

Shulamith Firestone, 1945–2012

Shulamith Firestone was perhaps the most infamous radical feminist theorist of the twentieth century. As a student at the Art Institute of Chicago, she became an early activist in the women's movement, founding (with Jo Freeman) the Westside Group in 1967, in large part in response to the patronizing sexism of left politics at the time. After moving to New York she founded New York Radical Women (NYRW) and wrote short, pithy articles in which she diagnosed the reasons for what she saw as the failures of the mainstream women's rights movements ('women's rights were never won') and proposed elements for a solution: never compromise on basic principles; raise consciousness to prepare the way for the utilization of the freedoms to be won; and (the contentious one) always put women's interests first in the women's movement. After the break-up of NYRW she cofounded the Redstockings in 1969 but soon split to form the New York Radical Feminists. By the time of the publication of her major work in 1970 – *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Revolution* – she had become largely politically inactive and slipped from public view.

It is in this work, *The Dialectic of Sex*, that the ferocious intellectual energy of Firestone's youth was crystallized. She had earlier written (in 'Women and the Radical Movement') that 'rather than storming the Pentagon as women, or protest the Democratic Convention as women, we must begin to expose and eliminate the causes of our oppression as women', and *The Dialectic of Sex* is devoted to this task. The book is remembered for the radical proposal that the oppression of women could only be ended by the abolition of pregnancy, a proposal based on the easily misunderstood claim that the oppression of women and the existence of what Firestone called 'sex class' 'sprang directly from a biological reality'. From within what she called 'a materialist view of history based on sex itself', Firestone argued that the existence of an originally naturally based social inequality does not, under changed historical and social conditions, offer the slightest justification for the continuation of that inequality, and formulated a series of revolutionary demands, starting with 'The freeing of women from the tyranny of reproduction by every means possible, and the diffusion of the child-rearing role to the society as whole, men as well as women.' Anticipating, with uncanny precision, the reproductive technologies that would become a reality some forty years later, she was

also clear that technological innovation is not in itself socially revolutionary – in a reactionary environment it will be used to reactionary ends. For Firestone, the current use of reproductive technologies to ensure that more and more women continue to become pregnant and give birth would be confirmation of this.

In the reception of *The Dialectic of Sex* the headline-grabbing demand for the abolition of pregnancy overshadowed everything else, including the idea that women's oppression is coextensive with the oppression of children and what is perhaps the book's most radical theoretical claim: 'the end goal of feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just the elimination of male privilege but of the sex distinction itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally.' Today, the significance of that claim has still to be even partially digested, though recent years have seen renewed interest, and more nuanced analyses can be found in *Further Adventures of the Dialectic of Sex* (which Mandy Merck and I co-edited for Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

Undoubtedly flawed, *The Dialectic of Sex* nevertheless remains one of the great feminist texts of the twentieth century, and one with which we have not yet come to terms. Attempts to write Firestone off as a crazy woman, given her history of mental illness and the sad circumstances of what seems to have been a lonely death, shows that the sexism that she diagnosed is still hard at work today. Perhaps Laing's characterization of madness as a rational response to an insane world was never so true as in Firestone's case, and her book of short stories, *Airless Spaces*, certainly evoked the horrors of institutional psychiatry.

But when the public face of feminist writing is Naomi Wolf, we need Firestone today as much as ever. Arch mistress of the one-liner, with a great early talent for pissing everybody off, Firestone showed how frightening and threatening an angry heterosexual woman could be. The combination of theoretical ambition and wit in *The Dialectic of Sex* is as refreshing as ever. It is this that survives her.

Stella Sandford

Three of Firestone's essays from the late 1960s and *The Dialectic of Sex* are available online at www.marxists.org-subject/women/authors/firestone-shulamith/index.htm.