

## Toward a Cybernetic Communism: The Technology of the Anti-Family

*Nina Power*

In *The Dialectic of Sex* Shulamith Firestone declares her version of communism to be the most radical yet incorporating and extending the vision of hitherto existing revolutionary thought through the inclusion of two often-ignored components of human and social life—the unconscious and the family. In her own words, “[i]f there were a word more all-embracing than *revolution* we would use it.”<sup>1</sup> To this polemical end, she seeks to combine a reading of Freud with a radical critique of the nuclear family in terms of the possibilities presented by reproductive and workplace technology. Among Firestone’s ultimate demands are the freeing of women from the “tyranny” of reproduction and the equal and collective sharing of childrearing. The implication of the former change would, Firestone thinks, threaten the family in radical ways. Coupled with her second major demand, “the political autonomy, based on economic independence, of both women and children,”<sup>2</sup> this combination of economic, political, and biological freedom as a whole Firestone calls “cybernetic communism.” The complete “integration” and “sexual freedom” of all women and children would accompany and follow from the political freedom granted by the reorganization of the family structure in the wake of technological emancipation from childbirth.

Firestone’s vision of a future without natural inequality or the nuclear family is breathtaking in its scope as well as in its conviction that technology holds the key to the emancipation of women and children. However, her argument is not without serious problems, practical as well as theoretical. This essay, though greatly sympathetic

to Firestone's aims, addresses three of these problems. The first is ontological, the second temporal, and the third historical.

The first is the deepest and concerns the concept of "nature" at work throughout *The Dialectic of Sex*. Firestone envisions that technology will get rid of nature, as we have historically understood it, with particularly far-reaching implications for women. At the same time, however, she posits the existence of a supposedly "natural" pansexuality that will become unfettered once reproduction is no longer tethered to human biology. However, it is not clear that Firestone is justified in imagining that the death of one nature will lead to the emergence of a second nature—why would technology destroy one and unleash another? What sense would it make to talk of "nature" at all if technology will so radically transform our relation to its historical meaning? In this sense her project for a "cybernetic communism" takes into account both productive and reproductive aspects of human life and labor. Although Firestone's acknowledgment that the personal (the unconscious sexual drives) is not only political but also more fundamental than the political—and indeed structurally prior to any political scenario (democratic, repressive, or revolutionary) makes for a serious and unique challenge and possible contribution to historical materialism, her use of the terminology of the natural/non-natural, in particular, ultimately poses more questions than answers.

The second problem concerns the *sequence* of Firestone's projected revolution. At points she writes as if scientific progress will be the catalyst for social change and at others as if cultural shifts must predate the progressive implementation of scientific developments. The first position leaves her open to accusations of technological determinism, the second to free-floating utopianism. How can she mediate between the two poles?

My final criticism of Firestone concerns the practical developments that have taken place in the field of reproductive technology since the publication of *The Dialectic of Sex*. Although many of her predictions in regard to technological developments have in fact come to pass in the years since her work appeared, it is starkly obvious that the socio-sexual changes that she suggested would ensue as a result of these changes have not, even if we take the one side of her argument that cultural change must precede technological change. Rather than Firestone's pansexual utopia, these developments have in fact inaugurated the increasing privatization of reproduction within the family, with collective approaches to family life only appearing in reactive, religious forms (the evangelical Christian attack on birth control and

abortion, for example). Ultimately there are specific reasons why Firestone's revolution did not happen; nevertheless she makes urgent and important claims that still bear upon the future of feminism and the political lives of women.

### THE END OF NATURE?

Firestone's approach to the question of sex is refreshingly blunt. Sex difference is real. Men and women exist, and possess asymmetrical physical capacities that have historically made existence for women extremely difficult and frequently unpleasant or even lethal. Firestone's particular strand of materialism is therefore not only historical but also profoundly biological, thus material in an older, more classically philosophical sense. We can compare Firestone's materialism to the explicitly "vulgar" materialism of La Mettrie for whom "[t]he human body is a machine which winds its own springs. It is the living image of perpetual movement."<sup>3</sup> Firestone accepts that culture and history have played important roles in shaping the way we conceive of men, women, (and children) and their differing roles but that underlying all these interpretations are some basic anatomical continuities—unchangeable until now. It is not therefore economic class that underlies oppression but biological and physical characteristics. As she puts it: "Nature produced the fundamental inequality."<sup>4</sup> This claim about the reality of sex difference and its natural consequences—there are women and there are men and women suffer precisely because of their womanness—puts her at odds with the majority of feminism, past and present. She is interested neither in more subtle analyses of the cultural meaning of sex and gender, nor in reclaiming a positive essence of female physicality (celebrating birth, for example, or the specificities of female sexual experience). As Stella Sandford puts it: "On the main points that constitute her distinctive contribution to feminist theory she finds herself in opposition to the mainstream of US radical feminism."<sup>5</sup>

