

Helen Hester, *Xenofeminism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), 169 p.
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As feminists we inhabit many houses. Nancy Fraser is a feminist, Sheryl Sandberg is a feminist, Sheila Jeffreys is a feminist. But each one means something quite different, and so we cannot simply take the claim at face value. Thus, xenofeminism is feminism, but a variety which stands in contrast to other developments in recent times. Helen Hester's book describes itself as an admixture of cyberfeminism, posthumanism, accelerationism, material feminism, "and so on." It is divided into three uneven chapters; "What is Xenofeminism?," "Xenofeminist Futurities", and "Xenofeminist Technologies." So let us now take a look at Xenofeminist Futurities.

In 2014 Deep Green Resistance, a US-based militant ecological movement, hit something of a bump in the road – it could even be called a scandal if it wasn't of such manifestly ideological content – when they expelled a leading member for supporting the heresy of transgenderism. This was defended on the grounds that the movement regarded gender as a social construct to be opposed, and so antithetical to their militant green politics. Once again, the contest between biological sex and gender identity had fallen victim to sexual fundamentalism.¹

Hester's chapter on "Futurities" deals with this element of fundamentalism, while also incorporating some of the analysis of Lee Edelman's classic of Queer Theory, *No Future*.² Edelman sees the Child as a heteronormative symbol of the (political) future. His response is a refusal of the Child, a refusal which Hester picks up on, and asks how we can fight for a more emancipatory future without falling back on the theme of making the world a better place for our children.

Her analysis draws upon the language and imagery of climate change activism. Often the woman's role is connected with familial care, while the child is seen as shorthand for the future itself. We can see this in the contemporary campaigns of Extinction Rebellion or even more tellingly in Fridays for Future. Hester notes a common criticism of ecofeminism that it essentialises gender (surely sex?) and links women with the biological capacity to give birth.

¹ See *Counterpunch*, 11.8.2015.

² Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

In the context of population growth, Hester then uses the work of Donna Haraway and her invocation to “make kin and not babies.” The current ecological conditions demand a feminism that prompts us to rethink the existences and relationships that our politics tend to privilege. Hester is careful here to differentiate between *birth control* and *population control*, as the latter has a history in racist eugenicism. This involves a generous call not simply to reduce the number of babies born, but to support and act in alliance with the current care givers. This is where Xenofeminism envisages an optimistic and inclusive future. “The ground for our most productive strategic coalitions may not travel in our DNA [... and] we must make it newly possible to conceive of futures beyond the household, the family, and the Child as we know them.” (63)

The longest of the book’s chapters is focused on Xenofeminist technologies, and is both backward-looking to the self care initiatives of the 1970s while at the same time presenting a vision of the future and the repurposing of current technologies. The key example is the Del-Em, a home-made device for menstrual extraction and abortions developed in the early 1970s. Today it is easily google-able,³ and Hester describes it as “a technology totemic of second-wave feminist self-help.” (70) The Del-Em is designed to suck the endometrial lining from the human uterus, using a syringe and a flexible tube inserted into the cervix. By taking this device out of its primary context, i.e. a simple home-made vacuum pump, we can see how radical feminists challenged and perhaps subverted the medical establishment. As an example, the Del-Em shows the aims of Xenofeminist repurposing. First, it allows women to circumvent the medical gatekeepers; second, it appears as a tool of repurposing and thus enables women to take control; third, it is immersed in “discourses of scalability” (tools on a smaller scale allow more direct control); and finally, the Del-Em shows a potential for intersectional use. With these principles in mind, Hester sees the possibility for technology, which is already available, to be used by small independent communities of women as part of “a bottom up movement centred on self-equipping via knowledge exchange.” (95)

In this discussion, Hester draws inspiration from second-wave feminism and the group which produced the classic *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, and uses its various global editions to illustrate how feminism can create a global network of knowledge, but also how knowledge can be utilised within differing political and cultural contexts. In an interview on the *Politics Theory Other* podcast, fellow Xenofeminist Patricia Reed discussed this in terms of situated knowledges, and it would have been interesting to have seen this element developed further.⁴ What Hester refers to as “protocols” set out when, how and with whom autonomous health care should be practiced. Such an approach can even develop as far as the National Federation of Feminist Health Care Centers (again

³ See, e.g.: <http://the-reproductive-right.blogspot.com/p/building-del-em.html> (accessed Dec. 1, 2019).

⁴ “Patricia Reed on Xenofeminism,” *Politics Theory Other* 3, April 27, 2018.

an example from the 1970s). Now, with the aim of sharing and developing knowledge on a collective basis, Hester envisages a global network of practitioners.

