledging the

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<sup>3</sup> Joyce Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement*, (New York University Press, 2018).

connection Firestone had with Judaism and how it can help counteract some of the criticisms she has faced regarding her chapter on racism in *The Dialectic of Sex*.

On the reasons that I think it is important to know about Firestone's Jewish background is because of the subject of chapter four, 'The Question of Race'. The chapter 'Racism: the Sexism of the Family of Man' is perhaps the most controversial of *The Dialectic of Sex* as she compares racism to sexism. To begin with, even if we are to dismiss or disavow the nature of its argument, then it is unlikely, considering Firestone's background, that she was a racist. But she is treated by critics as though she was a white middle-class woman, who is totally ignorant of race, and speaking from a position of privilege. I do not believe this to be true, but this does not mean the criticisms of this chapter have no validity. As she does unintentionally devalue the experience of black men and women. Indeed, having written a chapter dismantling the Oedipus Complex, it is strange that she uses the same structure to interpret the political movement of black power and reduce it to abstractions that diminish their lived reality to caricatures. This is even more peculiar, since in her political writings at the time she fully recognised the specificity of this political struggle against racism. She also did not reduce it to her thesis where she compares racism to sexism, and that all oppression must have the same origin. Indeed, she uses the language of 'alliances', which is lacking in this chapter entirely. Firestone suggests in *The Dialectic of Sex*, that there cannot be a union made between the Woman's Movement and the Black Power Movement without their first being a sexual revolution. It is here that I compare Firestone's approach with Donna Haraway's, where I contrast the idea of a radical socialist feminist based on the idea of alliance. As well as a coalition to the linear developmental approach of Firestone, which

appears to suggest that one movement must have a priority over another, rather than celebrating difference. This can reduce our experience of the world to a unity and sameness. An approach, Haraway appears to suggest is antithetical to an authentic feminism of the future.

Haraway is also the link to my final chapter, 'New Kinships'. I explain what I consider to be the most important demands of Firestone's work, which are still not close to being fulfilled. Therefore, justifies my argument that her work is still contemporary. Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* is presented as a manifesto and clearly outlines that patriarchal oppression can only be stopped by controlling our biology and avoiding further exploitation. When she was writing this, technology was only in infancy. However, it is clear from scientific development that she was incredibly prescient in her views. Yet, as Firestone was a dialectic thinker, then it can never be a matter of trusting technology to achieve these feminist demands. Rather, there must also be a social revolution that adjoins with her feminist theories. Indeed, this is what our present tells us. For all the sophistication and scientific excellence of current biotechnologies, they have not at all lead to the changes in society that Firestone imagined. Part of my argument is to show that in relation to these demands, there is plenty of evidence that we are as a society going backwards, as the restriction of abortion in the US demonstrates. It is for this reason, that we need radical change, rather than just incremental liberal reforms. If we cannot imagine different possibilities for our future, which is the spirit in which I take Firestone's work, then there is no promise that this regression will not continue

# Chapter One: Radical Socialist Feminism

Defining feminism, like any word and especially a movement, is perhaps an impossible task, since feminists have different diverging goals and commitments. Although there is no essence to feminism, we can perhaps claim there is a 'family resemblance' between different branches, which aim to challenge and overcome the establishment of patriarchy.<sup>4</sup> This term, literally means 'rule of the father', but for most feminists it means 'male rule' or 'male dominance'.<sup>5</sup> Although patriarchy is a system of social power, it is also grounded in the biological division of the sexes.<sup>6</sup> Firestone, from her perspective of radical socialist feminism, argued that sexual inequality is embedded in our society. For this to be altered, would require a complete and total reconstruction of civilization, without nothing will change. We cannot reform ourselves out of sexual inequality by tinkering at the edges, as the roots of this oppression are very old and fully established within society. This

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<sup>4</sup> As Karen Offen describes, feminism can be broadly explained as a 'challenge [...] to patriarchy'. See, Karen Offen, 'Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach', *Signs*, 14.1 (1988), p.153.

<sup>5</sup> As Finn Mackay notes the term is more widely and generally used to mean male rule or male dominance. For example, male dominance or male superiority in a whole community, a whole society or a whole world. See, *Radical Feminism: Feminist Activism in Movement* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), p.5.

<sup>6</sup> As Abeda Sultana argues, the biological difference between the sexes is not itself either positive or negative. It is patriarchy that gives them this meaning. See, Abeda Sultana, 'Patriarchy and Women's Subordination: A theoretical analysis', *Arts Faculty Journal*, no 4 (2010), pp.1-18.

struggle still continues today, since patriarchal control shows no sign of disappearing.<sup>7</sup>

Before we can begin to understand the details of Firestone's argument, which demands as well as calls for the total defeat of patriarchy, we need to see how it is located within the broader social and political movement of feminism in the US. Throughout history, this movement has been led by individuals who aimed to tackle patriarchal control using alternative strategies. These have varied and can be found in the most common feminist branches known as liberal, radical, and socialist.<sup>8</sup> I will go into these distinctions in much greater detail later as they are essential when understanding Firestone's feminist position. But it is important at this point in my dissertation to refer to some simple definitions. Liberal feminism refers to the earliest struggles for the vote, whereas radical feminism questions the social roles and identities of women in a patriarchal society. Socialist feminism proposes a material critique of capitalism.<sup>9</sup> What is distinct to Firestone's argument is that radical and socialist feminist branches need to work collaboratively to defeat the oppression of women. Her reasoning is that without socialism, radical feminism is only a slogan, but does not materially change society, and without radicalism, socialism would not

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<sup>7</sup> As Finn Mackay argues, radical feminism is not dead, and every generation needs to re-invent it. See, Finn Mackay, *Radical Feminism: Feminist Activism in Movement* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2015) p.5.

<sup>8</sup> There is of course not one history of feminism, but multiple, some of them well-known and some of them more hidden. For an understanding of Firestone's polemic, a basic grasp of the history of American feminism is useful. For a brief but insightful overview of this history, see Rory Cooke Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms* (Berkeley Seal Press, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> I have modified these definitions from Mackay, pp. 56-61.

change the status of women at all. Hence, oppression would still exist, as is clear from the experience of women in former socialist countries.<sup>10</sup>

These three branches were expressed historically through what has come to be known as the 'waves' of feminism.<sup>11</sup> Yet, as this chapter will explore, patriarchy still exists. Therefore, only by illustrating both the strengths and weaknesses of these feminist branches, and their different historical waves, can we comprehend how Firestone aimed to dismantle patriarchal systems. My argument is that she confronted inequality by combining both radical and socialist branches. Furthermore, her position is not merely a historical or dated curiosity. But could stand as the future of contemporary feminism.

As we briefly mentioned, there are many unique branches of feminism, with overarching types which themselves contain additional diversification and disagreement. To name just a few more of the most recognised schools of feminism: liberal, radical, socialist, anarcho-feminism, black, womanism, eco-, lesbian,

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<sup>10</sup> There is no doubt that women were treated more equally in former socialist countries in terms of employment, family planning and reproductive rights. However, women were still subject to harassment and domestic violence. For an excellent overview of the status of women in socialist countries during the Cold War, see Kristen Ghodsee, 'What Has Socialism Ever Done for Women?' (with Julia Mead) *Catalyst*, Vol 2. No. 2, (2018).

<sup>11</sup> Feminist scholars debate whether there are three or four waves of feminism (the argument is whether the third wave has come to an end or not), but these waves interpret feminism in terms of its social and historical context. The first wave focused on suffrage, the second on sexuality and reproductive rights, the third, intersectionality and heteronormativity. Although all waves can be dated, they are nonetheless continuous. Women's fight for suffrage and reproductive rights have not gone away, as recent American history teaches us. On the different waves, and their historical context, see Martha Rampton, '*Four Waves of Feminism*', Pacific University, (2015) <<https://www.pacificu.edu/magazine/four-waves-feminism>> [accessed 5 May 2024].

separatist, pro-, and revolutionary.<sup>12</sup> Obviously we cannot describe all these feminisms in one chapter, but in terms of understanding Firestone the main traditions that do need to be acknowledged are as mentioned: liberal, socialist and radical feminism. The core aims of each branch differ. Liberal feminism, for instance, seeks to reform rather than revolutionise. It leads to activities such as lobbying government, monitoring equal pay or lack of it, and working on improvements to maternity rights or women on the boards of companies.<sup>13</sup> Socialist feminism, on the other hand, focuses on the role of capitalism in the oppression of women and all people.<sup>14</sup> Lastly, radical feminism is concerned with the complete overthrow of patriarchal control, even socialist patriarchy. Radical feminists are also known for promoting women-only groups as well as political organisations which are paramount towards ending male violence against women.<sup>15</sup> However, everyone has their own unique understanding of feminism and sees merits in the theory which resonates with them personally. Thus, some feminists may explain these branches differently compared to myself. However, I think the most important matter to acknowledge is that without

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<sup>12</sup> Christine Flynn Saulnier gives a quick overview of these different feminisms in her article, *'Incorporating Feminist Theory into Social Work Practice: Group Work Examples'*, *Social Work with Groups*, 23 (2000), pp. 5–29.

<sup>13</sup> These are some of the different kinds of feminism that Mackay offers as examples. See, Mackay, p. 35.

<sup>14</sup> The classic essay on socialist feminism is Barbara Ehrenreich's, *What Is Socialist Feminism?* <<https://jacobin.com/2018/07/socialist-feminism-barbara-ehrenreich>> [accessed 13 May 2024]. She argues it is insufficient merely to overcome economic inequality as classical Marxism does not pay sufficient attention to the subordinate position of women in capitalist society, especially in relation to reproductive labour.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Ellen Willis, *'Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism'*, *Social Text*, 9/10, (1984), 91–118. Willis argues that radical feminism extended the limits of what was conceived as political. Firestone could be thought of as a radical feminist because she took socialist politics into the technological and biological dimensions. Willis also specifically refers to how she and Firestone set up a radical feminist group in New York in 1969 called 'Redstockings' (p. 96).



understanding these contrasts, we would not be able to recognise the distinctiveness of Firestone's work, and why it remains relevant for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Regardless of these diverse aims, feminism began as a social and political movement.<sup>16</sup> We might understand these different kinds of 'feminisms' as ways of deepening the idea of equality both in a social economics register but also in terms of gender roles within society.

If 'waves' is a popular metaphor in referring to the history of feminism, we need to be careful how it is used. As Nancy Hewitt argues, rather than thinking of them as 'ocean waves', we could imagine them as 'radio waves'.<sup>17</sup> From this perspective, a wave does not appear one after the other in a linear progression, but as simultaneous overlapping circles. Also, some voices at one moment of time can be heard and others not. So, when we read Firestone, her work does not just appear at a certain point on a historical timeline and then is replaced by later feminists. Rather, her writings evoke certain possibilities or voices that can be heard continuously throughout the history of feminism. They might have been drowned out by a stronger signal previously, but we can now hear her more clearly than before, as though she predicted our own future. The notion of 'waves' is entirely misleading if we think that

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<sup>16</sup> It is for this reason that Sylvia Walby argues that feminism is not dead. It is engaged in all aspects of equality on a global and individual level. What I mean by 'equality' here is not just legal or political equality, but in the sense that Firestone means it as the overcoming of the sex/gender system. See, Sylvia Walby, *The Future of Feminism* (Polity, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> See, Nancy A. Hewitt, 'Feminist Frequencies: Regenerating the Wave Metaphor', *Feminist Studies*, 38.3 (2012), pp. 658–80.

activism took place at one point of time and has now vanished.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps Firestone's future is still to come rather than something we have already passed by. Regardless of this criticism, the wave descriptor is a handy and popular shorthand when referring to recognised peaks within the history of feminist movements. Thus, I shall be using it within this thesis when describing each feminist transition.

Therefore, the first wave is known as the age of the suffragettes. Their movement's central aim from 1848 to 1920 was to fight for women's suffrage and debated as well as discussed, the issue of gender inequality. The suffragettes were involved in important campaigns, such as those against rape within marriage, fair divorce and custody laws as well as raising the age of sexual consent from 13 to 16 years old in 1885.<sup>19</sup> The second feminist wave began in the mid-1960s into the 1980s.<sup>20</sup> In my opinion, this was the most powerful movement for the social and political demand for equality for women, following the visionary writings of the influential Jewish author Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).<sup>21</sup> The most significant accomplishment of the movement was the legalisation of abortion rights in the US,

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<sup>18</sup> It is also important to realise that this metaphor is very Western centric and perhaps does not account for the different feminisms throughout the world. As Oyeronke Oyewumi argues, feminism has generally been conceptualised through European and American experiences of the world. See, Oyewumi Oyeronke, 'Conceptualizing Gender: The Eurocentric Foundations of Feminist Concepts and the Challenge of African Epistemologies', *JENdA: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, 2.1 (2002).

<sup>19</sup> Mackay, p. 34

<sup>20</sup> There is a lot of debate within the history of feminism as to when the second wave began. But there is a general agreement that it was around the early 1960s. See, Becky Thompson, 'Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism', *Feminist Studies* 28.2 (2002), pp.337-360.

<sup>21</sup> On the importance on Betty Friedan, see Joyce Antler, 'Betty Friedan, Feminism, And Jewish Identity', *Jewish Women's Archive*, (2021) <<https://jwa.org/weremember/friedan-betty/antler>> [Accessed 2 Feb 2022].

known as the case of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. If the ethos of the second feminist wave was to radically transform society both socially and politically, then we can say that it ended in failure. As it is clear to see that patriarchy is still visible throughout society. From Firestone's perspective at least, they failed to go far enough, since patriarchy cannot be partially reformed. Its overthrow demands the complete rethinking as well as the reorganisation of society. Since the second wave of feminism failed to do so, then it could only end in failure whatever its relative triumphs were.

So let us now quickly go through the last two waves of feminism to finish this contextualisation for Firestone's work. The third wave emerged from the 1990s to 2010s and tended to follow those decades' emphasis on individualism, flexibility and choice. In comparison to the radical feminism of the previous decades, we might argue that it was less revolutionary and radical.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, in the American context, the movement was able to enforce the Family Medical Leave Act of 1993, which allowed employees to take unpaid leave for family as well as medical emergencies, and the Violence Against Women Act 1994, which improved justice for women who faced abuse.<sup>23</sup> Even with these achievements, or the increased

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<sup>22</sup> Claire Snyder-Hall argues that from one perspective the third wave might seem to be obsessed with individualism and choice. Yet from another, it also shows a respect for pluralism and self-determination. See, 'Third-Wave Feminism and the defence of "Choice"', *Perspectives on Politics*, 8.1 (2010), pp. 255–61. Also, a good explanation of third wave feminism can be found in the introduction to Gillis, Stacy, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford, eds., *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). They see it as rejection of the essentialism and universalism of the previous generation of feminists.

<sup>23</sup> For the impact on woman of the Family and Medical Leave Act, see Naomi Gerstel and Katherine McGonagle, 'Job Leaves and the Limits of the Family and Medical Leave Act: The Effects of Gender, Race, and Family', *Work and Occupations*, 26.4 (1999), pp. 510–34. The Violence Against Women Act of 1994 was the first attempt in the US at a wide-ranging federal response to the devastation

possibilities of self-determination as well as pluralism; gender and sex inequality still existed. So, the history of feminism continued in the next variation. The fourth and latest wave could be characterised through its political aim to grasp the interconnections between different struggles for equality and how different groups within society experience them. Rather than looking for a unitary definition of feminism, it is concerned with the intersectionality of race, gender and class.<sup>24</sup> Many fourth wave feminists have been involved not only in protests for female rights, but in the struggle against religious, environmental, racial and class discrimination.

For instance, many feminists were and are still involved in the Black Lives Matter movement, which emerged in 2013 after years of unprovoked mass violence against black people in America.<sup>25</sup> As well as environmental protests fighting for the declaration of a climate emergency.<sup>26</sup> There has also been action led by feminists in the Me-Too movement, which originally launched in 2017 in America to support survivors of sexual violence. The movement gained widespread attention after it was

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caused by rape, domestic violence, and other forms of violence against women. As with the previous act it was a step in the right direction for women's equality, but it is just a bit terrifying how it took for this to become law in the US. See, Sally Goldfarb, 'The Supreme Court, the Violence Against Women Act, and the Use and Abuse of Federalism', *Fordham Law Review*, 71.1 (2002), p. 57.

<sup>24</sup> For a conceptual and historical definition of this term, see Sharon Smith, '*Black feminism and intersectionality*', *International Socialist Review*, 91, (2013), pp. 1-16. See also, Anna Carastathis, 'The Concept of Intersectionality in Feminist Theory', *Philosophy Compass*, 9.5 (2014), pp. 304–314. She also argues that we should not forget the specific historical origin of this concept in black feminism.

<sup>25</sup> For more context regarding feminist involvement within the Black Lives Matter movement, see, Garrett Chase, 'The Early History of the Black Lives Matter Movement, and the Implications Thereof', *Nevada Law Journal*, Vol. 18:3, (2018), Article 11.