Firestone is unusual in taking the premise so often used by conservative thinkers of one stripe or another—that women and men are recognizably and naturally different both biologically and culturally—but uses this as the background for her projected revolution, by accepting that *thus far* history has not yet managed to discover a way out of this predicament. For Firestone, it is not the case that anatomy is destiny, but rather that *it has been*, in fact that for the whole of human history this has been true, but need not be any longer. Firestone can, without too much difficulty, be seen as a thinker

belonging to a certain strand of Enlightenment thinking, not the liberal branch that would advocate slow and steady social reform and change within existing institutions, but the kind of thinking that wholeheartedly advocates the integration of technology into human life and the revolutionary potential for its transformative possibilities. She acknowledges that at present technology can and has been used for disastrous and oppressive ends (forcing women into sterilization programs, permitting doctors control over women's reproductive capacity, etc.), but that this is not an inherent feature of technology as such. Just as her "vulgar" materialism puts her closer to La Mettrie than to Marx, her pro-technological approach puts her closer to an Enlightenment thinker such as Voltaire, with his celebration of science, than to many of her 1970s theoretical peers, the latter of whom are more concerned with the horrific legacy of the gas chambers or the impact of human beings on their environment than with a bright new future of machines. Indeed, Firestone's attitude toward the environment and any negative human impact is arguably rather cavalier. It is probably too late, she says, to redress natural balances. All we can hope for is to establish an artificial (manmade) balance "in place of the natural one, thus also realizing the original goal of empirical science: human mastery of matter."<sup>6</sup>

Her "technofeminism," then, is dissimilar to the technofeminisms of others who later actually coined the word, as it is predicated on the assumption that it is both possible and desirable to totally dominate and overcome nature, human and beyond, rather than on the celebration of the liberatory potential of forming other identities in cyberspace, for example. As Judy Wajcman puts it in *Technofeminism* "Cyberfeminists have coffee in cyber-cafes, surf the Internet, and imagine a gender-free future in cyberspace."<sup>7</sup> If anything, Firestone puts the techno-theorizing of the late twentieth century into sharp relief, revealing the shamefully apolitical and escapist nature of such projects, which cannot help but exclude the majority of the world's women and lack any serious claim about the link between technology and emancipation. Rather than do away with sexual difference in the playground of a virtual world, Firestone reminds us through her vulgar materialism that to even have a choice about contraception is perhaps a more pressing need for real, nonvirtual women than the opportunity to perform ambiguity in cyberspace.

Though many criticize Firestone for her overly optimistic conception of technology, it is on the more fundamental question of her definition of nature that her argument about technology flounders. Although Firestone starts with the premise that there *is* a natural sex

difference, before moving on to show how technology can put an end to the historical ignominy of biological asymmetry, another kind of unexamined nature—the presupposition of a “natural” polymorphous perversity that would include all kinds of physical behavior, from the sexualized to the merely affectionate—suddenly takes the place of the older, unwanted nature. In many ways, Firestone does not take her own argument about the transformative capacities of technology seriously enough, resorting to the uncritical positing of an ontological wellspring of physicality that somehow underlies current social, cultural, and political organization. What if the very mechanism that allows for the separation of physical interaction from reproduction is the same mechanism that kills the desire to engage in such behavior? In the case of the contraceptive pill, researchers at Boston University Medical College found that women who take the pill regularly have much lower levels of the hormone that drives sexual desire.<sup>8</sup> Although this example alone is not enough to “prove” that reproductive technology does not release a wellspring of desire, but rather suppresses it, it does indicate an unexamined aspect of Firestone’s theory of natural sexuality.

Given her initial suspicion of “nature,” where does her faith in a *second* nature come from—one which, unlike the usual concept of “second nature,” is both primordial *and* can only be attained through technological change? The clue lies in her claim that: “Women and love are underpinnings. Examine them and you threaten the very structure of culture.”<sup>9</sup> Firestone’s second nature depends upon an ontological conception of love as that which will exist after or beyond technology. In this respect, Firestone can be usefully compared to the Young Hegelians and their insistence on the ahistorical and generic function of love. Ludwig Feuerbach, for example, states: “No living being is destined for happiness; but all are destined for life precisely because they live. Love, however, is the life of life.”<sup>10</sup> Love for Feuerbach is an ontological feature of human beings, that which underlies the alienations of religion, philosophy, and atomized social life. For Firestone too, although it is technology rather than humanism that permits the revelation of love, love is the “underpinning” that unites sexual and nonsexual modes of behavior together in a continuous whole. But is there any such thing as a natural love of the species for itself? It may be for Firestone that “Pregnancy is the temporary deformation of the individual for the sake of the species,”<sup>11</sup> but why is love somehow more natural than pregnancy, for example? Why is social-affection more “true” than the affection a mother feels for her own child?