The last section of this chapter is a curious text entitled “From Self-Help to Transfeminism,” in which we are told things such as how trans people communicate about health needs, especially now we have the aid of the internet. One wonders who this section is aimed at. How many people will feel the need to know that the needs of trans people are not quite the same as the rest of the population? However, the point is made that firstly, trans health care is an example of intersectionality in action, and secondly that there is a commonality between trans autonomous health care and those such as the *Our Bodies Ourselves* group.

For many years I lived in a part of the world that was hostile to trans people. At the same time, the country had some very loose regulations when it came to the regulation of medicines. For example, I could buy contraceptive pills from the shop on the neighbouring compound, while in a local mall I could buy the prostate medicine Avodart, which contains dutasteride, an anti-androgen. On trips back to the UK I could buy oestrogen gel from a friend to whom it had been prescribed. Before this off-the-shelf experience I had also tried the well-worn practice of buying off the internet, in my case the antiandrogen finasteride. This is what is known as self-medication, and from anecdotal evidence it is not uncommon in the trans community. However, it is born of necessity in most parts. It is a defensive response to a situation born of need, where the medical system does not accommodate trans people. I find it hard to accept that this is a creative act. Never did I think I could spin self-medication as “a new means of resisting those institutions that have historically fought to destabilise the disciplinary grid of gender in the face in the face of biomedical innovations which might unsettle it.” (88) It seems that a positive spin can be put on anything. Acceptance of trans people as outside the medical industry is one political tactic, but there are others which can challenge structural oppression in a more direct way.

Instead of celebrating trans autonomy, why not join with trans people for adequate health provision including mental health provision? What might be useful is a peer-reviewed piece of research on the long-term impact of Hormone Replacement Therapy on trans people. Valorising alternative practices separates trans people from the wider community in the same way as celebrating abortions outside the medical community instead of improving abortion rights.

Hester’s work, and Xenofeminism in general, illustrate two aspects of contemporary feminism. The first of these is the apparent rediscovery of Second Wave Feminism⁵ and, in particular, Shulamith Firestone’s, *Dialectics of Sex*. This is certainly a seminal work, and the Xenofeminists are inspired by Firestone’s vision of the future and the role technology may play in granting women the ability to take control of sexual reproduction.

⁵ See Ros Hague, “Between the waves: Currents in contemporary feminist thought,” *Political Studies Review* 14 (2016), no. 2, pp. 199–209.

Firestone uses the example of the artificial placenta as a form of scientific research which is “still taboo” and is not discussed because it is “unnatural.”⁶ Furthermore, she makes the point that the technology is already available (in 1970) to reduce the pain of childbirth, and speculates that it would be possible to derail the “reproductive obligation to the species” through unspecified “artificial methods.”⁷

However, while there may be some merit in cherry picking a modern political classic, this reviewer has doubts. For example, moving slowly but steadily away from Engels,⁸ Firestone writes in a curiously racist manner of the sexual and power relations between black and white, male and female.⁹ Additionally, Firestone’s views on patriarchy and in particular the role of sexual reproduction have been fundamental to the development of Radical Feminism. We can see this connection in the work of Sheila Jeffreys and her *Gender Hurts*.¹⁰ Jeffreys is what is known as a TERF, a Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist and, inspired by Firestone, she explains how men oppress women through sexual violence and maintain their control through acts such as rape and murder. Trans women, having suffered the misfortune of being born male, retain the innate masculine propensity to violence and thus are an existential threat to born women. Jeffreys and Hester are drawing water from the same well, and I find it difficult to believe that it is fundamentally different water.

So, should we read Firestone as simply “a product of her time” and therefore not really racist or TERF? That would certainly allow us to utilise her ideas about technology in a guilt free manner. The white elitism of some radical feminists, identified by Angela Davis and others, is by now well-recognised, and led to the call – which we can still hear – for intersectionality. Thus, while Firestone and her visions of technology inspire Xenofeminism, many intersectional feminists still seek to move on from her view of patriarchy and her sexual fundamentalism.

This brings us to a second theme in contemporary feminism which is exemplified in Xenofeminism, namely the goal of gender abolition. In a recent interview with *Open Democracy*, the veteran socialist, feminist, and political writer Bea Campbell noted that gender, like post-modernism, has had its day.¹¹ Trans identities, she suggested, are “a kind of an exemplar of a neoliberal version of what it means to be human, at its most idiosyncratic, i.e. you can choose! You can choose to be anything you like. Well, I’m

⁶ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: William Morrow, 1970), p. 180.

⁷ Firestone, 1970, p. 209.

⁸ Firestone, 1970, pp. 4–13.