<sup>26</sup> For the involvement of the Women's Movement in environmental causes from the second wave onwards, see, Bernadette P. Resurrección 'Gender and environment from "women, environment and development" to feminist political ecology'. in Susanne. MacGregor (ed), *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Environment* (Routledge, 2017), pp 71-85.

revealed that the film mogul Harvey Weinstein had sexually harassed and assaulted women in the industry for years. Victims of sexual harassment or assault around the world began sharing their experiences on social media or showing support by using the hashtag #MeToo.<sup>27</sup> One specific aspect of the fourth feminist wave, with respect to Firestone, has been the increasing interest of feminism in technology. This is particularly the case within the area of biotechnology. To some extent, Firestone was prescient in how it would affect women. But she was also, as we shall see in the final chapter of this dissertation, no technological determinist.<sup>28</sup>

These feminist waves are characterised differently as the movements have progressed. So, from this perspective we can analyse them for their successes and failures. However, it is important to note that I am no way meaning to devalue these different generations of women successes. Every change has, in terms of the political and social transformation, advanced the power of women. However, we must ask ourselves whether they have done so fundamentally, and whether feminism at this present moment is now facing a backlash. For instance, on 24th of June 2022 the American Supreme Court decided to overturn the *Roe v. Wade*

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<sup>27</sup> On the Me-Too Movement, see Rituparna Bhattacharyya, '# Metoo Movement: An Awareness Campaign', *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*, 3.4 (2018), p. 1-12.

<sup>28</sup> Maya Oppenheim is a good example of a contemporary feminist who is concerned with biotechnology, but also emphasises the importance of patriarchy in understanding the social role and status of women. She has written an excellent introduction to these issues which is full of shocking evidence and facts that patriarchy is alive and well in the UK. See, *The Pocket Guide to the Patriarchy: The Truth about Misogyny, and How It Affects Us All* (Hachette, 2023).

amendment, originally passed within the second feminist wave.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, contraception has also become more restricted, which has made it harder for women to be able to choose their own reproductive rights.<sup>30</sup> This does not mean we should accept defeat, but we should not think of these waves as progressing towards some kind of final telos, which we have now reached.

Rather, it makes sense for us to go back to these different waves and uncover the hidden possibilities that were never actualised within them. It is my argument that we must return to the radical and socialist methods of Firestone's work, especially those featured in her book *The Dialectic of Sex*. Though in some ways it is a book of its time, it is also a book of our time, because it makes us radically question the status of woman in society. Therefore, rather than submerging Firestone's work in this generational account of feminism, we can argue it is a critique of the lack of ambition and failure of each 'wave', which has attempted to overcome patriarchy but failed. Of course, this might explain why others consider Firestone to be too radical and utopian. Additionally, from one perspective, Firestone can be historically located

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<sup>29</sup> The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* means women's ability to choose to have an abortion or continue a pregnancy is no longer protected by the constitution of the US. Consequently, each state can now independently decide the legality of abortion, and according to the Guttmacher Institute, in 2022 26 US states had multiple bans ready to enact, 13 of which were trigger laws that automatically took effect when *Roe v. Wade* was revoked. Its increasingly scary to be a woman living in America currently and especially if Trump is re-elected. For the impact of the judgement on women's lives in the US, see, Judith A. Berg and Nancy Fugate Woods, 'Overturning *Roe v. Wade*: Consequences for Midlife Women's Health and Well-Being', *Women's Midlife Health*, 9.2 (2023).

<sup>30</sup> See, Laura E. T. Swan, 'The Impact of US Policy on Contraceptive Access: A Policy Analysis', *Reproductive Health*, 18.1 (2021), p. 235, doi:10.1186/s12978-021-01289-3. This article argues that it has become increasingly more difficult for women in the US to access contraceptives, especially if they are poor.

within a wave, but from another she cannot. The same perhaps could be said for many feminists, who we typify and label as belonging to one wave or another.<sup>31</sup>

However, another way of thinking about these lost possibilities are in comparison to what was and is offered in Firestone's radical feminism. She makes this argument when examining the early history of feminism in America featured within the second chapter of *The Dialectic of Sex*, 'On American Feminism'. This section focuses on analysing each feminist wave or branch in America up until the 1970s, when Firestone was writing. She believed the waves of feminism were progressive in terms of intent, but as they advanced, they became regressive. She notes that the first and second waves began with the work of radical and socialist feminists, who set the groundwork for the revolutionary overthrow of patriarchal control. Firestone refers to how the first feminist wave in America began with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. These women were the most militant feminists of the movement and among the first to stress the importance of organising female workers and founded the Working Woman's Association.

However, around 1890, leaders of the radical national feminist movements merged with the conservative feminist groups to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA).<sup>32</sup> Radical and socialist feminists had been openly and effectively ridiculed by not only non-feminists, but also liberal feminist groups, as

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<sup>31</sup> I have in mind here what Elizabeth Freeman calls 'temporal drag' and 'repetition' in her essay 'Packing History, Count(Er)Ing Generations', in *Further Adventures of The Dialectic of Sex*, ed. by Mandy Merck and Stella Sandford, pp. 255–275

<sup>32</sup> Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (Verso Books, 2015), p. 18. Hereafter DS.

their radical nature seemed too extreme. Hence, Firestone refers to how the first wave moved towards a more conservative ethos with its concentration on broad and uniting single issues such as suffrage. As well as working within a white male power structure, rather than aiming for the complete overthrow of patriarchal systems. Firestone also referred to how the early stages of the second feminist wave, which she was involved in, began with pioneers who were associated with 'women's liberation' as opposed to 'women's rights'.<sup>33</sup> This was a contrast from the conservative feminists of the first wave and a return to the ethos from the early stages of the original movement. Firestone and other radical feminists demanded a complete reconstruction of society and culture, which included the abolition of normative and constricting definitions of masculinity as well as femininity. These pioneers began their involvement within the movement by forming several small collectives in rapid succession in the early 1960s, which completely transformed the woman's movement. Such groups included the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, which promoted the newspaper *Socialist Feminism: A Strategy for the Women's Movement*, New York's Redstockings, New York Radical Women, and Boston's Bread and Roses.

These collectives were led by Jewish radical and socialist feminists such as Shulamith Firestone, but also Naomi Weisstein, Vivian Rothstein, Heather Booth and many more. At the heart of this radical socialist movement was the struggle not only for political transformation, but a change in the social status of women,

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<sup>33</sup> On the difference women's liberation and women's rights, see Jo Freeman, 'The Origins of the Women's Liberation Movement', *American Journal of Sociology*, 78, 4 (1973), pp. 792-811.



especially around reproduction and household work.<sup>34</sup> These women aimed to go beyond liberal feminism and tackle the roots of patriarchal oppression. Their strategies were unique as they offered direct solutions to tackling the core issues of inequality and end patriarchal, capitalist exploitation. However, as already mentioned, the second wave returned to liberal strategies as the movement progressed into the 70s and these radical demands were silenced. These groups were broken up and dismantled.

The effects of patriarchal control still exist within the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is only by returning to these progressive feminist movements that we can finally escape the grasp of patriarchal control. Firestone believed that women can never gain equality in a society that remains patriarchal. So, any feminism that truly desires equality for women as well as men must mean striving for the dismantling and reconstruction of society. Without the abolition of patriarchy there can be no true justice, since women will still be subject to the tyranny of the family and fertility. The reasoning is, that 'in every society to date,' Firestone writes, 'there has been some form of the nuclear family'. Thus, 'there has always been some form of oppression towards women and children to varying degrees' (DS 65). It is within this context that her provocative idea might be understood that 'natural' pregnancy could be replaced by an artificial womb and explain some of her negative comments about giving birth (she describes it as 'like shitting a pumpkin') (DS 181).

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<sup>34</sup> For the classic history of this period, and which offers an excellent historical context for Firestone's work, see Joyce Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism, Voices from The Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2018). These voices are going to be important document for the third chapter of this thesis that analyses Firestone's Jewish background.

In one way, you can understand the audacity of Firestone's claim. By overcoming this negative social meaning imposed upon us by patriarchal systems due to our biological differences, we can then overcome this oppression. Yet, this can only occur if the social form of patriarchy is abolished. For instance, Firestone believed it was enforced upon women that the ultimate meaning of their life is to give birth. So, if technology could allow women to gain control over reproduction, then they would not be oppressed and subordinated by men.

Additionally, Firestone also believed there would need to be a socialist revolution alongside a feminist liberation to free women from inequality. Firestone did not fully agree with the standard Marxist analysis, as she believed that the origin of all oppression within society came from sex and gender exploitation. All inequalities follow from this, such as class and race. The reasoning behind Firestone's conception is that even if there was a successful socialist revolution, without a sexual liberation, women and children would remain exploited for male gain. It is this 'level of reality' Firestone writes, 'that does not stem directly from economics' (DS 2).

However, it is not a rejection of materialism, but precisely the opposite. In this way, Firestone praises Simone De Beauvoir's seminal work *The Second Sex* but is also critical of her 'essentialism' (DS 7-8). Why define women in terms of philosophical ideas like 'otherness', or 'transcendence', when the real meaning of women's oppression is not found in ideas but biology, which is the foundation of her material existence. This is why Firestone believed we need a sexual revolution that is much larger than any socialist one and why Marx as well as Engels' method of dialectical materialism is rooted in the 'dialectic of sex' (DS 12).

I suppose it could be suggested Firestone's awareness of the limitations of socialism was inspired by her own experiences within 1960s left-wing politics. She was present at the National Conference for New Politics in Chicago, where thousands had gathered to debate new leftist policies in relation to the Vietnam war and the Civil Rights Movement. In the backrooms, women gathered for days framing a minority report that called for free abortion and birth control, an overhaul of marriage, divorce and property laws and an end to sexual stereotyping in the media. However, the conference chairman William Pepper refused to accept the women's report, claiming it was insignificant and insisted they 'calmed down, there are more important things to speak about rather than policies to do with women'.<sup>35</sup>

Firestone's involvement within leftist politics made her realise that socialism was deeply chauvinistic. But it also failed to take the division of sexes seriously enough, and because of this it could never be enough to liberate women. Thus, there could be no political revolution without a sexual one. Without feminism, there could be no true socialism, and without 'true socialism' there could be no feminist revolution.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, for Firestone, it was not a matter of attaching 'socialism' to feminism, as though it was just a secondary supplement to politics. But 'deconstructing' or 'deforming' socialism through feminism. This is the meaning of 'radical', when we describe her political position as 'radical socialism'. This unique outlook meant the total transformation of society, where the political project was to overthrow the binary

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<sup>35</sup> For a description of this event and William Pepper's comment, see, Antler, p. 34.

<sup>36</sup> For a detailed history of socialist feminism, see Donna Haraway, "'Gender" for a Marxist Dictionary: The Sexual Politics of a Word', in *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 49–75.

sex/gender system through a fundamental critique of patriarchy. It is this radical socialist feminism that remains relevant in the 21st century and our future, rather than just a historical curiosity of the past.

The polemic of *The Dialectic of Sex* inspires us to imagine a different future for reproductive technology. This can liberate women to other futures, rather than forcing them to fall back into the same sex/gender roles. In this way, just as in the Marxist model, the proletariat must seize the means of production. In Firestone's radical feminism, women must seize the means of reproduction. This method does not just mean the abolition of 'male privilege', but of the 'sex distinction' itself, where through 'artificial reproduction', children are born to both sexes. 'The tyranny of the biological,' Firestone declares, 'would be broken' (DS 10-11). This position made Firestone's voice unique, as there could be no political freedom without their first being a sexual one. We need, she writes, 'a sexual revolution much larger than – inclusive of – a socialist one to truly eradicate all class systems' (DS 12). The role of reproduction and biology in the suppression of women is still a serious issue today, if recent events in US politics are to go by, as it was in the 1970s. One of the fundamental political tasks of feminists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be to wrest technology from the further subjection of women and through the superimposition of normative heterosexual familial roles. Who can say this is still not a political struggle for our time? What then does it mean to go beyond Marx and Engel's dialectic materialism to a dialectic of sex? We shall see in the next chapter that it means understanding how deeply sex/gender roles are embedded in society prior to historical economic inequality. Firestone even claims that it precedes race inequality, which we shall examine in chapter four.

The aim of this chapter was to situate Firestone's work within the history of feminism. We should not think of this as a simple linear history where each wave is supposedly an improvement of the others. Rather, these waves are better understood as thresholds of possibilities rather than a past that has come to an end. In this way, rather than just saying that Firestone is an historical expression of a certain kind of feminism popular in the 1960s/70s, she also holds out to us new ways of conceiving the feminism of the future. These possibilities we believe, are encapsulated within the twin ideas of biology and overcoming exploitation through technology. This is what I understand as the radical nature of Firestone's feminism that goes beyond the chauvinistic socialism she had to suffer. This is not to suggest that Firestone rejected socialism, but that socialist feminism does not go far enough. In the next chapter, I will explore her argument in 'Freudianism: The Misguided Feminism'. This chapter is central to understanding what is truly distinctive about Firestone's feminism. She argues that the roots of gender and sex oppression stem from biological exploitation caused by patriarchal establishments. It is this concentration on the centrality of patriarchal power in the oppression and subjugation of women that makes Firestone so important and relevant for contemporary feminism

## Chapter Two: Shulamith Firestone's Voice

As I explored in chapter one, radical socialist feminism is a critique of patriarchy and capitalism. Since we are still living within a patriarchal capitalist society, then this branch remains very much relevant for the 21<sup>st</sup> century feminist movement. This chapter will focus upon why Firestone remains a progressive alternative compared to the current liberal feminist movement. As I will analyse, she remains contemporary due to her argument that the origin of all inequality is caused by the exploitation of biology. To overcome this, we would need to obtain technological control over our sex, and a socialist revolution would not be sufficient to oversee this alone. There must be a sexual revolution alongside any socialist one, otherwise the cycle of oppression will continue to exist. The reasoning, as Firestone outlines in her third chapter of *The Dialectic of Sex*, 'Freudianism: The Misguided Feminism' (DS 41-71), is that women will always be oppressed unless we are able to take control over our sex.

As Theodor Adorno famously said, 'in psychoanalysis nothing is true except the exaggerations'.<sup>37</sup> I take this to be Firestone's approach when describing the origins of sex and gender inequality. As well as her use of Sigmund Freud's observations on sexual difference. The very form of their exaggeration reflects the social reality of women, despite Freud's own bias. However, his mistake was to universalise the

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<sup>37</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. by E.F.N Jephcott (Verso, 2006), p. 49.

family in the Oedipus Complex, but his abstraction of the family reflects the concrete expression of the oppression of women in the nuclear patriarchal family. If Freud could not imagine any other family than the patriarchal one, then at least he pitilessly reveals the truth of the Oedipal family for what it is. Yet, what he does not do but Firestone does within her book, is explain the contingent and historical nature of this patriarchal nuclear family and how to overcome it. This of course would be to destroy the Oedipal family and its origin in biology. To understand why the patriarchal family is contingent is to comprehend the social basis of sex/gender roles in human society. My guide here will be using the seminal essay by Gayle Rubin 'The Traffic in Women' and detail the 'importance of explaining the relationship between kinship systems and patriarchy' (what she calls the 'sex/gender system').<sup>38</sup> One way of understanding how we can imagine the alternative to the Oedipal family is through other ways of being kin. By using Rubin's work, I will return to her main inspiration, who is Levi-Strauss.

It is also important to note that Firestone's writing is not a return to essentialism, but rather a matter of understanding how the biological is mediated by society and culture. Additionally, biology for Firestone is dialectical rather than essentialist and there must be a transformation of our biological destiny through a materialist account of history. It is only in the past two centuries that technology has existed to transform both reproduction and the family. However, the political intention of *The Dialectic of*

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<sup>38</sup> Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex', in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Duke University Press, 2011), p. 33–65. The essay was originally published in 1975. Hereafter TW.

Sex is to ensure that this technology is not used to oppress and subject women. As

Victoria Margree writes in her book:

*The Dialectic of Sex* was above all else a manifesto – a public declaration of intent. It is a book that declares that a feminist revolution must happen, and that it can happen now, since for the first time in human history the technology exists to enable the root cause of women's oppression to be addressed just as the contradictions of women's situation have emerged with such painful clarity.<sup>39</sup>

One of the purposes of this thesis is to offer an equally compelling reason to read Firestone and outline her detailed explanation for the origins of discrimination. I believe chapter three, 'Freudianism: The Misguided Feminism', is the most crucial part of her book as it provides the theoretical undertones of her progressive feminist perspective. If you cannot understand Firestone's argument here, then you are seriously going to misunderstand the rest of Firestone's book. Equally, if you disagree with her argument, then you are not going to agree with the rest of her book either. This chapter will also aim to portray Firestone's adaptation of Freud (both what she rejects and accepts) and by analysing this, we will reach a deeper understanding of what she means by the biological in relation to sexuality. Also, what a dialectical social understanding of biology might be, as she writes, 'The basic tenants of Freudianism [...] are the raw material of Feminism' (DS 56, my ellipsis). In my previous chapter, I mentioned the work of Marx and Engels. Firestone both appropriated and rejected aspects of their work by taking upon a dialectical method but rejecting its productivism or economism. Firestone believed that without a sexual

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<sup>39</sup> Victoria Margree, *Neglected or Misunderstood: The Radical Feminism of Shulamith Firestone* (Zero Books, 2018), p.19.



revolution, brought about through the possibilities of social transformation of technology, women will remain trapped in sexual oppression and no amount of apparent social equality will change this. So too, when it comes to Freud, Firestone rejects his conformism towards the family, as he fails to see the possibility of its openness to a radical future that could fracture the Oedipal triangle.<sup>40</sup>

The power of hierarchies within the nuclear family, and the sexual repressions necessary to maintain it, are destructive as well as costly to the individual psyche. If we abolish the family, then we abolish the trauma inflicted on the individual.