The point here is not to deny the role and importance of love in human relationships and the need and desire for physical contact, but to raise a note of skepticism that reproductive technology would somehow be capable of unlocking some underlying immanently normative, wholly positive, humanist physicality. After all, according to her own argument, what would be left of the “natural” such that one could base a futural politics upon it? Firestone’s Reichianism betrays her more radical commitment to the mechanization of desire. In the end, she is too simplistically caught up in the opposition between a “good” sexuality (open, generous, indifferent to its object, anti-familial) and a “bad” sexuality (depressing, routine, domesticated). Firestone is ultimately less straightforwardly conceived of as a Marxist than as a radical feminist follower of Wilhelm Reich. Reich of course certainly considered himself a Marxist of sorts, but both he and Firestone share the fundamental assumption that sex (in both senses) precedes class. As Reich puts it, “[The] process of sexual selection is older than the ‘class conflict’ between man and woman and is the cause of this antagonism.”<sup>12</sup> In Firestone’s words, there is “a level of reality that does not stem directly from economics.”<sup>13</sup> Firestone calls this expanded historical materialism “sex class,” in much the same way that Reich talked about the “social sex-economy.” When Firestone speaks of developing a materialist view of history based on sex itself,” we should hear the word “sex” in both senses, as in the biological differentiation of the human animal and the physical behavior that would fall under the category of the sexual (although Firestone aims to shift the implications of this category to include all forms of physical affection across all ages and all social relations). By getting rid of the family and its universal “malpsychology,” “we would in effect be doing away with the repressions that mould sexuality into specific formations.”<sup>14</sup> Again, “If we dismantle the family, the subjection of ‘pleasure’ to ‘reality,’ i.e., sexual repression, has lost its function; and is no longer necessary.”<sup>15</sup>

The liberating potentiality of reproductive technology in the forty years since Firestone wrote her short book has, if anything, only proved the tenacity of the nuclear family and the ever-widening gulf between public and private life. It may be that Firestone’s time has not yet come, in which case we may need to propose technological innovations yet more radical than even she imagined. But the implications of technology for sexual and social life seem nowhere near as straightforward as she imagines, either in the present or in the future. How does technology relate to wider cultural shifts? Does one necessitate the other? Is it a “cybernetic communism” or a “communistic cybernetics?”

## THE TEMPORALITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Although Firestone is unusual among feminists for being so unguardedly pro-technology, there is a very real, practical sense in which she has a point—perhaps the Enlightenment, understood as the rational application of technology and science in the name of improving the lives of individuals, bears greater emancipatory potential for the concrete lives of women than of men. Firestone broaches and celebrates the teleological drive of technology head on: “Empiricism is only the means, a quicker and more effective technique, for achieving technology’s ultimate cultural goal: the building of the ideal in the real world.”<sup>16</sup> But which comes first, technology or cultural change? This section addresses the ambiguity of temporality in Firestone’s vision.

Firestone stands out among both feminists and twentieth-century intellectuals in this unconstrained love of the machine, which she alternatively describes as cybernetics—a kind of “acceleration” of scientific understanding of human functions.<sup>17</sup> Indeed there is something futurist about her commitment to the transparencies and totalizations of science, which makes her an extremely rare kind of feminist indeed. Futurism in its early-twentieth-century formation was explicitly misogynistic, consigning women and their wombs to a dead era to be replaced by speed, transport, war, and chaos. As Marinetti puts it in the 1909 Futurist Manifesto: “We want to glorify war—the only cure for the world—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas which kill, and contempt for woman.” There are further parallels. In her all too brief discussion of art, Firestone shares the same disdain for the current organization of culture as the Futurists did, which she calls “the death of aesthetic humanism.”<sup>18</sup> For Marinetti too, museums were to be compared only to cemeteries. However, the *telos* of Firestone’s vision is not war, as it was for many of the Futurists, but a holistic, expanded notion of culture itself: “The merging of the aesthetic with the technological culture is the precondition of a cultural revolution.”<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that this is a common motif in Firestone’s work—the attempt to remodel a concept in terms of expanding and thus destroying its original narrower meaning. The revolution will change what we mean by sexuality, culture, and nature. Fusing the aesthetic with the technological (which Firestone somewhat bluntly describes as female and male modes) will create an “androgynous culture” that will instigate a kind of “matter-antimatter explosion” canceling out culture altogether: “The *id* can live free.”<sup>20</sup> But would this expanded, holistic notion of culture in which the *id* can truly express itself in art

and physicality be remotely interesting? Although Firestone begins in many ways from Freud's insights into the nuclear family, she refuses the argument that repression plays a necessary role in the creation of culture, looking forward instead to a future in which free desire will express itself in every way.