⁹ Firestone, 1970, pp. 95–112. See also, Mithu Sanyal, *Rape* (London: Verso, 2019), pp. 86–7.

¹⁰ Sheila Jeffreys, *Gender Hurts* (London: Routledge, 2014).

¹¹ “UK sexual politics have become ‘profoundly authoritarian’ says Beatrix Campbell,” *Open Democracy*, 1 November 2018 (online at

^h<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/beatrix-campbell-uk-sexual-politics-profoundly-authoritarian/> [accessed Dec. 1, 2019]).

sorry, you can't." Thus Campbell echoes the anti-trans rhetoric, in which trans people simply "choose" their gender identity of their own volition.

Gender, as a social construct, reflects the society in which we live, while sex is a biological fact. As Reed says, Xenofeminism is interested in facts, not norms.¹² Gender is a norm, sex is a fact. So far, so good. Gender roles are generally seen as restrictive and providing the basis for women's oppression. Thus, release from these gender roles will be a huge step towards the dismantling of patriarchy and women's (human?) liberation. Reed points out that instead of the end of gender, their idea is for a proliferation of genders. However, the language used for gender abolition does not differ greatly from the language used by "gender critical" feminists, i.e., TERFs. As has been noted above, Hester makes it clear at different points in the book that she is not directly hostile to trans people and would clearly not be so vulgar as to exclude them from political or public life. However, in speaking of the felt need by trans people to develop a gender identity, she states that trans people are not "at fault." (29) This is a choice of words I have puzzled over for some time. Clearly she thinks something is wrong here. Perhaps it is the acquired gender identity which reinforces the gender binary, but the trans person is not to blame. "You've done something wrong, but it's not your fault." Not terribly reassuring, I must say. And neither is it a great deal different from Germaine Greer's offensive description of trans women as "delusional men."

Gender abolitionism implies that there is a choice involved. The term antinaturalist is used to show that we are not restricted by nature. If there is something wrong with nature: change it. This is an exciting idea. In her interview, Reed cites how she admires the acts of the trans community which change the restrictions of the sexed, "natural" body as if this were somehow a playful, creative act. There is no comment here on the mental strains of the trans people who feel forced to change their bodies to conform to their gender identity, or to those who self-harm or lacerate their genitals with a broken bottle. Because, for those in the trans community, "choice" is the last thing which comes to mind when dealing with trauma. As with the challenges of self-medication discussed, this seems to be a confusion between strategy and tactics.

As to the strategic goal of gender abolition, we may think of it as we may any other political objective. As Sally Campbell notes, "to reject gender diversity now on the basis that our aim is to abolish gender in the future is like rejecting the fight for higher wages on the basis that we want to abolish the wages system."¹³

In this context, we might recall David Harvey's remarks about forms of resistance under neoliberalism: "What if every dominant mode of production, with its particular political configuration, creates a mode of opposition as a mirror image to itself? [...]"

¹² *Politics Theory Other 3*.

¹³ Sally Campbell, "Gender Recognition Act: Trans Rights Versus Feminism?" *Socialist Review*, September 2017, (online at <http://socialistreview.org.uk/427/gender-recognition-act-trans-rights-versus-feminism> [accessed Dec. 1, 2019]).

The reorganization of the production process and turn to flexible accumulation during neoliberal times has produced a Left that is also, in many ways, its mirror: networking, decentralized, non-hierarchical.” However, he goes on to say that “I think much of the Left right now, being very autonomous and anarchical, is actually reinforcing the endgame of neoliberalism. A lot of people on the Left don’t like to hear that.”¹⁴ In contrast, the recent manifesto *Feminism for the 99%* by Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser is based on the experience of mobilising women workers in the US and in other parts of the world. It is an inclusive feminism which deals with the central issue of social reproduction, its understanding of gender comes from a material analysis of capitalism, while the final thesis “calls on all radical movements to come together in a common anticapitalist insurgency.”¹⁵

Hester’s *Xenofeminism* is a book for our times. It is backward-looking to the 1970s, while also seeking to harness the potentials of technology to hand women more control over their lives. However, the autonomous structures it promotes allow one to live within neoliberal capitalism without seriously trying to build a movement for its overthrow.

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¹⁴ “Neoliberalism is a Political Project: An Interview with David Harvey,” *Jacobin*, 23 July 2016 (online at <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/07/david-harvey-neoliberalism-capitalism-labor-crisis-resistance/> [accessed Dec. 1, 2019]).

¹⁵ Cinzia Arruzza, Nancy Fraser, and Tithi Bhattacharya, *Feminism for the 99%* (London: Verso, 2019).