Naturally, Firestone has one family in mind, the Oedipal one. This unit not only damages the mother, by subordinating her to the father, but also harms the child through this subservience. To accept this family would be allowing sexual repression and oppression. Thus, under the patriarchal Oedipal triangle, women are biologically disadvantaged from birth, as their sexual fate is different to men's because they can have children. Equally, the fate of the child is also hindered. Sexual repression is demanded of every individual in the interests of family integrity, which makes not only for individual neurosis but also a 'widespread cultural illness' (DS 56). The biological liberation of women, which ultimately would destroy the Oedipal family, would be the only way to form an equal just society.

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<sup>40</sup> To some extent, though I do not believe they cite her work, Deleuze and Guattari's project in *Anti-Oedipus* is the same as Firestone's. The political task is to break the Oedipal triangle open. 'There is no Oedipal triangle,' they write, 'Oedipus is always open in an open social field'. See, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Continuum, 2004), p. 95.

Firestone uses Freud's theory of psychoanalysis and the Oedipus/ Electra Complex not because she wants to universalise these complexes as Freud does (which would completely contradict her dialectical historical method). But she wants to show how the biological determination of the sexes is overlaid by the patriarchal structure that Freud sets into stone. In his unrelenting honesty, which Firestone admires more than her criticisms of Freud, and despite the revisionism of 'clinical Freudianism' (DS 61) he displays how the nuclear family works in both oppressing women, children, and finally even men.

This is how we should understand Firestone's statement regarding Freud and the fact she uses him metaphorically rather than literally. Unless we understand the meaning behind the Oedipus Complex, then we will just think it is absurd or untruthful. According to Firestone, the point behind the Oedipus Complex is 'power' and the only way, she writes, 'that the Oedipus Complex can make full sense is in terms of this' (DS 43). What is meant by 'power' here is the family. Firestone believes Freud's opinion of the Oedipal family is wrong as he universalises his theory that every family is a 'Daddy-Mommy-Me'. However, before I get to this description of power and how it functions, I need to explain the important factors of Freud's work. To do this, requires a description of the Oedipal and Electra Complex according to

his essay '*Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Differences Between the Sexes*'.<sup>41</sup>

Freud's argument goes like this: at the earliest stage of the child development, there is no difference between the sexes. This is because both the little girl and boy have the same object of desire, their mother. However, this does not explain how the little girl will develop into a woman, and how the boy into a man. The task of the Oedipus Complex is to show how the masculine ideology already operates within the family structure. For instance, the little girl can only become a woman by changing her object of desire from mother to father, whereas the little boy never changes his object of desire, though he will end up in conflict with the father. The cycle for the little girl is penis envy, Oedipal Complex (or Electra Complex), whereas for the boy, it is the Oedipal phase of castration and the dissolution of the Oedipal Complex. The little girl can only become a woman by remaining within the Oedipal Complex and sees her anatomical difference from the little boy as something negative ('penis envy'). In seeking to gain what she lacks, the little girl identifies with her father and breaks with her mother, because she knows that the mother too lacks what she desires. However, for the little boy his experience is different as his conflict is with his father. The little boy wants to possess the mother and take her away from his father. This is known as the castration complex. The little boy dissolves this complex by

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<sup>41</sup> Sigmund Freud '*Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes*', Standard Edition, 19 (Hogarth Press, 1925), p. 243–58. For an explanation of the influence of Freud on Firestone, see Mandy Merck, '*Prologue: Shulamith Firestone and Sexual Difference*', in *Further Adventures of the Dialectic of Sex: Critical Essays on Shulamith Firestone*, ed. by Mandy Merck and Stella Sandford (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2010), pp. 9–26. As Mandy Merck points out, Firestone retranslates Freud's analytic terms with relations of social power. See also, Margree, p.56-72

identifying with the masculine ideal his father represents. The little girl's position is always ambiguous, as to fulfil her destiny of becoming a woman, she must identify with her mother, even though she can only have negative feelings towards her.

How then does Firestone reinterpret this family drama? What Freud takes in psychoanalytic terms, she translates and reformulates as expressions of social power. It is not the Oedipal Complex that explains the family, but the family that explains the Oedipal Complex. It is only when you understand the family as a 'stand in' for social power then it becomes clear how biological oppression emerges from this unit.<sup>42</sup> It is this traditional patriarchal nuclear family, which is the real foundation of Freud's psychoanalytic terms, where the father is the 'breadwinner' (DS 44).

Everyone else in the family, the mother and the children, are his 'dependents', the children even more so. He 'supports' his wife, if she provides 'housekeeping, sex, and reproduction' (DS 44). For children, Firestone argues, this power relation is even worse. They are legally his property. He can do with them as he wishes, and his name continues through them. Have these relations of power substantially changed overtime Firestone asks?

It should not surprise us that her answer to this question will be 'no'. There is the 'same triangle of dependencies' (DS 44), even if women might now be able to go out to work, or the laws around divorce have changed. However, if women and children

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<sup>42</sup> In some way, then, Juliet Mitchell is right to suggest that this is not Freudian, but the question is whether Firestone wanted to be Freudian in the first place. She subjects the Oedipal triangle to critique of social power, and this of course would be as valid critique of both Freud as it would Lacan, who equally solidifies social relations through the transcendence of the masculine ideal. For Mitchell's critique of Firestone, see Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (Allen Lane, 1974), pp. 347-50.

were allowed to be independent, then the seemingly unalterable Oedipal triangle, which Freud has universalised, would explode apart. As well as the social relation of power which underpins it. Naturally, we might say from our vantage point this is exactly what has happened in our society. There is a possibility of alternative families other than daddy-mommy-me, though there remain the constraints of the heteronormative family, which proves Firestone's point rather than denies it.

Since Firestone's metaphorical reading of Freud is to suggest that we can go beyond the social forces behind the Oedipal triangle, we therefore can then imagine other ways of being a family. Yet, when Firestone was writing *The Dialectic of Sex*, the patriarchal nuclear family was still the rigid norm in which other possibilities were barely conceivable. It was routinely normal for women to be married young, educated about housework in preparation for married life as a housewife and mother, and this being prescribed to girls without question as a gender role at birth.<sup>43</sup> It might have been the case during the 1970s that a woman could be highly educated and even earn a salary. But it would usually be lower than the husband, as she would still be wholly dependent on him.<sup>44</sup> Even if women did earn more or the same as men, by the time she perhaps chooses to have children, she is tied to the task of rearing them. This power relation has been replicated down the generations. The same

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<sup>43</sup> As Louise Toupin shows in her archival work and interviews on the feminist campaign 'Wages for Housework', it was still the case in the 1970s that women's reproductive labour did remain within the family. This was unpaid and unacknowledged, as the primary care giver was still crucial for male productive labour in the capitalist system. See, Louise Toupin, *Wages for Housework: A History of an International Feminist Movement, 1972-77*, trans. by Käthe Roth, (Pluto Press, 2018)

<sup>44</sup> For evidence of 'sex segregation' in the US workforce in the 1970s, see, Shirley Harkess, 'Women's Occupational Experiences in the 1970s: Sociology and Economics', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 10.3 (1985), pp. 495–516.

expectations that were imposed on the role of the mother are then passed down to the daughter. She is expected to fulfil the same function, which is not a contingent factor imposed on by the patriarchal nuclear family from the outside. But is the very purpose of this kind of family. In other words, it is only through the abolishment of this kind of unit that women can ever conceivably become free.

If the power dynamics of the nuclear patriarchal family oppresses and represses women, then by relegating her to the role of the mother means it equally damages the child. In terms of the Oedipal Complex, Firestone first takes the perspective of the little boy, as Freud did (DS 48-9). Like both sexes, he is the first to identify with his mother. The father is something terrifying and terrible to him (this would be the castration complex, in the Freudian schema). Freud is important to Firestone because to some extent he recognises the agency of the child before and at the age of six. She criticises the literal Freud, because she cannot believe the boy would desire penetrative sex with their mother.<sup>45</sup> If the boy identifies with the mother, then it is because she is there to provide care for him, and the father is largely absent. If he is to become a man, then he must give up his love for his mother. 'Most children aren't fools,' Firestone writes, 'they don't plan to be stuck with the lousy limited lives of women' (DS 47).

Again, if we examine the Electra complex through the prism of power, it is the 'inverse of the Oedipus Complex' (DS 48). The little girl also identifies with her

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<sup>45</sup> It is this literal Freud that commentators would argue that Firestone, whether intentionally or not, misreads Freud. Indeed, the Oedipal complex is already in Freud metaphorical since it is related to the displacement of the unconscious. Thus, Victoria Margree writes that Firestone's argument is not 'particularly Freudian'. See Margree, pp. 63-64.

mother, but she realises as we saw in Freud's own account, that she does not have a penis like her brother. She is a mutilated boy. To compensate for this lack, she attempts to seduce her father. Again, Firestone recasts this complex through the relations of power. The little girl does not identify with the father because she lacks a penis, but because she recognises that it is her father who possesses all the power. She then has two possibilities, to either seduce the father or reject her mother to become like her father. Unlike her brother, becoming more masculine does not work for her. Like every woman, because of societal pressures she must eventually accept her destiny. Firestone insists that none of this is convincing if we take Freud literally. It will only make sense if we think of these theories in terms of power, 'Penis envy' is a 'metaphor' (DS 49). If she sees a difference between herself and her mother, or her father, then it is nothing to do with genitalia. Therefore, the whole of Freud's terms only make sense through the 'power psychology of the family' (DS 51).

In this way, if we want to rid ourselves of these identifications and repressions which harm both children as well as women, then the only way to do so is by destroying the family unit itself. For Firestone, such an abolition is only likely on technological grounds because the reason for the existence of the patriarchal nuclear family is reproduction. If women cannot free themselves from reproduction through their biology, then the family and the Oedipal Complex that Freud describes, which is now retranslated through power, can only continue to exist. No sexual revolution without the abolition of the family can succeed without ending the tyranny of reproduction. Thus, we can see that in this context, Firestone's argument was that technology can liberate women from the domination of the patriarchal nuclear family.

However, even as I am writing today, reproduction continues to be used to oppress women. For instance, as mentioned in chapter one, the recent overturning of *Roe v Wade* in the US and motherhood is still viewed as being the natural desire of most women.<sup>46</sup> I will explore this further in my final chapter and provide Firestone's alternatives to this cycle of oppression. But there is no doubt that for her at least, if women's and children's oppression is to be abolished then so too does this destructive family. Therefore, a revolutionary feminist movement must imagine new ways of being kin if it is to escape this domination and subjugation. There is no kind of family, if it is based on the Oedipal triangle of power, that can in anyway lead to the liberation of women. It will always be a kind of subjugation.

At this point in my argument, I want to turn to Gayle's Rubin's essay 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex"', which gives greater credence to the argument of reimagining the family or being kin is crucial to radical feminism. Firestone's discussion of technology and biology is always in the context of this thinking about kinship in different ways. Why should children be reared in nuclear families? Why should the only types be daddy-mommy-me? The work of Gayle Rubin, an American cultural anthropologist best known as an activist as well as theorist of sex and gender politics, can present us with a deeper explanation of Firestone's more programmatic remarks. As well as referring to the origins of sex

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<sup>46</sup> I am not convinced that Firestone would have thought 'mothering' as opposed to 'motherhood' would be an improvement on the idea that the subjectivity of women should primarily be viewed through giving birth. On the history of motherhood in feminism, see, Emily Jeremiah, 'Motherhood to Mothering and Beyond: Maternity in Recent Feminist Thought', *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, 8.1/2 (2006), pp. 21–33. For an approach more closely attuned to Firestone reimagining of a 'non-oedipal kinship', see Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism against Family* (Verso, 2019).



and gender oppression as an actual system, Rubin's work supports Firestone's objectives of analysing the origins of discrimination in patriarchy.

Like Firestone, she maintains that the oppression of women stems from their biological exploitation, which she refers to as the 'sex/gender system'.<sup>47</sup> It is how society transforms biology into sexual inequality. Though she does not dismiss Marx entirely, she chooses to explain the 'sex/gender system through Freud and Levi-Strauss, though from a feminist perspective, since neither author recognises the radical nature of their explanations. This is because, as we have seen from Firestone's description of Freud, they take the sex/gender system as a structural given, rather than as the product of social relations as well as power, and therefore subject to change. The sex/gender system is ultimately a product of historical human activity, which both authors have solidified into a permanent structure of the unconscious, or the social as such, rather than as a contingent form.

How did Marxism fail to get sexual oppression right? Marx gives us the clearest explanation of 'class oppression', so why, Rubin asks, can we not just apply the same schema to sexual oppression (TW 35)? Perhaps the best way to do this would be to examine the dependence of the reproduction of labour on housework. The surplus value of labour that capitalism extracts to form profit would itself be dependent on the surplus value of women's unpaid labour in the family.<sup>48</sup> The

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<sup>47</sup> As Rubin writes in the introduction to the republication of this essay, this expression was an 'alternative to "patriarchy"' (TW 13).

<sup>48</sup> Heidi Hartmann argues that capitalist society depends on the 'unequal division of labour' found at the heart of the family. See, Heidi I Hartmann, '*The Family as the Locus of Gender, Class, and Political Struggle: The Example of Housework*', *Signs*, 6.3 (1981), pp. 366–94.

purpose of capitalism is to turn 'money, things and people into capital' (TW 36). How it does that is by extracting surplus value from labour. The value labour produces are less than the cost of labour itself. The worker does not get paid for what they make and gets paid to survive and to live. Their survival is the cost of 'food, clothing, housing and fuel' (TW 36). These basics are paid for by the wage of the worker, but they themselves must be worked on. They do not just miraculously appear. 'Food must be cooked,' Rubin writes, 'clothes cleaned, beds made, wood chopped' (TW 37).

At least at the time Marx was writing *Das Capital*, it was women who were mainly doing this work, and not getting paid for it. Since the worker would have had to get paid more to pay for the wages of women to do all these things, then we can safely say that this unpaid labour contributed to the overall profits of capital. Yet, Rubin, points out, this might explain the usefulness of the exploitation of women to capital, but it does not explain the 'genesis of the oppression of women' (TW 37). We know this because we can point to many kinds of societies that are not capitalist where women are equally oppressed and exploited. Indeed, anthropology can present many such examples of the extent of gender inequality.<sup>49</sup> It is women who do this work rather than men and the result is a long historical development that predates capitalism.

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<sup>49</sup> As Judith Shapiro argues, there is no evidence that sexual inequality just arises with capitalism or economic relations, rather it is more concomitant with social inequality more generally. Hierarchical societies produce sexual inequality. Sexuality inequality is an effect of power relations of domination. It is social inequality that explains economic inequality and not the other way around. See, Judith Shapiro, 'Anthropology and the Study of Gender', *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 64.4 (1981), pp. 446–65.

The Importance of Engels in Rubin's account is that unlike Marx he does separate reproduction from economics (TW 38), and this reproduction or sexuality is just as much culturally formed as production. It is at this point in her argument that she introduces the significant terminology of 'sex/gender', and it is worth quoting her in full:

Sex is sex, but what counts as sex is equally culturally determined and obtained. Every society also has a sex/gender system – a set of arrangements by which the biologically raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner, no matter how bizarre some of the conventions might be (TW 39).

Whatever meaning the biological has for human beings it is always shaped by its cultural and social context. In the same way, there is never a natural meaning of the biological, nor should we think what Firestone means by the biological is anything natural. Her opposition to the family is social like any other human behaviour and is therefore open to change and transformation. Patriarchy is only one possible manifestation of the sex/gender system. It is not the only one and does not have to be the only way in which the 'raw material of human sex and procreation' must manifest itself. It is for this reason that Rubin argues we should focus on the idea of 'kinship' (TW 41). I would also suggest this is exactly what Firestone re-imagines when she claims that technology can break the tyranny of the Oedipal triangle. It is this attempt to reimagine different kinds of kinship, or different kinds of family that are open to the social rather than closed off from it.

The key thinker for Rubin in the history of kinship systems is anthropologist Levi-Strauss, and his work *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1955).<sup>50</sup> Why he is so important to Rubin's argument is that he presents the clearest example of how kinship is imposed upon biology and the key to this imposition is the exchange of women between men. It is this process that explains gender inequality. The social institution of marriage should be understood primarily as a 'gift exchange' (TW 43). The incest taboo is what promotes this exchange, since it requires that daughters or sisters are given to other men. It is women who are being transacted and have no power over this. 'If women are the gifts,' Rubin writes, 'then it is men who are exchange partners' (TW 44). It is kinship systems that explain how biological differences are given a negative and positive significance, and why sexual inequality arises. It also explains how it is only through radical change within kinship systems, that this oppression can be overcome. Where Rubin disagrees with Levi-Strauss is that the incest taboo and the exchange of women is the beginning of culture, since this would imply that feminism would have to destroy culture to overcome inequality. Also, would it not be better to think of other kinds of kinship rather than claim that there is only one kind?

The Oedipus Complex describes how sexuality is organised and distributed. It tells the individual what is and is not permitted. Who is and is not the right partner. As Rubin expresses, 'the Oedipal complex is a machine which fashions the appropriate

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<sup>50</sup> For a good overview of anthropology and feminism, see Penelope Harvey, '*Feminism and Anthropology*', in *Contemporary Feminist Theories*, ed. by Stevi Jackson and Jackie Jones (Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 73–85.

forms of sexual individuals' (TW 51). It does so through the norm of 'obligatory heterosexuality' (TW 54). Understood this way, perhaps against Freud himself, we can read the whole schema as the explanation of the oppression and repression of women. Rubin's proposal might be less radical than Firestones (she appears to suggest that one way out would be for men and women to equally contribute to child rearing), but nonetheless they are the same in form.<sup>51</sup> We cannot change the subordination of women unless we can think of other ways of being kin.