Firestone's futurism can productively be compared to the ideas expressed by two other thinkers—both concerned with technology, though in quite different ways—Herbert Marcuse and Leon Trotsky. For Marcuse, writing in *One-Dimensional Man*, the lure of futurism is an illusion: “In the construction of the technological reality, there is no such thing as a purely rational scientific order; the process of technological rationality is a political process.”<sup>21</sup> Clearly Firestone sees technology as being put to use for political ends, but does she have a politics of technology itself? For Marcuse “When technics becomes the universal form of material production, it circumscribes an entire culture; it projects a historical totality, a ‘world.’”<sup>22</sup> It is not merely that technology has the power to harness and control nature but that there is nothing natural about the course of technological development, which should be borne in mind at all times, if one is to remain critical. For Marcuse technology has multiple implications with regard to nature and the individuals that fall under its worldview: “Nature, scientifically comprehended and mastered, reappears in the technical apparatus of production and destruction which sustains and improves the life of the individuals while subordinating them to the apparatus.”<sup>23</sup> Although technology may improve the lives of those who use it, as Firestone, quite correctly, certainly believes, it may not always remain in the service of the ideals to which we are committed. It may not eradicate sexism in the way Firestone would desire, as William T. Blackstone points out: “Oppression... could exist even under conditions in which some biological differences are minimized (strength, for example) or in which certain biological functions (childbearing) are not performed by women but by machines.”<sup>24</sup>

But it is clear that overall Firestone has no truck with a certain strand of critical thought that would be suspicious of unmediated notions of progress and an unfettered celebration of technology. However, her implicit point about a gendered relationship to technology is of some importance. There is absolutely no doubt that access to contraception, safe abortions, and supervised childbirth drastically improves not only the quality of life of women, but also their chances of survival, full stop. But do these innovations give hints of a feminist revolution to come or can they in fact be perfectly well accommodated by the existing capitalist order?

Apart from the relatively minor cultural impact (at least according to Firestone's standards) that technological innovation has had in the forty years since she wrote her book (further discussed in section three), there is a confusion in *The Dialectic of Sex* about the *order* of her revolution-beyond-revolution. Is it that technology will necessarily destroy existing institutions such as class and the family? Or that a cultural takeover of technology is required before science can be steered in the right, feminist direction? Does Firestone fall prey to a kind of technological inevitabilism that leaves her open to criticisms of historical determinism? At times Firestone does indeed seem to imply that there is something necessarily prior about technological development: "Empirical science is to culture what the shift to patriarchy was to the sex dialectic, and what the bourgeois period is to the Marxian dialectic—a latter-day stage prior to revolution."<sup>25</sup> At other points her claim seems closer to a proposal to change the culture of the family before technology can release a true "human condition": "our final step must be the elimination of the very conditions of femininity and childhood themselves that are now conducive to the alliance of the oppressed, clearing the way for a fully human condition."<sup>26</sup> And: "until the decision not to have children or to have them by artificial means is as legitimate as traditional child-bearing, women are as good as forced into their female roles."<sup>27</sup>

The problem here is twofold. The first is the difficulty of bringing to the forefront something that is supposedly hidden. As Firestone says: "Sex class is so deep as to be invisible."<sup>28</sup> Like Freud's "unconscious," which is revealed only in moments of breakdown and lapses of speech, the unspoken acceptance of the nuclear family must be revealed in all its contradictions. But surely technology will need a hand in doing this? Although Firestone is explicit about her desire to fuse this broader historical materialism with Freud, she argues that analysis is a weak solution to the problems that Freud identifies: "Freudianism was the perfect foil for feminism, because, though it struck the same nerve, it had a safety catch that feminism didn't—it never questioned the given reality."<sup>29</sup> But how would technology itself "question the given reality" without help from consciousness-raising (to use an old-fashioned term) on the part of those who could see the progressive potential of that technology? This, as Marcuse saw it, is a political problem. Yes it is true that women are at the continual mercy of their biology, true that human infants take a long time to grow up, and true that mother/child interdependency shapes the psychology of both mothers and their children; it is true that "[t]he biological family is the vinculum through which the psychology of power

can always be smuggled.”<sup>30</sup> We can agree with Firestone and Engels that reproductive difference between the sexes is the first division of labor, or as Engels puts it: “According to the materialistic conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life.”<sup>31</sup> Yet, seizing the means of reproduction is not merely a historical inevitability, nor something that the technology itself will invoke. Firestone misses a crucial dimension of human life (and feminist history), namely politics. Without political organization, any response to technology will either be overly conditioned by that technology itself or will bear no relation to the aims supposedly at stake. This is the point that Sandford makes in “Sexmat Revisited”:

But with no distinction between a political and a biological concept of sex, Firestone’s thoroughgoing and often pitiless account of how sex matters in every aspect of social and economic life, its structural importance, falls, disastrously—and, it must be said, sometimes comically—into the grounding thesis of the inherent inequality of biological sex difference and its primary explanatory importance and the proposals for the abolition of biological reproduction. The contradiction between the assertion of the “biological reality” of sex division and its eventual disappearance is in fact the dialectic of *The Dialectic of Sex*, the exposure of the error of its starting point.<sup>32</sup>

