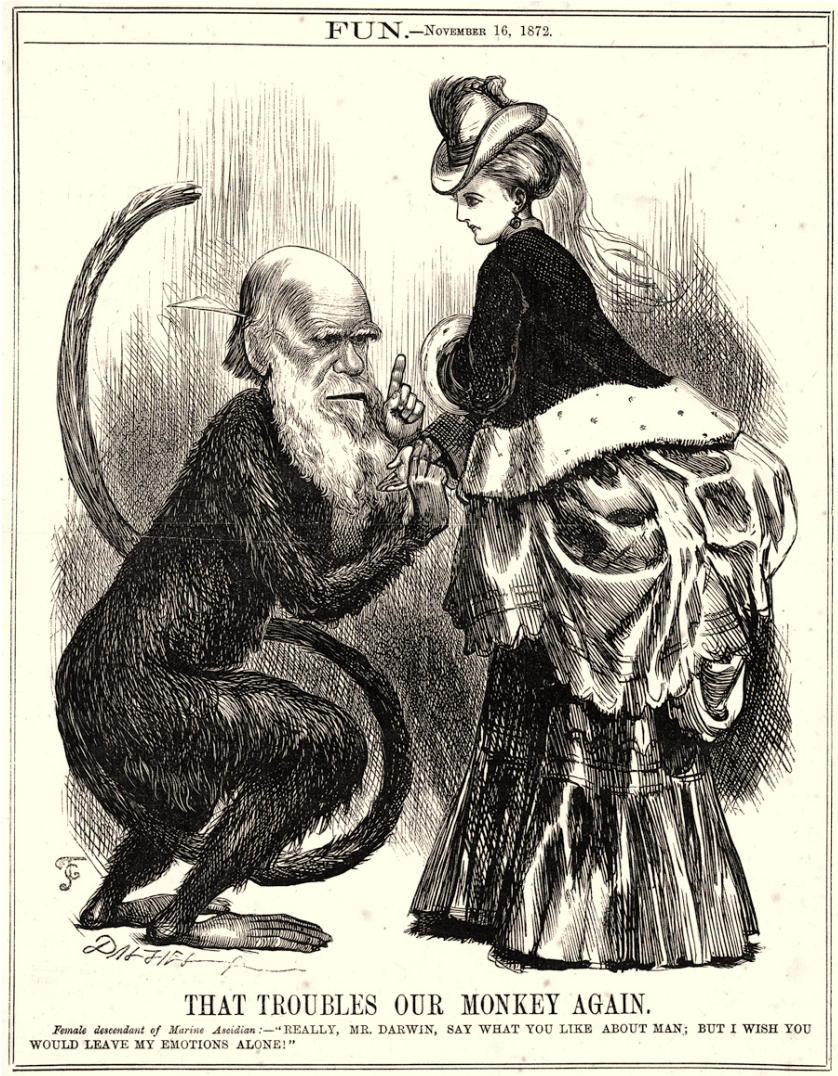
Exploring the feminine “other”

Gender history, feminist studies and the scholarly debate.



Henrik Arnstad
Stockholm University
Gender History in Theory and Practice
Spring 2018

Index.

Introduction:
Feminism is the radical notion that women are people.

In 1871 the naturalist Charles Darwin published his study *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*.[1] Darwin had already applied his theory of evolution upon humanity – or to be more specific; *mankind*, interpreted as the race of *men*.

Darwin argued that the human male had undergone a long evolutionary process, leaving the human female behind on a sub-human level.[2] The reason for this being that males had, during the existence of humanity, constantly fought among themselves. Men had therefore produced an evolutionary environment of endless competition. Females – not having been competing warriors and instead domestically tendering children – had consequently escaped evolutionary progress, according to Darwin. Women were therefore not to be regarded as fully human.