It might seem like a long detour to go through Rubin's essay to explain what is at stake in Firestone's argument. Yet, *The Dialectic of Sex* is presented as a manifesto as well as a polemic, and for this reason it can be dismissed as too political or extravagant. Yet if we read the more sober academic writings of Rubin, then there is a strong affinity between their arguments. The sexual oppression of women is not the result of a biological infirmity but the socialisation of women through the family. If the Freudian Oedipal Complex is the explanation for this subordination, then it is because its origin lies in a certain social ordering of kinship where women are exchanged but are never the exchangers. The Oedipal Complex is not fixed for all time in the human unconsciousness but is the result of social structures that can and will change through the transformation of kinship systems. If there is a difference between Firestone and Rubin, then it is the latter's concentration on the means of this revolution through technology. Yet even in this difference, the desired outcome

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<sup>51</sup> She also rejects 'parthenogenetic reproduction' as a route for feminism. I wonder if this is a sly dig at Firestone, who otherwise she does not refer to by name in this essay (TW 61).

for feminism is identical: how can we rethink and then reshape kinship outside of the heteronormative family.

As Margree explains, Firestone's key position is that women throughout history are at the 'mercy of biology'.<sup>52</sup> Before the access to contraception, women 'could expect to spend perhaps 30 years of her life pregnant.' It would also be expected for women to look after and nurture the child over its long period of development. For this reason, Margree explains, women are separated from productive labour. This ensures women are dependent upon men for her and her child's survival as he produces the commodities, they all need to survive. This 'natural division' between the sexes was then solidified by its social reinforcement through kinship systems. Since reproductive biology has always been the way it is until now, women have therefore always been oppressed. Hence, Margree concludes that for Firestone 'a revolution of production alone and not also of reproduction will fail to uproot the ultimate source of the problem.'<sup>53</sup> Therefore, there can be no political revolution without there firstly being a sexual one, and modern technology can now allow women, to seize control over their biology.

I hope, in this chapter, I have clarified the understanding of the origins of the sex/gender system and why Firestone's emphasis on technology remains relevant for feminism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I have also justified why reading Rubin in parallel with Firestone can explain how this biology is mediated through its social institution

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<sup>52</sup> Margree, p. 25. The quote is from *The Dialectic of Sex* (DS 9).

<sup>53</sup> Margree, p. 35.

in kinship. For Firestone, there is no point in women controlling their own reproduction if it does not also lead to rethinking and reimagining kinship. There is, however, one aspect of Firestone's history that we have not spoken about in depth and that is her relationship to Judaism. This will be the topic of the next chapter as I believe many commentaries on her work have failed to mention how her Jewishness impacted her activism.<sup>54</sup> I believe it to be fundamentally important when thinking about the political context of Firestone's work. Especially when we come to read perhaps the most controversial chapter of *The Dialectic of Sex*, 'Racism: The Sexism of the Family Man', where I argue that Firestone misapplies the Oedipus Complex even though she has already demonstrated its embeddedness in social structures of power.

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<sup>54</sup> The most important recent publications on Firestone, which have been indispensable for my understanding of her work, is *Neglected or Misunderstood: The Radical Feminism of Shulamith Firestone*, and *Further Adventures of the Dialectic of Sex: Critical Essays on Shulamith Firestone*. However, it only makes a passing reference to Judaism. See, Margree, pp. 8-9, and Merck and Stanford, p. 174.

## Chapter Three: Judaism and Firestone.

As I argued in chapter one, we cannot understand the radical nature or continued relevance of Firestone's work without some knowledge and understanding about the context of the history of feminism. This is not to reduce her work to a historical curiosity but to demonstrate that it remains a possibility for our future. The original way she and others thought about oppression and the effect of the patriarchal family towards women is unique. In my second chapter, I examined this in greater detail to show that Firestone's biological revolution is not a return to essentialism, but a dialectical transformation of human society through technology, especially through re-imagining kinship systems. However, the purpose of this chapter is to add a different historical context to Firestone's work. One that is perhaps, at least in her case, more hidden and concealed, which is the Jewish background behind her activism. As concluded in the previous chapter, it is this Jewish background that is missing in some of the contemporary accounts of Firestone's work. Yet, it is crucial in understanding it, as it provides important context to her manifesto and its personal motivation.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Susan Faludi, in her article in the *New Yorker*, does emphasise Firestone's Judaism. See, 'Death of a Revolutionary', *The New Yorker*, (8 April 2013) <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/04/15/death-of-a-revolutionary>> [accessed 1 July 2024]. Ann Shapiro also mentions her in passing but concentrates on other feminists' authors. See, Ann R Shapiro, 'The Flight of Lilith: Modern Jewish American Feminist Literature', *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-), 29 (2010), pp. 68–79.



This chapter will analyse the experiences and personal background of Shulamith Firestone. As well as other radical and socialist feminists from the 1960s/70s Chicago and New York Woman's Liberation groups. These feminists were highly involved in the early stages of the second wave of feminism in America and laid the groundwork for the 1960s women's liberation movement. They were so distinctive in their ability to view society in a transformative way, and as I will outline, they all shared similar experiences facing sexism. However, they did not just encounter this within secular society but also through their Jewish upbringing, as well as facing antisemitism throughout their lives. By outlining this connection, I will offer an insight into how being Jewish heightened their sensitivity to injustices within society as their experiences tailored their activism to include equality for all; not just the few

Additionally, it is important to understand the relationship between Judaism and progressive feminism, which has been neglected by some historians when writing about Jewish second wave pioneers. I feel it is important to underline this relationship as I believe it did in fact impact their progressive nature. More importantly for the purpose of my thesis, it is necessary to understand the relationship Firestone had with Judaism. This will help provide a clearer picture of how she became a progressive feminist. As well as mitigate some of the criticisms she faced, especially when we come to interpret the most controversial chapter of *The Dialectic of Sex*, which I will explore later.

My objective for this section of my dissertation is to provide a brief definition of Judaism. As well as analyse the experiences some of the most important feminists shared from the New York and Chicago liberationist groups. Additionally, outline that being Jewish enabled these women to become the forward-thinking radical and

socialist feminists of the second wave. The key source for this history is Joyce Antler's book *Jewish Radical Feminism, Voices from The Women's Liberation Movement*. The reason why this book is so crucial for understanding the Jewish context of radical feminism during the second wave is the personal testimonies Antler writes about. She interviewed around 40 Jewish liberationists pioneers, and their personal stories recapture a history that otherwise would have been lost.<sup>56</sup>

Obviously, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to go into great depth concerning the status of women in Judaism in all its variations. However, it perhaps would not be too controversial to assert that, at least in the orthodox form, which Firestone was raised in, women's roles were subordinate to men.<sup>57</sup> Jewish women were traditionally relegated to the home and to the family as well as separated from social life. As the Jewish theologian Judith Plaskow argues, women are Judaism's 'other'. This 'exclusion' is, in one sense, due to the written tradition of Judaism (both the *Halakha* and the *Aggadah*) and the purpose of this literature was for men. She argues that men 'define Jewish humanity' and they are the norm. Against this norm, women can only be less than men. The Mishnaic treatment of women follows Gayle Rubin's

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<sup>56</sup> Antler explains the origins of her book in the introduction. In 2011, she organised a 2-day conference in which she invited 40 activists to speak about their personal histories, which she then subsequently interviewed for the book. See, *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement*, (New York University Press, 2018), pp. 22-23. (Hereafter JRF). For reviews of Antler's book that emphasise the importance of this stories both to the history of Judaism in the US and feminism, see, Tahneer Oksman, 'Review of Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement', by Joyce Antler', *Contemporary Jewry*, 38.3 (2018), pp. 437-39, and Shulamit Magnus, 'Review of Review of Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement, by Joyce Antler', *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, 35, 2019, pp. 234-37.

<sup>57</sup> The classic introduction to American Judaism pretty much erases women from its history. There is not one reference to feminism in the book, even though there is discussion of other political movements. See, Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism*, Second Edition, Revised (University of Chicago Press, 1988).

explanation of patriarchal kinship, which I referenced in my previous chapter. It only speaks of women when concerned with marriage. They must be controlled under this system, and at the heart of this regulation is the fear of female sexuality.<sup>58</sup>

It should not surprise us, that the relationship between Jewish feminists and their own religion is going to be ambiguous. For instance, the Jewish background of the influential second wave feminist Betty Friedan, who I mentioned in the first chapter, rejected the stifling atmosphere of the Jewish family. But, at the same time, she was aware of the antisemitism she faced in America, and this was just as an important part of her political background. It was this experience that many Jewish women shared as they felt it was necessary to conceal their Jewishness.<sup>59</sup> In her own words, Friedan expressed that ‘people changed their names and did something to their noses, tried not to talk with their hands, and denied the very richness, the warmth, the specialness, the good taste of their own background as Jews.’<sup>60</sup> For Friedan, it was important both to confront antisemitism but also the diminished status of women in Judaism. This ambivalence was vividly present in the speech she gave to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of women gaining the vote known as ‘The Women’s Strike for Equality’. She opened her speech by repeating the prayer that Jewish Orthodox men would say

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<sup>58</sup> This classic statement of the marginalisation of women in Judaism can be found in her essay ‘The Right Question is Theological’, which was republished in Judith Plaskow, *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972-2003*, ed. by Donna Berman (Beacon Press, 2005), pp 56-65. For an alternative more positive account of women and Orthodox Judaism, see Debra R. Kaufman, *Rachel’s Daughters: Newly Orthodox Jewish Women* (Rutgers University Press, 1991).

<sup>59</sup> For a historical source of Friedan’s views of her Judaism see, Joyce Antler *The Journey Home: How Jewish Women Shaped Modern America*, (Schocken Books, 1998), pp. 259-67. An extract from the book on Betty Friedan can also be found at Joyce Antler, “Betty Friedan, Feminism, and Jewish Identity”, from Joyce Antler, *The Journey Home...*, *Jewish Women’s Archive* <<https://jwa.org/weremember/friedan-betty/antler>> [accessed 7 July 2024].

<sup>60</sup> Antler, *The Journey Home*, p. 263.

every morning when thanking God that they were not born a woman. However, she changed the words to say, 'I thank Thee, Lord, I was created a woman.'<sup>61</sup> Friedan also faced a double alienation for being a Jewish feminist. Firstly, this was caused by her own Jewish background because of the diminished status of women in Judaism. Secondly, the alienation from American society, because of that very Jewishness. To counter this isolation meant overcoming the oppression of women, and the racism in American society. Both movements came together, and you could not have one without the other. We shall see this conjunction is very important when understanding Firestone's own writing, especially when we look at her own work about racism.

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* could not have been written without her own experience within a patriarchal Jewish family and being inspired by her revulsion against antisemitism.<sup>62</sup> After the second feminist wave, Friedan went on to do a lot of work helping Jewish women gain equal rights, as she did for secular society. Friedan's book was revolutionary for women during this period, and many individuals were inspired and began forming their own groups, which were the basis of the 1960s radical and socialist feminist movements. These collectives went on to form the beginnings of the Women's Liberation movement and attracted many more Jewish

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 159.

<sup>62</sup> In the introduction to the book, she writes that 'the book came from somewhere and all my experience came together in it. See, Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (W.W. Norton, 1997), p.3. See also for a detailed account of how Friedan upbringing and her experience of antisemitism influenced her political activism, Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2000). More controversially, he argues that she concealed her radical left-wing roots through fear of McCarthyism.

women who like Friedan, were struggling to liberate themselves from their patriarchal expectations but also from racism.

Although from a neoliberal perspective, we might think the ‘personal is political’ is an individualist mantra. However, in the historical and political context of the second feminist wave it marked the revolutionary potential of subjectivity.<sup>63</sup> If the first wave of feminism was a matter of gaining the vote for women, then the second wave was a critique of social roles, and the limitation of their possibilities. As activist Carol Hanisch writes, ‘personal problems are political problems.’ In a similar way, we can understand that the transformation of feminist struggle cannot be separated from the personal backgrounds of the individuals involved. It was life experiences that drove these progressive feminists, like Firestone, towards radical and socialist feminism. Their own subjectivities were already directly political, because politics contributed to how their lives were restricted and limited within society. We see this same parallelism when acknowledging many other radical feminist groups of the second wave. For instance, the Chicago’s West Side Group, which began in 1967, was a pivotal part of the feminist movement during this period (JRF 31). The catalyst of the Chicago movement began with the voice of Shulamith Firestone, when she entered the ‘spotlight’ during a weekend convention at the National Conference for New

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<sup>63</sup> The phrase ‘the personal is political’ was a title of Carole Hanisch essay originally edited by Shulamith Firestone. It seems that it is likely Firestone chose the title, so she might have invented the famous slogan. See Carole Hanisch’s introduction to the republication of the essay, Carole Hanisch, ‘The Personal Is Political: The Woman’s Liberation Movement Classic with a New Explanatory Introduction’, *Women of the World Unite! Writings by Carole Hanisch*, (2009) <<https://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>> [accessed 9 July 2024]. For an explanation and context of the phrase, see Julia Schuster, ‘Why the Personal Remained Political: Comparing Second and Third Wave Perspectives on Everyday Feminism’, *Social Movement Studies*, 16.6 (2017), pp. 647–59.

Politics held in Chicago (JRF 34). The Group attracted a variety of members from different ethnic and political backgrounds. By 1968, as Antler writes, 'there were approximately thirty-five small radical women's group concentrated in big cities' (JRF, 36). Within the West Side Group, a so-called feminist collective known as the 'Gang of Four' were the vanguard of the women's liberation movement in Chicago. These four women; Amy Keesleman, Heather Booth, Naomi Weisstein and Vivian Rothstein all experienced a commonality of being Jewish. They shared similar backgrounds and upbringings, which connected them as feminists.

Naomi Weisstein, for example, had been brought up by her progressive and secular parents in the Jewish socialist tradition. As the daughter of her politically radical mother, Mary Weisstein, Naomi admired her drive for political justice. Yet she was also disappointed when her mother gave up her career as a concert pianist to raise her family. Naomi vowed: 'I would never get married, and I would never have kids, I was sure it ruined my mum's life' (JRF, 49). Naomi's family were Jewish and like Friedan's, also experienced a great deal of antisemitism. For this reason, she decided not to openly identify as Jewish during her involvement within the Gang of Four. Similarly, Amy Kesselman's left-wing upbringing and learning about Yiddish culture strengthened her political views and commitment to radical ideas of justice as well as equality. Heather Booth also came from a left-wing Jewish background. All three were able to absorb the Judaic values of social justice in their childhood, even if they did not explicitly emphasise their 'Jewishness'. As Weisstein described their group, 'even though our families were dissenting Jews, Jewish values permeated our lives' (JRF 52). Their Jewishness still affected them personally, and despite hiding that part of

themselves within the movement, they did not shy away from the fact it had motivated their ambition for equality and justice.

However, the fourth member of the Gang of Four, Vivian Rothstein experienced a very different Jewish upbringing. As a child of Jewish immigrants who fled Nazi Germany in the late 1930s, she had a distinctive experience of 'alienation and separateness' (JRF 45). She was also brought up in a single family by her mother, who she greatly admired and acted as a role model. Rothstein felt empowered by the strength and autonomy of her mother as well as many other Jewish women who had lost their extended family in the Shoah (Holocaust). For Rothstein, Judaism was close to her heart due to the experiences her family had faced. In fact, the legacy of the Shoah exerted a significant influence in shaping Rothstein's identity. For instance, 'she found her college friends on the political left were hostile towards German Jews for not 'fighting back' (JRF, 49). She was also 'shocked' by their lack of 'understanding' and 'sympathy' (JRF 51). For this reason, like many other Jewish women involved in the radical socialist feminist movements of the 1960s/70s, she concealed her Jewish identity. Perhaps it is the legacy of this concealment, that the Jewish origin of many key women in the second feminist wave are relatively unknown.

Regardless of these women's different upbringings, they all looked to each other within the Gang of Four for political support and guidance. As Antler describes it, 'a consciousness of oppression, the strong pull of social justice, ideas derived from Jewish values, and a sense of themselves as outsiders, provided them with the ability to critically view sexual oppression. As well as repression of the previous generation of women and drive their commitment for radical change' (JRF 51).

Together they protested for free child-care, wages for housewives, an end to racist as well as sexist education, and fought against street harassment. They may have hidden their Jewish identity within the movement, but in my opinion their Jewishness shaped their empowering ability to envision an alternative to a society where gender and sex oppression was and perhaps still is the norm. This factor was crucial in influencing the progressive early stages of the women's liberation movement.