Politics mediates nature and technology, and has to if progressive or revolutionary projects are to be advanced. Without a conception of politics or strategy, Firestone oscillates between grandiose technofuturism and baseless speculation. The scope of her project can usefully be compared to Trotsky’s claims at the end of *Literature and Revolution* in which he states:

The care for food and education, which lies like a millstone on the present-day family, will be removed, and will become the subject of social initiative and of an endless collective creativeness. Woman will at last free herself from her semi-servile condition. Side by side with technique, education, in the broad sense of the psycho-physical molding of new generations, will take its place as the crown of social thinking. . . . Man, who will learn how to move rivers and mountains, how to build peoples’ palaces on the peaks of Mont Blanc and at the bottom of the Atlantic, will not only be able to add to his own life richness, brilliancy and intensity, but also a dynamic quality of the highest degree. The shell of life will hardly have time to form before it will burst open again under the pressure of new technical and cultural inventions and achievements. Life in the future will not be monotonous.

Trotsky's new man, and the women liberated from "semi-servility," herald a time in which human creativity and technological dynamism fuse in the name of a "non-monotonous future" (but again the worry about Firestone's unleashed id comes back—what if total lack of repression creates nothing new?). But Trotsky too leaves open the question of whether these transformations take place in a certain order. At one point he suggests that:

The human species, the coagulated *Homo sapiens*, will once more enter into a state of radical transformation, and, in his own hands, will become an object of the most complicated methods of artificial selection and psycho-physical training. This is entirely in accord with evolution.

If this transformation is "entirely" in accord with evolution, then what makes it such a radical break? And what does evolution mean once it has been taken into mankind's own hands? Surely any notion of nature that once was operative is now completely redundant? Although Trotsky and Firestone are very close in many respects—the emphasis on technology, the total reform of culture—they differ on the priority given to economics and sex. For Trotsky:

Man first drove the dark elements out of industry and ideology, by displacing barbarian routine by scientific technique, and religion by science. Afterwards he drove the unconscious out of politics, by overthrowing monarchy and class with democracy and rationalist parliamentarianism and then with the clear and open Soviet dictatorship. The blind elements have settled most heavily in economic relations, but man is driving them out from there also, by means of the Socialist organization of economic life. This makes it possible to reconstruct fundamentally the traditional family life.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, economic reform precedes changes to traditional family life, but for Firestone, as we have seen, it is "sex class" that underlies economic disparity. Indeed, all socialist revolutions are doomed to failure, she argues, unless they take the family into account. The family structure thus underlies economic oppression, is indeed its source. Sex class precedes economic class. In a specific instance that relates very directly to Trotsky's arguments above, Firestone states "the failure of the Russian Revolution to achieve the classless society is traceable to its half-hearted attempts to eliminate the family and sexual repression."<sup>34</sup> But is Firestone too quick to dismiss the Soviet project? Soviet theorists foresaw relations based on

“free union” or “free love,” much as Firestone does (although Goldman notes that “Lenin...strongly disliked these terms because of their association with bourgeois promiscuity”<sup>35</sup>). There were also important tensions in the formulation of the Soviet question on sex and family matters. Alexandra Kollontai, who founded the Women’s Department in the Soviet administration, was more radical than Lenin in her far-reaching ambitions for the transformations of sex relations and is in many ways a kind of precursor to Firestone. Kollontai famously argued that “In nature there is neither morality nor immorality...the satisfaction of healthy and natural instinct only ceases to be normal when it transcends the limits established by hygiene.”<sup>36</sup> Kollontai recognized that free love alone would not solve the problems of sexual inequality unless total reform of the family was carried out.

The Soviet Union under Lenin, despite its marriage, divorce, and childcare reforms, did not yet have the technology to make clear the link between reform at work (the inclusion of women in the workforce) and the total reform of family life as Firestone does. The Soviet attempt to transform the nuclear family was stymied by a number of factors: war, poverty, lack of education, and as yet undeveloped technology. This meant that any utopian ambitions along the lines of Firestone’s unobstructed pansexuality were difficult to achieve and often counterproductive. As Goldman puts it: “The idea of ‘free union’ had tragic and unforeseen consequences for women as long as they were unable to support themselves and their children.”<sup>37</sup>

Yet the question of the *order* of the feminist revolution rears its head once more when Firestone is contrasted with the actual historical process of reform in the Soviet Union after the revolution. If the Bolsheviks strongly emphasized waged labor as a prerequisite for women’s liberation it was because they felt that economic reform would produce social reform. The Soviets based female emancipation on the inclusion of women in the labor force: “women would only be free if they entered the world of wage labor.”<sup>38</sup> And indeed women’s inclusion into the workforce has had massive effects on the way we regard their purpose, capacities and social-reproductive role. But Soviet reforms indicate another potential criticism of Firestone’s techno-futurism, namely that what might need to take place before the transformation of technology in a progressive vein is the transformation of social relations, and not the other way around. When the Soviet Women’s Congress of 1927 called for a system of communal dining because women were still not free from the “family burden” it was clear that work alone was not changing patterns of family behavior.