Jewishness was just as important to the feminists in New York liberationist groups as it was in Chicago, and the bridge between them was Shulamith Firestone. After Firestone had set up some of the new movements in Chicago, she moved to New York and initiated the New York Radical Women, Redstockings and New York Radical Feminists.<sup>64</sup> Many of these groups attracted women from similar backgrounds who shared parallel experiences with Shulamith Firestone, such as Ellen Willis, Alix Kates Shulman and Susan Brownmiller. These women, like their Chicago sisters, shared the similarity of being Jewish. Firestone's Redstockings collaborator Ellen Willis, who came from a non-observant Jewish background, grew up in a solidly Jewish Bronx neighbourhood and then moved to a Catholic area. She was a 'red-diaper baby', the daughter of former communist party members, and was brought up to have a positive but critical relationship with her Judaism (JRF 89). As is evidenced by her famous essay, 'Next Year in Jerusalem', which recounts her brother's return to the Orthodox faith, and where she critically engaged with (rather

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<sup>64</sup> Debora Halbert gives a good summary of Firestone's women's liberation activism in her article, 'Shulamith Firestone: Radical Feminism and Visions of the Information Society', *Information, Communication & Society*, 7.1 (2004), pp. 115–35.



than completely rejected) her Jewish background. In her own words, 'Orthodox Judaism enshrined as divine law a male supremacist ideology, I had been struggling against, in one way or another, all my life. It was a patriarchal religion that decreed separate functions of the sexes- man to learn, administer religious law and exercise public authority: woman to sanctify the home. For Mike to accept it would be (Face it) a betrayal' (JRF, 92).<sup>65</sup> Her own commitment to a radical socialist feminism was antithetical to this kind of Judaism. She was able to understand there was a difference between identifying as a Jew, and strictly following the religious laws of the Orthodox faith. This meant Willis continued to fight against anti-Semitism, as being Jewish always meant being viewed as an 'outsider' on the margins of society. She felt that being Jewish meant she should identify with those who are similarly oppressed and rejected (JRF, 98).

For the Redstockings member Alix Kates Shulman, her relationship to Judaism was paradoxical. While believing that Jewishness had little impact on her activism, some aspects of her Jewish upbringing suggest otherwise. Her mother was president of the Federation of Jewish Women of Greater Cleveland, and Shulman attended conventions with her when she was a child (JRF, 104). Additionally, the personal experiences of antisemitism also affected her activism. Therefore, perhaps this paradox is why Shulman made a remark at the Women's Liberation and Jewish Identity Conference many years later, 'the older I get, the more I feel and celebrate my Jewish identity and aspects of Jewish culture' (JRF, 108).

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<sup>65</sup> The essay was reprinted in Ellen Willis, *The Essential Ellen Willis*, ed. by Nona Willis Aronowitz (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), pp. 132–169.

Susan Brownmiller grew up in a liberal Jewish home. Like Shulman, she did not stress her Jewishness in relation to the Women's Liberation Movement. Yet, thinking back on her seminal book on rape, *Against our Will*, she reflected that even though she did not stress her Jewish heritage in her writing, she did remark, 'I can argue that my chosen path - to fight against physical harm, specifically the terror of violence against women - had its origins in what I had learnt in Hebrew school about the pogroms and the Holocaust' (JRF, 111).<sup>66</sup>

All three women had similar, yet different experiences of being Jewish. However, they all shared experiences of marginalisation for being a woman within the Jewish faith, as well as antisemitism. Thus, they were all open to the tradition of radical politics in the history of American Judaism.<sup>67</sup>In reflection, it may be a contingent factor that so many of these radical feminists were Jewish, or perhaps their Jewishness influenced their progressive nature. I of course, would argue the latter, and believe this applies to Shulamith Firestone. As mentioned, Firestone was a fundamental figure in both the Chicago and New York women liberation groups. Firstly, she published many important essays that set out how these groups

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<sup>66</sup> Susan Brownmiller's *Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape* is one of the most important books in second wave feminism. In this book, Brownmiller argues that rape is a political rather than just an individual personal crime that concerns the intimidation of all women by men. See, Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (Simon and Schuster, 1975).

<sup>67</sup> Sheila Shulman argues that the Jewish side of radical feminism is the experience of the Other. Like women, the Jew is someone who experiences themselves as inferior in relation to a norm. As other, they are designated as something negative that must be demonised and suppressed. In this way Jewish women experienced as doubly 'Other', both as a Jew and a woman. Positively, however, in both cases, it is about re-imagining the 'Other' as different rather than as something negative in relation to a norm. I see this as the central meaning of Firestone's Judaism, even if during this period she did not refer to her Jewishness explicitly. See, Sheila Shulman, 'A Radical Feminist Perspective on Judaism', *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, 21.1 (1987), pp. 10–18.

operated. For example, essays including 'Women and the Radical Movement', 'The Jeannette Rankin Brigade: Women Power?', and 'The Women's Rights Movement in the US: A New View'. She was also the editor of what Antler described as 'the movement's unofficial newsletter', *Notes from the First Year (1968)*, *Notes from the Second Year (1970)*, and (with Anne Koedt), *Notes from the Third Year (1971)* (JRF, 74). These newsletters spread the idea of radical feminism throughout the US and helped women organise their own consciousness raising groups. As we have already seen, from the first chapter of this thesis, her book *The Dialectic of Sex*, had a huge impact on the feminist movement, and has gained much recent attention. Yet her Jewishness has almost vanished in contemporary bibliographies about her. This leaves the question of whether this factor has an essential significance to her politics and her thought.

As I have already explained, Firestone's demand for an equal and just society was the abolition of sexual social differences and for women to be liberated from the tyranny of their biology. In the newly imagined world within *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone believed the genitals you were born with should not determine your social role. This is only possible through a socialist revolution and technological liberation, that would free both women as well as men from their biological fate. In her utopian society, the norm of the patriarchal family would cease to exist. There would be other ways of being a family compared to the 'negative' patriarchal one. This nexus of biology and the family, which is what Firestone learnt from Freud, is the true source

of women's oppression.<sup>68</sup> None of this appears to correlate with Jewish values. But, when Firestone's book was published, her sister Rabbi Tirzah Firestone, recollected that 'my father publicly howled in laughter at her outrageous views, declaring her manifesto to be the joke book of the century. I don't think he ever realized just how much his own rigid, patriarchal style had served to shape his daughter's politics' (JRF, 82).<sup>69</sup> It is my opinion that Firestone's upbringing hugely impacted her ability to write in the manner she did. The oppressive nature of antisemitism, sexism within the secular society, and her experience of the rigid patriarchy of Orthodox Judaism, shaped her political demand that women can only be freed within society if the patriarchal family is abolished.

As Antler details, Orthodox Judaism, was central to Firestone's childhood. She was the eldest daughter of six and her surname was originally 'Feuerstein', which was later anglicised to 'Firestone' (JRF, 78-88). Her father converted to Orthodox Judaism and was particularly insistent that Firestone and her siblings followed the strictest version of this faith, which included the subordination of women. Firestone was forced to study at the Yavneh Teachers Seminary for women, which was affiliated to Telshe Yeshiva. She then studied at Washington University, and at the Art Institute of Chicago. Like her older brother Daniel, she escaped the confines of

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<sup>68</sup> As Susanna Paasonen argues. what is notable about *The Dialectic of Sex* is the rejection of any identification of women with nature. Rather, Firestone was arguing for a 'cybersociety' controlled by women. The liberation of the 'sexual class' would lead to the liberations of all classes. See, Susanna Paasonen, 'From Cybernation to Feminization: Firestone and Cyberfeminism', in *Further Adventures of the Dialectic of Sex: Critical Essays on Shulamith Firestone*, ed. by Mandy Merck and Stella Sandford (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2010), pp. 61–83.

<sup>69</sup> For Rabbi Tirzah Firestone's recollections of her sister and her own escape from her Orthodox Jewish background and return to Judaism, see, Tirzah Firestone, *With Roots in Heaven: One Woman's Passionate Journey into the Heart of Her Faith* (Dutton, 1998).

Orthodox Judaism, and what was expected of her. But his escape ended tragically by suicide. In interviews with Firestone's younger sister Layla, Antler confirmed that the suffocating oppression of their family life instigated Firestone's rebelliousness. (JRF, 81-82).

Firestone's upbringing within a fundamentalist Orthodox Jewish household was a direct factor in establishing her militant activism. It is unsurprising that the constraints of this hyper-patriarchal version of Judaism drove Firestone's critical views on gender-based roles and the nuclear family. The experiences of oppression she faced both within Judaism and secular society helped form an understanding of how patriarchy operates. Firestone emphasised in her work that there must be an understanding of how these systems exploit the biological difference between men and women, whether they are religious or secular. Patriarchy was not an abstract idea for Firestone. It was something that she lived, and at least in her upbringing, a patriarchy of the most extreme kind. Yet, I do not wish to claim that her life was only a negative experience. Like most of the Jewish women who were the backbone of the radical feminist movement of the 1960s/70s, the history of Judaism was also the history of radicalism. Their Judaism influenced their ability to be feminists and enabled them to help others who suffered. As Firestone's sister Layla states during her interview with Antler, "She felt she wanted to raise them up. She was seeing real

things because she had blinders pulled off. [...] She perceived suffering in a way that few people did. She would walk right into the fire” (JRF, 81. Author’s ellipsis).<sup>70</sup>

I hope I have outlined that Jewish identities in the early stages of the second feminist wave were extremely important. Especially when it underpinned not only Firestone’s activism but that of many other radical and socialist feminists from the movement. It is important to understand what shaped these progressive feminists as they made connections with others through shared experiences. Their endurance founded the start of many conscious raising groups, which began the early stages of the Women’s Liberation Movement. Understanding how these feminists were influenced by their Jewishness is a fundamental aspect of illuminating the motives behind their activism. However, there still seems to be little coverage regards to this element from some historians of feminism, who have not recognised Jewish women’s prominence within the second wave.<sup>71</sup>

Additionally, my own experience of learning about the second feminist wave in school was a cloudy description of a movement run by liberal feminists. In fact, when I started to look at these historical testimonies, it clearly emerged from the experience of many oppressed Jewish women. Despite this historical inattention, Antler’s pioneering historical research and interviews clarify that many leaders of the radical feminist groups were Jewish. (JRF, 2). It is unclear why this significant

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<sup>70</sup> After Firestone’s death in 2012, an email listserv was set up so that people could share remembrances of her. Booth asked about the importance of Judaism to Firestone’s life. Antler records many of the remarks of those who testified just how central it was (JRF, 85-86).

<sup>71</sup> As Antler herself points out, many historians of second feminist wave tend to leave out the influence Judaism had on pioneers of the movement. (JRF, 2). As I have already suggested, even with the returned interest in Firestone’s work her Jewishness is barely mentioned.

factor has been overlooked, as their identities and early experiences enabled them to become fiercer feminists. Perhaps It could be explained by the fact their Jewishness was undeclared during the early stages of the second feminist movement. Nevertheless, as Antler concludes her chapter on the testimonies of New York radical feminists, although each experienced their Jewishness in a different way, it was central to their lives. However, it was never a narrow and inward-looking religious consciousness. It was both the politics of a 'common humanity' and the openness to future possibilities for women outside of patriarchy (JRF, 114).

Their upbringing and experiences of antisemitism, loss, oppression and sexism enabled them to not just look at injustices against women, but also class, race and religion. I hope I have outlined that it is essential to appreciate Firestone's Jewishness when understanding her progressive radical activism and writing, as well as the important role Judaism had on the history of the second feminist wave in the US. Another vital reason for this recognition relating to Firestone's book is caused by the criticism she has faced due to the most controversial chapter 'Racism: The Sexism of the Family Man' (DS 95-113). As I will explore in the next chapter, Firestone's weakest argument in *The Dialectic of Sex* was in comparing racism to sexism. She has faced critical comments from many contemporary feminists, as they believed this chapter excluded black women from their own oppression.<sup>72</sup> It is

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<sup>72</sup> So, for example Elizabeth Spelman argues that by reducing racism to sexism, Firestone 'ignores the existence of Black women'. See, Elizabeth V Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Women's Press, 1990), p. 119. See also, Hortense J Spillers, *Black, White, and in Colour: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 159-64. She argues that Firestone's chapter is a prime example of the erasure of Black women's experience in American feminism through their 'objectification'.

important to respond to these criticisms if we are going to argue that Firestone remains a catalyst for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, I hope this chapter can provide reassurance that Firestone's intention was not from a place of malice. Rather, as I will argue, there is another reason for this obliteration of the experience of black women, which was her failure to follow her own dialectical method.



## Chapter Four: The Question of Race

It is only fair to provide a balanced argument regarding Firestone's work and as mentioned in my conclusion to chapter three, her ideas concerning racism have faced criticism. In the most controversial chapter of *the Dialectic of Sex*, 'Racism: The Sexism of the Family of Man', Firestone provides a solution to the injustices of racial inequality and sexism. She writes, 'I shall attempt to show that *racism is a sexual phenomenon*. Like sexism in the individual psyche, we can fully understand racism only in terms of the power hierarchies of the family' (DS 97. Emphasis in the original). Thus, Firestone once again uses the idea of the nuclear family and the Oedipus/Electra complex to demonstrate how racism is the sexism of the family. One of the fundamental criticisms of this chapter is Firestone use of third-person narration to display her objectives. Firestones writes as though she could speak for black women, and it seems very questionable to whether she is speaking for or against their experiences. In the view of feminist scholar, Hortense Spiller, the 'narrative voice' of this chapter lacks any irony or displacement. It is simply the voice of Firestone's prejudices that are centuries old.<sup>73</sup> Yet, another way of viewing this 'narrative voice' is in the style of free indirect discourse. This is where the speaker adopts the voice of the other not to replace them, but to see or imagine the world

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<sup>73</sup> Spiller writes, 'it is difficult to tell whether we are in the midst of an ironical display or being forced to reengage an all-too-familiar configuration of violently imposed meanings'. See, Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Colour: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 163.

from another's perspective. It might have been Firestone's intention to do so in this chapter. However, does this shield Firestone from Spiller's criticism? Personally, I do not think so, since it is not a matter of correcting one interpretation by another but conceiving different possibilities. Therefore, what would be the most charitable reading of this chapter, or should we even imagine such a reading?

As I will explore, there is truth to Spiller's criticism. Yet, one of the reasons why I wanted to highlight Firestone's Jewishness in my previous chapter is that we should, from our own perspective not be quick to accuse her of racism. We should also not forget that Firestone was personally involved in the civil rights movement. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to firstly, understand Firestone's argument and why she believed that racism is sexism extended. Secondly, by understanding the criticisms this chapter has faced, I hope to offer a response and alternative way to interpret her ideas.<sup>74</sup> In the latter response, we shall turn to the work of Donna Haraway as an alternative.

As we already know from my previous chapters, the essence of Firestone's argument is that the first oppression is sexual inequality and all other disparities,

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<sup>74</sup> Victoria Margree, for example, writes, 'the chapter is startlingly presumptuous in the hugely generalizing claims it makes about what black men and women feel'. See, Victoria Margree, *Neglected or Misunderstood: The Radical Feminism of Shulamith Firestone* (Zero Books, 2018), P.67. On the potential of free indirect discourse, see Augusto Ponzio, and Susan Petrilli, 'Visions of the Other and Free Indirect Speech in Artistic Discourse: Bakhtin, Pasolini, and Deleuze', in *International Handbook of Semiotics*, ed. by Peter Pericles Trifonas (Springer Netherlands, 2015), pp. 181–99. What is at issue here is whether viewing the world from the viewpoint of the other is necessarily replacing the other with your own subjectivity or is it changing a translation of your subjectivity. Whether it is possible to still appeal to a universalism through free indirect discourse is beyond the scope of this thesis but could mitigate some of the criticism of Firestone's approach.

such as social and economic, stem from the origin of sexual discrimination.<sup>75</sup> The controversy with 'Racism: The Sexism of the Family of Man' is that she tries to apply this argument to racial inequality. 'Racism', for Firestone 'is sexism extended' (DS 97) and the question I raise is whether Firestone's methodology is erasing the experience of black women. Also, it should not surprise us that, following this logic, Firestone immediately identifies 'race relations' with the 'family' (DS 98).

As we know, the power dynamics of the family is the sexual oppression of women (and children). If sexual discrimination is the origin of all social inequalities', then race must be subordinate to the family. So, we have the same Oedipal Complex that we met in the second chapter 'Daddy, Mommy, Me.' However, there is a significant variation in Firestone's argument within this chapter. For instance, the children in this model are now replaced by 'blacks'. Firestone writes, 'The white man acts as the father, and the white woman is the wife-and-mother [...]; the blacks are the children' (DS 98). It is this 'power hierarchy' that is the source for racism too. However, when analysing Firestone's argument, it is not racism that extends into sexism, but the 'power hierarchy of the family'.

As we saw previously, Firestone uses Freud to explain how power operates within the family. She uses this same schema in 'Racism: The Sexism of the Family of Man', to explain the 'psychology of the black male' (DS 98). For instance, like the

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<sup>75</sup> There is some anthropological evidence that the first form of oppression was gender inequality. See, for example Kent V Flannery, and Joyce Marcus, *The Creation of Inequality: How Our Prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery, and Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2012). Even in early egalitarian societies, it was possible that women were seen as unequal to men, and evidence of rank inequality and stratification is first seen in the replacement of men's houses with temples. Hence, gender inequality predates social inequality.

child, the black man first identifies with white females, who take the position of the mother in the Oedipus Complex. They ally with one another because both have been 'castrated' and made 'powerless' by the norm of the white heterosexual male (DS 98). In terms of the dynamic of power, their political project should be the same, and they ought to be allies. They both seek to overthrow the dominance of the white heterosexual male within society. Firestone claims that this in fact did happen, and the reason why the first feminists identified with the 'abolitionist movement'.<sup>76</sup>

Women saw the 'black man' as a possibility of uniting together to overthrow their mutual oppression by the white father. The racism of white women is their abdication to their own oppression. They identify with the white father against their own son, the 'black man'. For this reason, Firestone calls it an 'inauthentic form of racism'. As it is a failure of women to recognise the dynamics of power and that they are as equally oppressed as the 'black man' (DS 98-99).