While the Soviets proposed the socialization of housework and child-care, Firestone leaves almost everything to the machine, which will fix housework, reproduction, and the working day. The Soviets needed to make strategic decisions about everyday oppressions, with the state playing the role that Firestone accords to technology: "Society will feed, bring up, and educate the child."<sup>39</sup> But society is comprised of its members and of the relations between them.

In the end, then, technology may well be secondary with regard to the social relations without which technology has no inherent transformative capacity. But how has technology actual played out in the lives of women at home and in the workplace in the years since Firestone wrote her polemic?

### THE PRIVATIZATION OF THE PRESENT

Given the 40-year gap between *The Dialectic of Sex* and today, and given Firestone's belief in the progress of technology, are there hints of the kinds of freedoms afforded by developments in contraception, for example? Of course, it is not simply the case for Firestone that technological developments will straightforwardly lead to the dissolution of family structures or the destruction of class relations, as control of the means of (re)production is critical in terms of its future development, yet there is much optimism in her project, as if all of these transformations were just around the corner. Cybernetics ("the full takeover by machines of increasingly complex functions"<sup>40</sup>) and the control of fertility will "so radically redefine our relationship to production and reproduction" as to require "the destruction at once of the class system as well as the family."<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, if Firestone is correct in the details about the far-reaching cultural changes that supposedly accompany technological innovation in the realm of the biological (materially speaking, widespread use of contraception, in-vitro fertilization (IVF), test-tube technology, etc., all of which have become much more widespread since the publication of *The Dialectic of Sex* in 1970) then presumably hints of her progressive vision would have begun to appear in the realm of the domestic, and subtle shifts in the perception of the nuclear family would be underway. But it is not at all clear that this is the case.

In the final section of the book, "The Ultimate Revolution: Demands and Speculations," Firestone again points to the historical specificity of her call to arms, as if *The Dialectic of Sex* could only have been written at the point at which the total overcoming of nature could be expressed: "the biological family unit has always oppressed women

and children, but now, for the first time in history, technology has created real preconditions for overthrowing these oppressive ‘natural’ conditions.”<sup>42</sup> However, it is one thing to say that a certain kind of analysis is possible at a certain moment in history, and quite another to think that certain *practical* consequences follow from the possibility of being able to make this argument. On this point it is interesting to compare Firestone to other more recent attempts to promulgate the idea that it is only now that a certain kind of labor has become prevalent that we can make general claims about human nature. Unlike Firestone, however, whose analysis is resolutely material—even down to her explicit portrayal of pregnancy (as her friend tells her, “like shitting a pumpkin”)—for thinkers such as Paulo Virno it is the *immateriality* of contemporary life that reveals certain possibilities for political change. Virno’s wager is the following—that it is only now, when the differential traits of the species (that is, that which separates us from other animals; namely, verbal thought, the transindividual character of the mind, neoteny, the lack of specialized instincts) are the “raw material” of capitalist organization that we can return again to the question of a politics of human nature. Thus the problem of the “natural” emerges contingently, that is, at a certain historical moment, yet as if for the first time.<sup>43</sup> Virno reminds us of Marx’s claim from the “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” of 1844: “It can be seen how the history of industry and the objective existence of industry as it has developed is the open book of the essential powers of man, man’s psychology is present in tangible form.”<sup>44</sup> But the difficulty here for Virno is identifying the cracks in the edifice—what separates the exploitation of human capacities under “biolinguistic capitalism” from the resistance to such forms of exploitation? Firestone is faced with a similar problem, as it is technological innovation that will ultimately reveal a supposedly natural, underlying sexuality. Firestone’s initial commitment to sexual difference does however suggest an interesting critique of contemporary theories of immaterial labor. While many have noted the “feminized” nature of contemporary work, there is often the absence of a discussion of what to do with the supposedly revenant philosophical anthropology when the sexed nature of capacity and its transformation is taken into account. If philosophical anthropology reveals not immaterial capacities (language skills) but the kinds of capacities that Firestone identifies—the natural, unfair distribution of biological capacities—then what effect does this have on any theory of work? Capitalism cannot deal adequately with pregnancy, but neither perhaps can its autonomist alternatives. Firestone’s brutal materialism can be usefully resurrected in the age of immaterialism.

For Virno, immaterial labor indicates the basic elements of human cognitive capacity in the present. For Firestone, this revelation is a little way off but eminently thinkable, for example when she says of reproduction: “Soon we shall have a complete understanding of the entire reproductive process in all its complexity, including the subtle dynamics of hormones and their full effects on the nervous system.”<sup>45</sup> Firestone’s quest for scientific transparency is in keeping with her turbo-Enlightenment approach to human development, but the implications of technology on labor, and the treatment of men and women by a certain technicized work should be noted. Firestone, however, radically overestimates the impact of machines on the need to work in the future: “Machines . . . could act as the perfect equaliser, obliterating the class system based on exploitation of labor.”<sup>46</sup> Possibly they could, but it is manifestly clear that the cybernation of work has not led to emancipation for their operatives. The precariousness of and lack of specialized skills required for most informational jobs (beyond learning how to use a computer or a telephone) have meant that women in particular are at risk of becoming dispensable. This chimes with the recent claim that in the economic downturn in 2008–9 women were losing jobs twice as fast as men.<sup>47</sup> Agency work in the European Union (EU), often advertised as a “flexible” option for women, is explicitly precarious (no more than 13 weeks at any one place otherwise the company would have pay for a week’s holiday) and means that no one working for the agency has any idea about who their colleagues are (how many people are on the agency’s books? Where do they work?)<sup>48</sup> Firestone recognizes that the alienation of work has its own effects, for example, when she discusses how cybernation “aggravates the frustration that women already feel in their roles, pushing them into revolution.”<sup>49</sup> But this is to drastically underestimate the prolonged and increased alienation that technology has in fact brought to the workplace.

Though Firestone could not have predicted that the technological revolution is all too compatible with the continuation and extension of the status quo (although she does, it should be noted, foresee the internet: “why store facts in one’s head when computer banks could supply more comprehensive information instantaneously?”<sup>50</sup>), she perhaps could have recognized that work would have had a rather more predatory relationship to the machine than any revolution, feminist or otherwise. Firestone misses the all-pervasive relationship of work to social life in general, seeing perhaps the inclusion of women in the workforce as a sign that collective working life and the alienation of the workplace might lead to broader cultural shifts, rather

than yet more atomization. When theorists of immaterial labor talk about the bleeding of the working day into time previously regarded as private (being called at home, answering emails in the evenings to give two concrete examples), this observation should be accompanied by an analysis of the impact of these machines on the relationship between workers and their bodies. The “aggravation” that Firestone predicted never transpired. Instead we have what we might call a private mechanization and a public mechanization, an unstable and unhappy relationship between the technologies available to the self and the technologies of the workplace. If anything the two are even further apart, that is to say, less on the cusp of revealing their revolutionary potential, than in Firestone’s day.

Is the political alienation of workers of a greater order than the alienation of women’s capacity to reproduce? Or does one underlie the other? Eleanor Burke Leacock notes that “In some ways it is the ultimate alienation in our society that the ability to give birth has been transformed into a liability.”<sup>51</sup> But why has it been transformed into a liability? The technologies that Firestone projected—IVF, wide access to contraception, advice, and abortion, test-tube technology—are here, at least in richer parts of the world. And yet there is no collective understanding of or concern for such technologies. Depressingly enough, the politicization of birth control and any organized response to it comes from the side of reaction (the Evangelical pro-life movements). The atomization of the female worker and her inclusion into the workforce is predicated on the idea that her reproductive life is her concern...until such time as it impacts upon her job, of course. Capitalism, particularly in its neo-liberal formation, has not dealt with reproduction, which it both needs in the long run (more workers) but abhors in the short term (the expense of maternity leave, and so on). Indeed, if contemporary capitalism had a say in it, it would probably wish that the dystopian reading of Firestone’s hope for total mechanization had come true, and that babies could be cheaply produced by machines and cared for by robots until such time as they could be put to work in call centers.

As it is, the privatized understanding of contraception (whether you are on the pill, use condoms, do not have sex, are trying for a child) is precisely that—a matter for the individual. Pregnant female workers are pitted against childless women who are asked to resent those who “choose” to have children. Technologies in which Firestone saw so much potential, such as IVF, are often used as a kind of resort after women have delayed childbirth in order to maintain their position in the workforce and pursue their careers. Here advanced technology and

the scientific understanding of complex hormonal processes as Firestone envisaged are put to work in the name of the individual worker and not in the name of women as an oppressed sex class at all. The idea of regarding one woman's reproductive choice as any business of anyone other than her and her family is unthinkable as part of a progressive project. Does Firestone allow for the fact that technology could individualize rather than collectively politicize? What would a follower of Firestone have to say about the religious Right's monopolization of the collective implications of reproductive technology (especially its profound conservatism)? Contemporary forms of collectivity that involve considerations of the public implications of reproduction seem to be restricted to religious movements and are as far from Firestone's Reichian reflections as they could be. Again Firestone has underestimated the political implications of technological progress, omitting to countenance the idea of a fierce backlash against the developments achieved by the science of reproduction.