In terms of applying the Oedipus Complex, as understood by Firestone, it is structurally impossible for the white woman to be racist. This is because the role of a racist can only be applied to the white man. Thus, if a white woman is being racist, she cannot really be a woman and must in fact be a fake man. Firestone believes this to be true as 'radical women', like herself, identify with 'black men', as she feels betrayed by white men. However, what kind of betrayal is Firestone talking about when she claims that they are involved in the same common struggle against the

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<sup>76</sup> Again, this would be an example of the criticism Firestone has faced as she makes false empirical claims about the history of feminism. As well as racism in the US. The early women's movement was mainly white and middle class and not without its own issues of racism. For details of this racism, see Angela Y Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, (Vintage Books, 1983), pp. 70-86.

normative white man? She believes this to be true as once again she uses the schema of the Oedipal Complex to flatten the real historical relation between sexism and racism.

For instance, in Freud's schema, the child must transfer his identification with the mother to the father, so the 'black man' also must reject the mother, that is the white woman. Not only does he reject his alliance with her, but he also 'lusts after her', as to revenge himself against the white man, his father (DS 100-101).<sup>77</sup> If he rejects his mother, then he must identify with his father. He becomes what his father wishes, which Firestone derogatorily labels 'Uncle Tomism' (DS 100). Alternatively, if he cannot completely internalise the white male norm, he must aggressively identify as a man against all women and refer to them as 'bitches', which Firestone calls the 'Pimp Complex' (DS 101).<sup>78</sup>

What then is the position of 'black women' in Firestone's theory? It should not surprise us that their position is even worse than the 'black man', since she is doubly alienated. She can never truly occupy the position of the white father or the child. Initially she might identify with the white Mother, and thus be in solidarity with white women. But, in her attempt to gain the affection of the white Father, she betrays white mother. Thus, Firestone argues, there are two options open for her. Firstly, she

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<sup>77</sup> As Angela Davis points out, this logic means that Firestone repeats the familiar racist trope of the 'Black rapist'. See, Angela Davis, p. 182.

<sup>78</sup> There is a third alternative, which Firestone only mentions in passing, which is that he 'could surrender(s) to homosexuality' (DS 100). Thus, the opportunities left to the 'black man', which of course in Firestone's schema is always a child, is either to become a poor copy of a white man, a homosexual or a pimp. This is an absurd crushing of possibilities and a travesty of black history, and not to mention a ridiculous view of homosexuality.

might 'imitate the white man', secondly, she might seduce him (DS 101).<sup>79</sup> Since both the 'black man' and the 'black woman' are in competition for the affection of the white Father, they are not disdained towards white women but have a 'mutual contempt' for one another.

In another form of this 'Eternal Triangle', the white man and woman, are 'Husband' and 'Wife' (DS 102). However, when Firestone applies it to analysing racism, the 'black woman' can only be the 'Other Woman' (DS 102). For the wife in this theory, she feels respect and affection, whereas for the other woman, who appears only as 'black women', she is only a 'sexual receptacle' (DS 102). Firestone seems to apply this further by suggesting that this triangle at least provides 'black women' some form of freedom, whereas white women are permanently trapped inside the prison of the family. For this reason, they are divided from one another. The white woman thinks black women are 'sluts' and black women see the white woman as 'frigid' (DS 102-103). They fail to recognise their common enemy which is 'The Man' (DS 103).

So, black men and women are reduced by Firestone's universalisation of the Oedipus Complex. This 'Eternal Triangle' is extremely problematic as she refers to them as 'Pimps' and 'Whores'. Firestone uses the word 'pimp' as she believes black men are 'degraded males' compared to 'The White Man'. She also uses the term 'whore' because black women are degraded females (DS 103). Firestone's argument is confusing at this point as though the schema she has adopted is beginning to fall under the weight of its own logic. Does she mean that black women are the 'whores'

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<sup>79</sup> Strangely and without comment by Firestone, the third possibility of homosexuality is not open to 'black women' since as she claims in a footnote that black lesbians are really men (DS 102).

of 'The Man' or the whore of the black man who is pimping her out? In any case, Firestone believes that black women have no respect for black men, since the real object of desire is for the 'The Man'. The 'sex/race system' (DS 105) explains the subjugation of black people in the US and it appears to have nothing at all to do with the history of slavery, about which Firestone does not appear to have anything to say, nor the current social and economic exploitation of black people. Rather, its true source is the white patriarchal nuclear family. 'The All-American Family', she writes, 'is predicated on the existence of the black ghetto Whorehouse' (DS 105).

What Firestone's analysis is short of, is what she accuses Eldridge Cleaver of lacking, which is the fact she has 'no conception of black women as being human in her own right' (DS 110).<sup>80</sup> This is a result of Firestone's 'Eternal Triangle' and how it has crushed all human individuality and possibility in its three corners. Much of the absurdity of Firestone's description, and lack of historical evidence or social facts, is caused by Freud's Oedipal Complex, as it trumps any material analysis. Criticisms of this chapter are entirely valid for that very reason. Even if we allow free indirect discourse to occupy the place of another speaker and thus to see the world from a different position of their own, Firestone squanders this opportunity. She makes hugely generalised claims about the experience of black women and men. She does not let them speak through her, but rather speaks in their place, and thereby erases

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<sup>80</sup> Eldridge Cleaver was a leader of the Black Panther Party, and Firestone uses quotations from his book *Soul on Ice* as evidence of her thesis that black men are pimps and black women are whores. She praises his 'honesty' (DS 112). For an important analysis of the social context of Cleaver's work, and which attempts to give a more sympathetic reading of *Soul on Ice* than many of its critics, see Douglas Taylor, 'Three Lean Cats in a Hall of Mirrors: James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, and Eldridge Cleaver on Race and Masculinity', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 52.1 (2010), pp. 70–101.

them. Firestone does this to convince the reader that the origin of all oppression is to be found in the power dynamics of the family. However, by doing so reduces racism to sexism. This makes the eradication of racism dependent on the liberation of white women, because the cause of racism is sexism.<sup>81</sup>

Clearly, as I have already pointed out, Hortense Spillers is quite right to highlight that like many radical feminists of that time, she has completely erased the voice of black women. Although Firestone tries to use the expression of 'women' throughout her book, it clearly does not include all of them.<sup>82</sup> Thus, rather than trying to connect all experiences as one, Firestone universalises an individual experience and erases any other voices. It is unfortunate that Firestone chooses this type of language as it means she completely expunges the political struggle of the Black Power Movement and compares it to a rather ridiculous theatre of the family. As Spiller outlines, it is 'one of the most disdainfully sustained readings of the U.S Black Nationalist Movement'.<sup>83</sup>

Consequently, after this analysis it is fair to suggest these criticisms have rightly undermined Firestone's intentions for this chapter. They are well-founded and more criticisms may be made. However, I want to re-evaluate this chapter by approaching Firestone's writing from a contemporary perspective. Unlike many other white

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<sup>81</sup> As Margree writes, 'Equally problematic, however, is that the claim that sexism is causative of racism establishes sexism as the more *urgent* oppression to be addressed', Margree, p 68 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>82</sup> She writes, 'Firestone addresses black women's issues in a single chapter, and everywhere else in the book, "women"—a universal and unmodified noun—does not mean them', Spillers, p. 159.

<sup>83</sup> Spillers, p. 162. As Margree also indicates by placing black women and men as children in the model of Oedipal complex, Firestone is merely repeating the age old racist infantilisation of black people since slavery. See, Margree, p. 69.



feminists of the period, Firestone did at least attempt a substantial analysis of racism and tries to illustrate how there is a link between sexism and racism. I believe firstly that Firestone's intent was to theorise that all inequality emerged from the same origins. Thus, there is more of an emphasis to defeat patriarchy as it will fix not only sexism but other injustices. Looking at her chapter from this perspective, Firestone was trying to suggest that if all oppressions emerge from the same source, then they can all be defeated by using radical and socialist methods. As Margree suggests within her research, Firestone's theory that 'sex and racism are intricately interwoven' (DS 95), was 'foreshadow(ing) later theorizations of intersectionality', despite reducing all oppressions to one single origin.<sup>84</sup>

Additionally, I would also like to suggest there are two versions of Firestone's writing. One way is to view the author herself, who is quite rightly criticised for silencing the voices of black people. The second, is that the text itself might have a meaning that goes beyond the intentions of the author. In relation to this, my argument would be that there are already resources within *The Dialectic of Sex* that could deconstruct this section of her manifesto. As I have attempted to argue within the second chapter of my thesis, the whole point of Firestone's analysis of the Oedipal triangle is to break out of it. Thus, this would open society up to other possibilities and be based on a material analysis of the dynamics of power. It is then entirely surprising that in this chapter, Firestone has a completely idealised schematic reading of the Oedipal complex. By doing this she crushes as well as obliterates any other experiences or

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<sup>84</sup> Margree, p. 69.

possibilities and turns the Oedipal Complex into a myth. I believe this is completely opposed to her conclusions in previous chapters on Freud. If the Oedipal Complex is universalised and idealised, then this shuts off any exit route, because possibilities of other types of kinship and alliances are closed from the start.

What I am suggesting is that we should read Firestone against herself. Ironically, I believe this would be truer to her own experience of the civil rights movement, which she was personally involved in during the 1960s (a fact that is sometimes left out of the criticism of this chapter).<sup>85</sup> Many of the direct political actions she was involved in, like the infamous incident at the National Convention of New Politics in Chicago in 1967, impacted her activism. She also stood at the offices of the *Ladies Home Journal* in New York during 1969 and was directly involved in the intersection of civil rights as well as feminist demands. Her involvement in other protests included demands put forward to the editor John Mack Carter, that not only white women should be appointed, but also 'black editorial workers'.<sup>86</sup> This intertwining of sexism and racism presents itself in Firestone's actual political actions and is precisely what is missing in this chapter. This is even more relevant when we read her political writings from this period. For instance, her article 'The Women's Rights Movement in

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<sup>85</sup> On the history of the civil rights movement in the US, see Bruce J Dierenfield, *The Civil Rights Movement: The Black Freedom Struggle in America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Routledge, 2021).

<sup>86</sup> For a personal recollection of the actions of Firestone at this National Convention, see Jo Freeman, 'In Memory of Shulamith Firestone', *The Feminist Movement* <<https://www.jofreeman.com/feminism/firestone.htm>> [accessed 2 August 2024]. For a description of the *Ladies Home Journal* protest and their demands, see Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp.197-208

the U.S.A.: New View', which she wrote in 1968.<sup>87</sup> She explains that the Women's Movement took 'inspiration and impetus from the Civil Rights Movement in the Sixties'. This is completely the opposite of the portrayal in this chapter, where the Civil Rights Movement is subordinated and even erased by the Women's Movement. Indeed, for Firestone civil rights are only possible after the sexual revolution, neither inspiring it nor in parallel with it. However, in her 1968 article, not only does she celebrate this parallelism, but she says that history requires this analysis and research.<sup>88</sup> Additionally, one of the forces, she later explains, that denied women the vote was racism. She does not place sexism above racism or reduce racism to sexism, rather they are parallel forces that oppress both women and black people. Moreover, in the same article she specifically refers to black women, stating that 'oppressed groups' need to 'stick together'. Thus, there is no mention of black women being the whores of white men or black men their pimps. She concludes that women must put their own interests first, but this includes black women. She goes on to say that both white and black women, should not surrender their personal struggle to some overall fight, which is usually of course led by men. But at the same time, they should proceed to make alliances with other oppressed groups.

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<sup>87</sup> This article first appeared in *Notes from the First Year*. For a reproduction of the original article, see, 'Shulamith Firestone. The Women's Rights Movement in the U.S.A. 1968', *Woman and Marxism Archive* <<https://www.marxists.org/subject/women/authors/firestone-shulamith/womens-rights-movement.htm>> [accessed 2 August 2024].

<sup>88</sup> Of course, as we have seen, the empirical facts of Firestone's reading of the Women's Movement role in Abolitionism are contested, but the point I am trying to make here is that the language and tone of Firestone's political writing is completely different from the language and tone of this chapter. She does not speak for black women but with them, and secondly, she speaks of alliances rather than the subordination of one struggle to another.

It is perhaps this language of alliance that is missing in Firestone's chapter on race. I would argue this context would better fit the actual methodology of *The Dialectic of Sex*, which requires the dismantling of the Oedipal Complex rather than the submission to the 'Eternal Triangle'. Not only does this idealisation prevent an alliance between the fight against sexism and racism. But it demands the subjugation of one fight to the other, even to the extent of denigrating the fight against racism by black people. Their political experiences are diametrically opposed to the Oedipal schema of the chapter on race, which flattens politics and merely moves within an idealised model. In Firestone's own experience, race and sexism were intertwined with one another, and one was not subordinated to the other. Firestone did draw on the lessons of the civil rights movement to advocate radical changes for sex and gender relations. Her ethos refers to political self-organisation for any oppressed group, be it women or black people.<sup>89</sup>

Her background within progressive movements of the 1960s/70s formed a strong basis for her to explore and write about matters which she believed had a strong interconnection. In some sense, at least in her activism, we could claim that Firestone believed in the process of intersectionality, which reflects the emergence of both the women's liberation and the civil rights movement within a similar time frame. Furthermore, to suggest Firestone favoured white middle class second wave

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<sup>89</sup> Finn Mackay has a more positive view of Firestone's political activism and second wave feminism. They argue that we must make a distinction between 'political autonomy' and 'separatism'. In the former, women might create women only groups but work also with other political organisations and alliances. In Firestone's, political writings and activism, she appears to be an autonomist, but not a separatist, whereas in this chapter, she seems to be both an autonomist and separatist. See, Finn Mackay *Radical Feminism: Feminist Activism in Movement* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 38-9.

feminists, who were against black women, would involve erasing her own Jewishness as I argued in chapter two. It is my belief that her political ethics and rebellious activism was a direct result of her fundamentalist, orthodox Jewish upbringing. Attending a Jewish girls seminary, raised in an Orthodox Jewish household, the patriarchy in her family, education and male-dominated leftist politics brought her to become more vocal regarding matters relating to all oppression. It is clear from this context that Firestone's political ethics were determined by her own personal struggles when facing prejudices due to her gender and ethical/religious background. These factors are important to note when considering the criticism mentioned in this chapter.

Therefore, Firestone's personal background offers an insight into her use of free indirect discourse and narrative writing techniques. They were driven from a place of her own personal prejudices and shared experiences.<sup>90</sup> Also, her use of narration arose from being with those who possibly felt and had experienced what Firestone stated in her chapter on race. Once Firestone has been contextualised, it is possible to understand her intentions for 'Racism: The Sexism of the Family of Man'. Adopting the voice of others and using free indirect discourse has attracted constructive criticism, but it does not completely devalue Firestone's morals and aims for this chapter. However, is an alternative possible?

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<sup>90</sup> For the classic oral history of Jewish women's involvement in Civil Rights Movement and the 'antiracist Jewish women's tradition', see Debra L Schultz, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York University Press, 2002).

I would like to end this chapter with the vision of Donna Haraway in her *Cyborg Manifesto*. In a certain way, we might argue that she is a continuation of Firestone's radical socialist feminism. Yet, I think she provides us with a better way to approach the interweaving of sexism and racism than Firestone does.<sup>91</sup> Both Firestone and Haraway understood the central importance of biology to the oppression of women, but their responses are very different. For Haraway, biology is something to be embraced, whereas Firestone believed we must overcome it. The conflict here, in Haraway's opinion, is both feminists have a different conception of biology and nature, as well as different notions of the relation between biology and technology. However, they do share similar conclusions to overthrowing kinship systems.

Haraway believed that feminism has always recognised that biology and nature are overdetermined words as they always been used to oppress women. But this does not mean that we should allow nature and culture to be split from another as though they were opposed to one another. This can lead feminism becoming in Haraway's words 'anti-natural in our ideology'.<sup>92</sup> One way this is expressed in Haraway's view, is in a desire to 'control our "natural bodies"' through biomedical science'. Haraway sees Firestone's work as part of this tradition and asserts that she is important to the 'feminist and social theory of liberation'. But Firestone fell into the error of reducing the social body to sex. Ultimately this would lead to the technological domination of

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<sup>91</sup> Debora Halbert describes Firestone as an 'important precursor' to Haraway. See, Debora Halbert, 'Shulamith Firestone: Radical Feminism and Visions of the Information Society', *Information, Communication & Society*, 7.1 (2004), pp. 115–35.