But perhaps, in a more limited way, there are flashes of hope here and there. In discussions of recent civil partnership reforms in the United Kingdom it was briefly mooted that the legislation could include atypical relationships that did not involve any sexual relation—for example, relations between a patient and his or her carer, or between siblings. Ultimately test cases failed, such as that between two sisters who wanted to ensure that they had the same rights as heterosexual and, more recently, homosexual couples.<sup>52</sup> But that the conversation took place at all opens up territory already staked out by Firestone in 1970. When she muses on the possibility of “trans-sexual group marriages which also involved other children” and suggests that “enduring relationships between people of widely divergent ages would become common,”<sup>53</sup> the promise of the acceptability of non-traditional relationships is raised. What little progress we have made since Firestone may be seen here, even if there is still a long way to go. It may be that the implications of asexual relations are in the long run more profound than those of a directly sexual nature, which would certainly be one direction in which to take Firestone's diffusion of sexuality to every aspect of life.

Fighting at the level of the unthought of oppression itself, Firestone's project is an eminently difficult one. Enlisting elements of Freud's theoretical work into a communist project that goes beyond the vision of Marx and Engels themselves, all within the bounds of a short polemic, was bound to mean leaps in argumentation and disparities with the world in which it ultimately finds itself. As we have seen, Firestone's “materialist view of history based on sex itself” lacks

a political dimension, as Sandford points out, but it is also fatally ambiguous over the concept of nature at stake as well as the temporality of technological and cultural changes. Firestone's arguments are not irrelevant by any means, as they serve as a useful corrective to the idealist excesses of contemporary theories of cyberspace and immaterial labor and provide us with a practical template against which to judge the present. *The Dialectic of Sex* also forces us to rethink our conception of sexual existence. "Why," Firestone wrote, "has all joy and excitement been concentrated, driven into one narrow, difficult-to-find alley of human experience, and all the rest laid waste?"<sup>54</sup> If Firestone's technological revolution is to be preserved, it should be in this most joyful of modes.

## NOTES

1. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 3.
2. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 186.
3. La Mettrie, *Man A Machine* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1912), <http://www.cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/LaMettrie/Machine/>.
4. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 184.
5. Stella Sandford, "Sexmat, Revisited," *Radical Philosophy* 147 (September/October 2007), 29.
6. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 175.
7. Judy Wajcman, *Technofeminism* (London: Polity, 2004), 3.
8. Ian Sample, "Taking the Pill Could Reduce Women's Libido, Scientists Claim," *The Guardian*, May 26, 2005.
9. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 113.
10. Ludwig Feuerbach, "Characteristics of My Philosophical Development," *The Fiery Brook*, trans. Zawar Hanfi (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), 277.
11. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 180.
12. Wilhelm Reich, *The Invasion of Compulsory Sex-Morality* (London: Penguin, 1971), 151.
13. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 7.
14. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 54.
15. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 56.
16. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 162–63.
17. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 162.
18. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 167.
19. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 158.
20. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 174.
21. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (London: Routledge, 1964), 168.
22. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 154.

23. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 166.
24. William T. Blackstone, "Freedom and Women," *Ethics* 85, no. 3 (April 1975: 243–48), 245.
25. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 163.
26. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 94.
27. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 182.
28. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 3.
29. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 64.
30. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 12.
31. Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, ed. Eleanor Burke Leacock (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 71.
32. Sandford, "Sexmat, Revisited," 32.
33. All three quotations are from Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, Chapter 8, "Revolutionary and Socialist Art," [http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit\\_revo/ch08.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/ch08.htm).
34. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 190.
35. Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State & Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life 1917–1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 7.
36. Quoted in Goldman, *Women, the State & Revolution*, 7.
37. Goldman, *Women, the State & Revolution*, 143.
38. Goldman, *Women, the State & Revolution*, 11.
39. Alexandra Kollontai, "Communism and the Family," *Selected Writings* (London: W. W. Norton, 1977), 134.
40. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 176.
41. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 183.
42. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 175.
43. Paulo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (New York: Semiotexte, 2004).
44. Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844," *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1975), 453.
45. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 179.
46. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 183.
47. Isabel Oakeshott, "Women Losing Jobs Twice as Fast as Men," *Sunday Times*, January 25, 2009.
48. Interestingly, Firestone proposes that one interim way of reducing the desire for women to reproduce is to increase and extend the prevalence of "lifetime jobs" or single professions: "A single life organised around the demands of a chosen profession, satisfying the individual's social and emotional needs through its own particular occupational structure," 204.
49. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 184.
50. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 212.
51. Introduction to Engels's *Origin of the Family*, 40.

52. Frances Gibb, "Sisters Joyce and Sybil Burden Lose Legal Appeal Over Death Duties," *The Times*, May 30, 2008.
53. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 209.
54. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 139.

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