<sup>92</sup> For Haraway's criticism of Firestone, see, Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Routledge, 1991), pp. 8-10.

women's bodies in the future. Firestone also made the basic mistake, Haraway writes, 'of reducing social relations to natural objects, with the logical consequence of seeing technical control as the solution'.<sup>93</sup> How then does Haraway approach the question of sexism and racism differently to Firestone? We can perhaps approach this question through her most famous canonical text the *Cyborg Manifesto*.<sup>94</sup>

Haraway tells us that we should read her manifesto ironically. This is a tone which is perhaps lacking in Firestone work. Of course, when Haraway speaks of cyborgs she does not mean that we should understand them literally, as though it is an aim of feminism that we should all become integrated into machines and technology. It is also important to note the image of Haraway's cyborg is one that cuts through the nature/culture distinction. As well as the 'organic reproduction' which offers a 'world without gender' (CM 6-7). There is nothing here, I believe, that Firestone would disagree with, as their goal is the same. Like Firestone too, Haraway does not 'dream of a community on the model of the organic family' (CM 9). However, the biggest difference between the two feminists, is how Haraway rejects all dualisms and reduces the possibilities of a unity both in her methodology and in her political activism. 'My cyborg myth,' Haraway writes, is about transgressed boundaries, potent, fusions and dangerous possibilities' (CM 12-14). However, I partly believe it is possible to see this kind of approach in the early chapters of the *Dialectic of Sex* in the dialectical understanding of nature and culture, and the internal deconstruction of

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<sup>93</sup> I believe Firestone's approach is more dialectical, as I explained in chapter two, than Haraway describes here.

<sup>94</sup> For a recent reprint of this famous manifesto, see Donna Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016). Hereafter CM.

the Oedipal Complex. Yet it is absent in Firestones chapter on race, which reduces racism to an instance of the operation of sexism.

What this means for Haraway is a rejection of a 'single vision' for the sake of 'affinity' (CM 15-16). We should no longer appeal to an identity, but to an 'oppositional consciousness' (a phrase she borrows from Chela Sandoval). One that refuses to insist the basis of political activity, must be in belonging to a fixed group (CM 17). Identity only defines itself in oppositional discourse, which is the very kind of discourse that operates in Firestone's chapter on race. Women are not men; black people are not white people; black women are not black men, and so on. Such a rejection of an identity predicated on an oppositional logic means the rejection of the 'totalizing (sic) revolutionary subjects of previous Marxism and feminisms' (CM 19-20). Haraway is suspicious of categories like 'women', 'gender', 'race', 'sexuality', and 'class' when they are used to totalise and universalise experience and possibility. The shock of reading Firestone's chapter on race is not just that it lacks irony, but that her authorial voice speaks for all black women and men. As though throughout history one could totalise human experience into categories and universals like 'Pimp' and 'Whore'.

Firestone and Haraway both refer to technology in general, and biotechnology in particular as the future place in which women will have to struggle against new forms of domination. The difference between them is that Haraway requires a fundamental change in our ontologies as well as epistemologies and ultimately a rejection of 'totality' or a 'common language' (CM 52-53). Also, the grounding of politics in a 'revolutionary subject' and 'hierarchy of oppressions (CM 58). Perhaps Firestone still



hoped in such a totality and 'revolutionary subject'.<sup>95</sup> Reading Haraway informs us of the limitations of Firestone's approach. This does not mean that I am arguing that we should reject *The Dialectic of Sex*. Again, I would point to the distinction I made between the authorial intention of *The Dialectic of Sex*, and the text of the same work (a distinction that Haraway herself makes in her emphasis on writing as opposed to the subject). We do not have to read *The Dialectic of Sex* in just the way that Firestone intended it to be read. We can read against her work, or we can even read it through Haraway. A text always has more resources within it than just authorial intention. This does not mean that we should silence the criticisms Firestone's chapter on race has received. To use Haraway's expression, it is precisely due to this kind of 'revolutionary subject' that silences all other voices in its demand for a totality, that the method it adopts should be avoided by feminism. What is required is a politics of affinity rather than totality. To some degree, I argued that this is more present in Firestone's political activism, rather than in the polemical nature of *The Dialectic of Sex*. Yet, there are glimmers of an alternative vision than the extreme totalising one in the chapter on race.

In my final chapter, I will explore the commonality that Firestone and Haraway shared, which is their dream of a genderless future through biotechnology, notwithstanding Haraway's criticism of Firestone's utopianism. The purpose of my final chapter will be to analyse the vision *The Dialectic of the Sex* can still offer for

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<sup>95</sup> In terms of the narrative voice of the two manifestos it is interesting to compare them. Firestone either speaks in her own voice, or the voice of the other, whereas Haraway writes in the voice of 'no-one'. We have written through writing, rather than the author of ourselves. See, Gary A Olson, 'Writing, Literacy and Technology: Toward a Cyborg Writing', *JAC*, 16.1 (1996), pp. 1–26.

contemporary feminism, and rather than it be a historical curiosity, it remains extremely relevant for women today.

## Chapter Five: New Kinships for the 21st Century

So far in this thesis, I have argued for the continued relevance of Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*. As I have explained, this work outlines how we can uproot patriarchal institutions as well as the 'sex/gender system' through radical socialist change. Firestone's argument is that the first and original inequality, which is the source of all other oppressions, is gender and sex discrimination. The origin of this oppression is the power dynamics of the patriarchal nuclear family, a unit Firestone had experienced within her own Jewish upbringing. She believed that the nuclear family, which underpins the 'sex/gender system' must be abolished, and this can only be done through biological liberation. Since Firestone was writing in the 1970s, she did not know the future rise of biotechnology that would follow years later. Despite this fact she is an important precursor in feminist theory of its general importance. It is critical to understand the details of Firestone's argument, otherwise it is easy to fall into glib soundbites that do her a disservice. For instance, that she was a biological determinist (a surprising interpretation, since one wonders what readers made of the word 'dialectic' in the title of the book) who believed that technology could immediately lead to the liberation of women.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> As Sarah Franklin argues, Firestone's argument is that without social change, science and technology cannot achieve any radical transformation in themselves. Indeed, without a feminist revolution, these technologies would only be used to control women and reproduction, as has been the case in IVF treatments. See, Sarah Franklin, 'Revisiting Reprotech: Firestone and the Question of Technology', in *Further Adventures of the Dialectic of Sex: Critical Essays on Shulamith Firestone*, ed. by Mandy Merck and Stella Sandford (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 29–60.

Firestone's final chapter in her manifesto demanded a feminist revolution that utilises technological advancement as its driving force. Through such a radical change, Firestone believed that women will finally be freed from the tyranny of reproduction, since 'child-rearing responsibilities' will be 'diffused' across society (DS 185). She also desires that 'economic independence and self-determination' will be gained for all and not just men. This would finally allow women as well as children to be integrated into society, with children's dependence upon adults and the mother's dependence upon men rendered obsolete. Firestone was not suggesting that we somehow leave technology to rectify oppression. Yet it is very clear that we must gain direct control over our reproductive rights for sex and gender oppression to perish.

Rather than Firestone's work be a historical curiosity, my argument is not only was she ahead of her own time but perhaps even ours. Contemporary events suggest that we have not advanced as far in this technological and sexual revolution as Firestone might have hoped. In some ways, our society has regressed, as women are losing control of reproductive rights and choices. For instance, the repeal of abortion rights by the Supreme Court in the United States. Even now in the UK, women are still the primary care givers and have unequal access to employment or

pay.<sup>97</sup> Thus, it seems clear that the current feminist movement needs to be inspired again by Firestone's manifesto.

As I have explored, Firestone believed that historically women's role in reproduction has been crucial in establishing societies based upon male domination. The reason being is that the biological difference between men and women has been used to divide humanity into two unequal genders. This fundamental inequality has relentlessly been reproduced at all levels of society. To end this exploitation, women must have control over their sex to prevent the continuation of this oppression.

Firestone argues that this can only be done by obtaining a feminist revolution, which focuses upon sex, class, and cultural liberation. One mechanism of this struggle is technology, which would provide alternatives to the exploitation of biological differences, patriarchal control and capitalist rule. This would then enable the establishment of a new ecological balance with a shift in emphasis from reproduction to contraception and an alternative to the oppression of the nuclear family.

Additionally, technology (Firestone also refers to this as cybernetics) would liberate us all from the tyranny of work, including both men and women, and thus would redefine the relation of the family to the entire economy (DS 201).

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<sup>97</sup> *Roe v. Wade* was overturned by the US Supreme Court on 24<sup>th</sup> June 2022 and thus the constitutional right to abortion was revoked. For the background to this ruling, and its implications on women, especially poor and Black women, see Karine Coen-Sanchez, Basseyy Ebenso, Ieman Mona El-Mowafi, Maria Berghs, Dina Idriss-Wheeler, and Sanni Yaya, 'Repercussions of Overturning *Roe v. Wade* for Women across Systems and beyond Borders', *Reproductive Health*, 19.184 (2022). Women are also still the primary caregivers in the UK and involved in the most intense form of caregiving as well as have a higher burden. See, Rebecca E Lacey, Anne McMunn, and Elizabeth Webb, 'Informal Caregiving Patterns and Trajectories of Psychological Distress in the UK Household Longitudinal Study', *Psychological Medicine*, 49.10 (2019), pp. 1652–60.

Firestone's revolutionary demands are as follows. First, we must 'free women from the tyranny of reproductive biology' (DS 201). This is not just about 'family planning' or the 'more distant solutions' of artificial reproduction, but the ability for women to have a say in how this technology is used (DS 201-202). Once again this demonstrates that Firestone is no simple technological determinist, as it will not lead to any feminist revolution if women themselves have no control on how this technology is used.<sup>98</sup> Only if biotechnology is directly political, could it lead to Firestone's second demand, which is the 'economic independence of women and children' (DS 186). This cannot happen just because technology exists. Rather there must also be a 'socialist revolution'. In fact, without this anti-capitalist liberation, technology will simply lead to the further oppression of women through patriarchal capitalism. If we read the previous chapter of *The Dialectic of Sex*, 'The Dialectics of Cultural History', we can see that for Firestone feminism and politics must be united. There must be a social and feminist revolution combined, as you cannot have one before the other.

Firestone defines culture as the 'attempt by man to realise the conceivable in the possible' (DS 154). Yet through this very conceiving of the possible, men were also capable of dominating and shaping nature to their own ends. As Firestone is not a technological determinist, we as women must also re-imagine different kinds of culture and society. Since technology alone cannot liberate women, there must also

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<sup>98</sup> This means that reproductive technology is as much a political question as a technological one, and even more so when this technology has so far only reproduced capitalist patriarchal relations. Without a change in these relations, we will not see a difference. See, Maria Mies, "'Why Do We Need All This?'" A Call against Genetic Engineering and Reproductive Technology', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 8.6 (1985), pp. 553–60.

be a cultural revolution. This is why there is always a 'dialogue' between the scientific and the re-imagined future in *The Dialectic of Sex* (DS 156-157). It is often the case in this history of technology that the imaginary is ahead of the scientific. As Firestone suggests, science fiction pre-dates what is eventually achieved.<sup>99</sup>

These two modes, sexual difference mapped onto: women are supposedly 'aesthetic' and men 'technological'. Now if Firestone were arguing for only technological determinism, then the revolutionary demand would be that women should become more like men and renounce their aesthetic status. However, she does not make this argument. Rather, 'What we shall have,' she writes, 'in the next cultural revolution is the reintegration of the Male (Technological Mode) with the Female (Aesthetic Mode), to create an androgynous culture surpassing the highs of either cultural stream, or even the sum of their integrations' (DS 158). It is this cultural revolution, which is the context of any utopian advancement of technology and explains the next two of Firestone's demands.

The abolition of all institutions that segregate the sexes is a necessity for Firestone. 'In our new society,' she writes, 'humanity could finally revert to its natural polymorphous sexuality' (DS 215). The objective of Firestone's feminist revolution would focus on the development of artificial reproduction, the disappearance of class distinction, as well as state institutions and the breakdown of cultural categories.

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<sup>99</sup> Victoria Margree suggests that we should read Firestone's work as science fiction'. 'Firestone's revolutionary future,' she writes, 'can seem so fantastical that her book reads like science fiction'. She means this positively and not negatively as her own book is 'defence of science fiction'. See, Victoria Margree, *Neglected or Misunderstood: The Radical Feminism of Shulamith Firestone* (Zero Books, 2018), pp. 1-8.

Firestone believed a progressive feminist revolution would liberate women from the tyranny of reproduction by every means possible. Thus, advancing new reproductive technologies would allow women to seize control of human fertility and eventually lead to the overthrow of the dominant power dynamics of the heterosexual nuclear family.

It is important to note that Firestone was writing during the 1970s, when women had little control over their body or choices compared with today. For instance, the contraceptive pill only became available for unmarried women in America during 1972, two years after Firestone's publication.<sup>100</sup> Abortion was also legalised in the US after the enforcement of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, which allowed women to be granted a safe abortion under healthcare up to 24 weeks.<sup>101</sup> Yet, the fact Firestone was writing about a society where women in the future might have control over their biology, supports my theory that her work is still contemporary. Women in the US are currently experiencing a regression in their choices with the overturning of *Roe v Wade*. This is why we need the radical and socialist strategies Firestone proposes. She was a pioneer who recognised what an equal and just society for women would look like if technology was used to liberate rather than oppress women. Firestone specifically warned us that technology could act as a 'double-edged sword' by

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<sup>100</sup> On the history of the contraceptive pill, and its feminist origins, see Christian R Johnson, 'Feminism, Philanthropy and Science in the Development of The Oral Contraceptive Pill', *Pharmacy in History*, 19.2 (1977), pp. 63–78.

<sup>101</sup> On the timeline of the history of abortion in the US from 1965-1983, see Mary Ziegler, 'Timeline for Abortion History, 1965–1983', in *After Roe: The Lost History of the Abortion Debate* (Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. xxix–xxxii. Of course, recent history has substantially revised this timeline and the conclusions of this work.



offering sexual freedom while remaining controlled by capitalist patriarchy. A perfect example of this is the science behind the development of the female contraceptive pill. This is still, even though its origins belong to this history of feminism, being used to control as well as regulate woman's sexuality and maintain the nuclear patriarchal family. This further demonstrates that technology is not panacea. There must also be a social and sexual revolution alongside it, as technology itself can be exploited to reproduce the domination and oppression of women as well as children.

Firestone proposed alternative options to natural childbirth, like artificial reproduction, and believed with technological advancement it may not inherently be dehumanizing.

*The Dialectic of sex* was published on the cusp of technological and political developments that promised to transform reproduction. 'Artificial insemination and artificial anovulation,' she writes, 'are already a reality. Choice of sex of the foetus, test-tube fertilization (when capacitation of sperm within the vagina is fully understood) are just around the corner' (DS 179). Yet, Firestone was aware that advances in these technologies were being stalled because they only served the interest of women. By the 1980's there was widespread expansion of IVF treatments, egg freezing and surrogacy. However, this progression was not necessarily a liberation of women. Rather, it could be seen as extension of their exploitation. As Gena Corea argues, these technologies are primarily directed by men to control women's bodies.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup>See, Gena Corea, *The Mother Machine: Reproductive Technologies from Artificial Insemination to Artificial Wombs* (Harper & Row, 1986).

On a surface level, these alternatives could be revolutionary by allowing us to move away from the patriarchal nuclear family. Yet within the context of capitalism, they have been anything such. For instance, Margree refers to egg-freezing clinics as encouraging women to be in a situation where they are choosing to reserve their eggs because of social and economic factors. She points to corporations like Apple and Facebook, whether they admit to this or not, that encourage women to postpone having children because they may have a job which is only suited to full time workers. Moreover, she adds, this process comes at a cost, and since it is not accessible for all classes this technology just increases class divisions.<sup>103</sup> In Firestone's proposed society, she argues, people who wished to have children would be supported collectively. Additionally, Margree outlines how fertility industries are benefiting from individuals wanting children. For instance, the process of IVF is once again very expensive, and clinics have been subjected to criticism for offering patients costly add-on treatments which have little or no evidence of working.<sup>104</sup> This is similar to surrogacy, like conventual IVF treatment and egg freezing, the process can promise to liberate people from the constraints of biology. Yet, as Margree writes, 'surrogacy does not alleviate women of what is for Firestone the burden of physical reproduction, rather it *transfers* it'.<sup>105</sup> This transfer, as she underlines, is only possible because of social and economic inequality, where the surrogate mother

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<sup>103</sup> Margree. p. 117

<sup>104</sup> Margree, p. 217. The NHS website she refers to no longer exists, but there is a BBC report based on the same research. See, Deborah Cohen, "'No Solid Evidence" for IVF Add-on Success', *BBC News*, 28 November 2016, section Health <<https://www.bbc.com/news/health-38094618>> [accessed 19 August 2024]

<sup>105</sup> Margree, p.123

might be forced, because of her poverty, to bear the children for richer others.

Whatever the case may be, there is no doubt, in many examples, there is a high degree of unequal power between the parties and the increasing commodification of women's bodies.<sup>106</sup> Therefore, the problem remains a fundamental one and if these systems are not sufficiently regulated, women will remain exploited and controlled by corporate companies for their own interests. Firestone called for the intervention into biological reproduction for the interests of people, rather than profit.

My final example I want to use to portray Firestones demands of how technology and biology cannot be separated dialectically from either social or political movements, is the topic of abortion. When Firestone was writing *The Dialectic of Sex*, abortion was illegal in America until 1973. Firestone argued that access to abortion would save women's lives and tackle patriarchal control, which was controlling their sexual choices. If abortion and contraception were not accessible, there would be no possibility of gender or sex equality. Without the right to access these procedures there is considerable evidence that it only leads to unsafe and illegal abortions, which harm and even endanger the lives of women.<sup>107</sup> Yet in relation to this fundamental right that American women have fought for in last decades, it has recently been taken away. The former president Trump has been on record saying, as early as 2016, that 'There has to be some form of punishment for women,' when speaking about abortion rights in America. By making this statement, he implies

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> See, NARAL: Pro-Choice America, 'The safety of legal abortion and the hazards of illegal abortion,' 1 January (2015), <<https://reproductivefreedomforall.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/2.-The-Safety-of-Legal-Abortion-and-the-Hazards-of-Illegal-Abortion.pdf>> [accessed 20 August 2024], pp. 5-8.

women are at fault for choosing abortion.<sup>108</sup> Worse yet, on the 24th of June 2022, America's top court overturned the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling that had guaranteed women the right to an abortion up until the point of foetal viability, which is about 24 weeks. The US Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* may have abolished the national right to abortion, but the state-by-state battle for abortion rights is far from over. It is clear that these reproductive rights and technologies cannot be separated from these broader cultural and political movements. Therefore, technology, which is exploited and can be impossible to access due to social and economic inequality, is no benefit for women if they cannot control it themselves. Even though Firestone is now remembered as mainly advocating technology as a way of overcoming sexual inequality, *The Dialectic of Sex* also highlights alternative kinship systems. For instance, Firestone demands that the concept of marriage must be reconsidered in order to destroy the structural institution of the nuclear family. Firestone viewed marriage as an institution that could never be able to fulfil the needs of its participants and is fundamentally oppressive (DS 198-200). I suppose when I view marriage from my perspective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the concept is very much romanticised by society, and this would have been more the case when Firestone was writing.<sup>109</sup> The purpose of patriarchal marriage is to provide financial

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<sup>108</sup> See, 'Donald Trump: "There Has To Be Some Form Of Punishment" For Women Who Get Abortions If They Become Illegal - *CBS New York*', (2016) <<https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/donald-trump-abortion/>> [accessed 20 August 2024]

<sup>109</sup> Without sex equality love is not possible for Firestone, and Romantic love is an effect of inequality. 'Love require a mutual vulnerability that is impossible to achieve in an unequal power situation' (DS 132). If women do not have equality, then love can only be a male idealisation that no actual woman can live up to.

security and some degree of intimacy. Yet, within this institution women have had to sacrifice their own possibilities and dreams. Therefore, how can marriage be the only ideal? Firestone decides to be 'dangerously utopian' at the end of her book by suggesting that it ought to be perfectly possible for women to be able to choose a professional life outside of marriage (DS 203-204).<sup>110</sup> Equally, people might choose simply to live together rather than form a nuclear family. Both are transitional forms of escape for Firestone, but they nonetheless demonstrate the dialectic nature of her argument. There can be no technological utopianism without social transformation, and technology will not overcome sexual inequality if the social forms of life remain untouched. Social transformations might lead to completely different ways of imagining a household (or being kin as Haraway puts it). For instance, a household might be a couple or a group, which is not necessarily organised around compulsory heteronormativity. In such households, in their various forms, 'childrearing' would be 'diffused' rather than located in the Oedipal Complex (DS 207). Firestone imagines that these 'households' could replace the nuclear patriarchal family and could even be given legal status. These alternatives present a transition from the nuclear family in understanding 'parenting'. Throughout *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone demanded that parenting be displaced from its hegemonic position and considered equal in value alongside other, non-reproductive, lifestyles.<sup>111</sup> It is only with the sphere of these alternative 'households' that technology of reproduction can be liberated from

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<sup>110</sup> In quotation marks as referenced in the original

<sup>111</sup> For Firestone, as is clear in her chapter 'Down with Childhood', the traditional patriarchal family oppressed children as much as women. The liberation of women from the family is equally the liberation of the possibilities of children. 'Women and children,' she writes, 'were now in the same lousy boat. Their oppressions began to reinforce one another' (DS 81).

patriarchal control. The one follows from the other and this is the meaning of Firestone's dialectic. If we expect technology to liberate us without social change, then this will be a false promise.

Such a social change is achievable, and a report published by the ONS in the UK, for marriages in England and Wales, states that 'marriage rates for opposite-sex couples are now at the lowest level on record. There has been a gradual long-term decline since the early 1970s, with numbers falling by a third over the past 40 years.'<sup>112</sup> In many ways, Firestone was prescient about the long-term status of marriage in the West, though this cause may be an economic as well as a social reason.<sup>113</sup> However, as we have already outlined in Margree's comments, Firestone would not have foreseen just to what extent these technologies would have been subordinated for capitalist profit. She also adds that technology must be dialectically linked to political transformation otherwise 'the hegemonic position' of 'parenting', will remain the same. These technologies are sold as the reproduction of the 'ideal family', rather than imagining different kinship systems.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Kanak Ghosh, 'Marriages in England and Wales', Office for national Statistics <[https://backup.ons.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/04/Marriages-in-England-and-Wales-\(2017\).pdf](https://backup.ons.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/04/Marriages-in-England-and-Wales-(2017).pdf)>, p.2, [accessed 4 September 2024].

<sup>113</sup> This does appear to be a general trend in the England and Wales at least. See, Jon Haskey, 'Trends in Marriage and Cohabitation: The Decline in Marriage and the Changing Pattern of Living in Partnerships', *Population Trends*, 80, 1995, pp. 5–15. This also appears to be occurring in the US as well. See, Paul Taylor, *The Decline of Marriage and Rise of New Families* (Pew Research Centre, 18 November 2010).

<sup>114</sup> Margree, p. 124.

The same dialectic between technology and social change is theorised by Firestone through cybernetics.<sup>115</sup> Just as with artificial reproduction, cybernetics is a ‘double-edged sword’ (DS 182). Indeed, in the present form of society it would undoubtedly be a power of repression rather than liberation. Yet such fears should not make feminists mistrustful of this process. There is a difference, Firestone adds, between the ‘misuse’ and the ‘value’ of science. Both biotechnology and information technology cannot be avoided because they have already happened. What can be changed is our relation towards them. One of the biggest implications for socialists with the arrival of cybernetics is the devaluing of work, and in this way, it could be seen as the end of our ‘class system based on the exploitation of labour’ (DS 183).<sup>116</sup> The implication for women is that automation could lead to the feminisation of work, though this might only last for a short time.<sup>117</sup> Household work will be automated and since the value of work would decrease so would the idea of the ‘head of the household’, (usually male role). The negative effects of this would be the increase in unemployment and inequality. For this reason, just as with technology, Firestone does not have a naïve and positive viewpoint that would lead to a utopian

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<sup>115</sup> The classic work of cybernetics by Norbert Wiener is rather less convinced than Firestone that cybernetics can be applied to social issues. Please see: Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (MIT Press, 2019)

<sup>116</sup> There is much debate today of the impact, whether exaggerated or not, of artificial intelligence. Again, the issue is not the technology itself but the use it is put to. At the moment, it merely appears to be used to increase the profits of corporations by lowering the cost of labour, but the key question is the impact it will have on society as a whole. Just as with Firestone, there is no neutral relation to technology. Will it create a utopian or dystopian future? See, Spyros Makridakis ‘The Forthcoming Artificial Intelligence (AI) Revolution: Its Impact on Society and Firms’, *Futures*, 90 (2017), pp. 46–60.

<sup>117</sup> The feminisation of work through automation is not necessarily a good thing for women and certainly not when you factor in global inequality. So far digitalisation and increased gender inequality across the world. See, Agnieszka Piasna and Jan Drahokoupil, ‘Gender Inequalities in the New World of Work’, *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*, 23.3 (2017), pp. 313–32.

society. 'Cybernation,' she writes 'may aggravate the frustration that women already feel in their roles, pushing them into revolution' (DS 183-184). Technology without a social revolution is pointless. What is required, is technology, the redefinition of the economy as well as the family, united in a dialectic relation.

At the end of *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone argues that cybernetics would lead to the closure of traditional education, and this is where I would like to conclude this chapter.<sup>118</sup> In the neoliberal society in which we exist, education is seen primarily as training for work (work that might increasingly not exist), but I want to passionately argue from my own perspective a different vision of education. Why can we not be more concerned with values rather than skills? The chances of *The Dialectic of Sex*, or even the ideas contained in this work, being taught within schools is probably non-existent. Indeed, any discussion of what is perceived to be 'anti-capitalist' is banned from being taught in English schools.<sup>119</sup> How has this become acceptable in a democratic society? Is this not the very authoritarianism that Firestone warned us of? I am absolutely convinced if Firestone was writing her book today then she would be warning us of the societal dangers which continue to oppress women.<sup>120</sup> How can

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<sup>118</sup> She writes, 'as for our educational institutions: the irrelevancy of the school system practically guarantees its breakdown in the near future' (DS 211).

<sup>119</sup> Mattha Busby, 'Schools in England Told Not to Use Material from Anti-Capitalist Groups', *The Guardian*, 27 September (2020), section Education  
<<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/sep/27/uk-schools-told-not-to-use-anti-capitalist-material-in-teaching>.

<sup>120</sup> Greta Gaard argues that the climate crisis disproportionately effects poor women across the world, but they are virtual absent from the 'climate change discussions. Firestone writes about ecology in terms of population, but what she says about this issue, could equally be said of climate change. Without a feminist revolution, there can be no solution to the climate crisis, and rather than trusting in technology to solve this problem we need to imagine different ways of living, especially since the alternative is so much worse. See, Greta Gaard, 'Ecofeminism and Climate Change', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 49 (2015), pp. 20–33.



this be seen as extremist discourse? Perhaps it says something about our society today that it still is. Firestone's work should be taught in our educational system. Why should society be organised around the patriarchal nuclear family? Why should work be the only purpose and end to our existence? Are there no other ways in which we as women could live our lives? Firestone presents us with a manifesto that clearly lays out a step-by-step guide on how we can obtain a political revolution using technology both in terms of biotechnology and cyber feminism. The main theme of her work is that a feminist revolution must happen alongside a political one. Women can only overcome the 'tyranny of the biological' through technology, but we must have control over this to avoid being exploited by it. We must follow Firestone's manifesto to reevaluate the current feminist wave, otherwise our continued oppression will be our permanent future.

## Conclusion:

Shulamith Firestone, a Jewish radical socialist, should be the catalyst for the 21<sup>st</sup> century feminist movement, since she still responds to the urgency of our oppression. The issues she wrote about, such as the constraints of normative heterosexual patriarchy on women and children, and the possible transformative liberation of reproductive technology (and its limitations), are still the same we face today. Do we as women want to continue living in a society where our oppression is still our reality, or indeed where this reality seems to be getting worse and not better? Is it not time we challenge, as women, the limitations of patriarchal capitalism. We can only do so by imagining other possibilities and different futures for ourselves, which *The Dialectic of Sex* offers. Therefore, let me remind you what I considered to be the important stages of Firestones' argument as I presented them in this thesis.

The purpose of chapter one, 'Radical Socialist Feminism', was to highlight how we could achieve this fairer society. As I outlined, we need to acknowledge that liberal strategies have fallen short when advocating for women's rights. As I explored, when analysing the history of feminism in America, it is clear how each wave began with the voices of radical and socialist feminists. But would gradually turn to safer liberal alternatives. As a result, compromises were made as Firestones idea of a just society was seen as too 'extreme' and 'utopian'. Of course, I am not dismissing the accomplishments of what women achieved through the history of their struggle. However, without Firestone's demands, I cannot see how anything will fundamentally change for women.

This chapter was also important, as it provided context to Firestone's work, and how she understood herself. Additionally, the past can now be used to our vantage point and inspire us to learn from missed opportunities.

It is in the second chapter, 'Shulamith Firestone's Voice', I presented the uniqueness of her feminism, which is the theory that the roots of sexism can be found in our biology. In particular, the negative evaluation of sexual difference through the power dynamics of the patriarchal family (what Rubin calls the sex/gender system). This power function can be found through historical forms of kinship, where different roles are assigned by gender. Firestone examines this form of kinship through a metaphorical reading of Freud's Oedipus Complex, where an unequal status is imposed on the boy and the girl through the imposition of a masculine ideology. The point for Firestone, and why she is not a literal Freudian, is that we as women need to break out of this Oedipal triangle. We can only do so through a sexual revolution that overthrows the 'tyranny of the biological', which can be done by a technological and social liberation. It is important to understand the dialectical basis of this argument. Firestone is not a technological determinist, nor does she oppose nature to culture. However, it is only through controlling technology that women can escape their destiny, otherwise it will be used to further their dominion. We must also understand another way of being kin, and this was the importance of Rubin's essay 'The Traffic in Women' to my overall argument. Like Firestone, she maintains that the oppression of women stems from their biological exploitation, which she refers to as the 'sex/gender system'. Rubin also chooses to explain her theories through Freud, but also uses the work of anthropologist Levi-Strauss, found in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1955). Again, as with Firestone's use of Freud, Rubin's aim

was not simply to reproduce Levi Strauss's conclusions, but to re-read them through a feminist perspective. The reason for this was to see how patriarchy has worked as a system, where women are always trafficked, but never the traffickers. Secondly, since patriarchy is social and historical (and this perhaps like Firestone, is her biggest deviation from Levi Strauss), it therefore can be abolished.

In terms of the research on Firestone, my third chapter 'Judaism and Firestone', is perhaps the most original. As I explained, I first came across Firestone's voice, when researching for my undergraduate dissertation, which examined the influence Judaism had on pioneers of the second feminist wave. Yet, apart from very quick and fleeting references, it is this Jewish aspect of Firestone's life that has been neglected in historical literature. I believe that it is important to know this context in order to have a full and well-rounded appreciation of her work. Judaism shaped Firestone as an individual, as well as many other progressive feminists of the second wave. My primary source for this section of my thesis was Joyce Antler's *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from The Women's Liberation Movement*. It is one of the few resources that contain actual testimonies and experiences of second wave Jewish feminists. In fact, it was specifically Antler's book that introduced me to Firestone and inspired my research. I heard within their stories that their experience of being Jewish, both negatively and positively, inspired their fierceness for radical change. This was due to the fact, they directly experienced oppression through patriarchy, and racism. Perhaps this is why some were radical socialists rather than liberals and had no desire to compromise or negotiate with existing society. The other reason why I wanted to outline Firestone's Judaism is that we should not label her as a

'white middle class feminist', which she has been categorised as due to the most controversial chapter of *The Dialectic of Sex* on race.

Chapter four, 'The Question of Race', addresses her theory that racism is sexism extended. There are two reasons why I believe critical examination is needed for this concept and I was greatly inspired by Victoria Margree's book *Neglected or Misunderstood: The Radical Feminism of Shulamith Firestone*. The first reason is that by intending to speak for the other, Firestone ends up speaking through them. By doing this, she devalues the experiences of black women and men. Secondly, she stops using the Oedipus Complex as a metaphor and imposes Freud's abstract model of the family on social reality, rather than using social reality to deform the abstract model of the family. What is required instead, as Donna Haraway describes it, is a politics of alliance. As well as different political struggles not being reduced to a totality or unity. Such politics, which appears to be the opposite to Firestone's methodology in 'Racism: The Sexism of the family of Man', is exactly what Firestone did achieve in her own activism at the time. She worked within the civil rights movement and emphasised the political struggle of black women without erasing their experiences. It is the latter memory we should take as the example for our feminism for the future, which supports my theory that she remains a catalyst for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This future is only obtainable, as I described in my final chapter 'New Kinships for the 21<sup>st</sup> century', through a cultural revolution and a technological intervention. Since the 1970s when *The Dialectic of Sex* was written, there has been a huge development in biotechnology and cybernetics. Indeed, we could argue that Firestone predicted that technology could oppress women further. This does not mean she was a

technological determinist. Rather, Firestone was very aware the potential impact technology could possess if it was not controlled by women. Consequently, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century there is plenty of evidence that this is in fact what has happened.

Technology has not liberated us but only exploited us further. This is not a reason for feminists to fear technology. But should inspire us to engage with it in a deeper way. Technology, like the contraceptive pill, surrogacy or IVF, has the means to explode the patriarchal family apart, but at the same time it can be used to simply reinforce it. Additionally, technology could change the future of work. However, it has been used to impose work on all aspects of our lives. This is why there can be no technological liberation without a socialist feminist revolution. Therefore, it is clear, that Firestone's demands should be our reality if we are to imagine any alternative future that is not the repetition of the past or present. It is for this reason that we need to keep Firestone's work alive in our educational institutions, as though we are blowing on embers to keep the fire going.

When I read Firestone for the first time, she seemed more radical and relevant than any of her contemporaries past or present. I could not conceive the fact that I did not know of her name, and her history had almost been totally erased. What terrifies me currently as a young woman writing in the UK is what she contemplated as 'extremism', is our current reality. Have the political choices both here in the UK and the US, become so narrow-minded that only a conforming liberalism is now acceptable for confronting the rise of the right? Where are the radical voices, and if they do exist, would they even be allowed to speak let alone be heard? If I were to take this research further, I would like to investigate how capitalist societies have narrowed down any possibilities of socialist alternatives and have made them seem

unrealistic as well as undesirable. Perhaps the reason is due to the generalised effect of capitalism and its latest form as neoliberalism, which has caused fear amongst society highlighting that socialism is not achievable. This is why Firestone's voice is so prophetic. She had the strength to imagine another society, which was free from patriarchal oppression. If we could hear her voice, as well as others, in our universities and schools, perhaps more women would be open to her alternatives without fearing, or even ridiculing the ideas. If we approach Firestone in this way, then her work is not just a historical curiosity of a past that is behind us, but a memory of future possibilities that were extinguished. Let us light these fires again and only then, can women liberate themselves from patriarchy.

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