Darwin wanted his conclusions to have political impact on society, regarding "the woman question" (suffrage, etc.). Which it did. According to contemporary male scientists, the findings of Europe's "great modern natural scientist" proved that women were on the same intellectual level as "children" or "the adult negro".[3] Influential men debated, among themselves, the *otherness* of "the woman" and thereby constructed patriarchal social power

[1] Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London, 1871).
[2] Bettyann Kevles, *Females of the Species: Sex and Survival in the Animal Kingdom* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 8.
[3] Carl Vogt, *Lectures on Man: His Place in Creation, and the History of Earth* (London, 1864).

via "naturalist facts" about *difference*. This 19th century male debate about women's biological inferiority shows, as an example, many things:

- How women historically and continually have been objectified, excluded and dehumanized – often within in all-men contexts.
- How the patriarchy reoccurringly finds new ways of formulating and legitimizing oppression in changing environments (geographical and over time).
- How there is a relationship between misogyny and racism regarding production of oppressive power.

The example of Darwin thus highlights the continuing academic relevancy of Judith Bennet's question:

> Why and how the oppression of women has endured for so long and in so many different historical settings?[4]

Feminist studies, women's history and *gender theory*: There are many names for these areas of research – and there has always been debates regarding how they should be understood, conceptualised and used. What these scholarly concepts – maybe – have in common is that they study certain interpretations of *otherness* and *difference*, compared to the normative power construction of normativity; the white, heterosexual and masculine male.

1. Constructing and deconstructing concepts.

Current day gender studies is a product of the so-called *second wave feminism* during the 1960's and 1970's. Perhaps, since this research field was initialised by a socio-political struggle, reaching consensus regarding key concepts has proven difficult, even concerning the most basic scientific constructs.

What is, for example, a *woman*? Judith Butler writes, that the minute that the notion of "women" is invoked, describing the constituency for which feminism speaks, an internal debate begins over what the descriptive content of the term will be. Joan Scott writes that "the common experience of being excluded was sometimes mistaken for a shared vision of the meaning of being female"[5] while Denise Riley adds that the characterizations of

[4] Sue Morgan (ed.), *The Feminist History Reader* (Oxon, 2006), p. 64.
[5] Joan Scott, *Only paradoxes to offer: French feminists and the rights of man* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 14.

"women" are established in a myriad mobile formations.[6] Butler adds, regarding "being a woman" as a common identity:

> Every time that specificity is articulated, there is resistance and factionalization within the very constituency that is supposed to be unified by the articulation of its common element.[7]

Thus, key concepts in gender history (such as the concept of "*gender history*" itself) are objects of debate. Yasmin Ergas writes:

> The 'sides' engaged in feminist disputes over the definition of feminism have not been frozen into particular identities by the political views they have espoused. Rather, the changing nature of feminist definitions reveals shifts in feminist identifications.[8]

This reflects that the research field is dynamic, always undergoing new intellectual challenges and new understandings. Gender studies is much more than the historical study of biological women. All kinds of intersectionality and sexual diversities are explored, challenging the notion of a masculine heterosexual white male normativity.

2. The concept of "women's history".

The second wave feministic *women's liberation-movement* (shortened "women's lib" or WLM), which gained momentum in the late 1960's, gave rise the research field of *women's history*. The academic aim was the "recovery of women as subjects of, and agents in, the making of history" in order to democratise "the vision of who and what constitutes historical discourse", according to Sue Morgan.[9] Traditional patriarchal historical research had neglected the women in history. Therefore, women's history was a process – almost archaeological in its rhetoric – of discovering and unfolding history's women, who had been "hidden" by misogynic power. Women's history stressed historical women's agency and subjectivity, arguing that hiding these women from view had been an active act of male

[6] Morgan, p. 153.
[7] Morgan, p. 200.
[8] Yasmin Ergas, "Feminisms of the 1970s", Frangoise Thebaud (red.), *A History of Women in the west: V. Toward a Cultural Identity in the Twentieth Century* (Harvard, 1994), p. 533.
[9] Morgan, p. 1.

power. In the words of Martha Vicinius: “Ignorance is not an empty box waiting to be filled by knowledge. Ignorance now and in prior times can be willed” and sometimes ignorance is “not a failure to know, but a refusal to know”.[10] The field of women’s history thus had consequences. Gisela Bock writes that “the pursuit of 'restoring women to history' soon led to that of restoring history to women”.[11] Estelle B. Freedman writes:

> Even when men held formal power, however, women across cultures found myriad ways to transcend or resist patriarchal rule. Elite women could enjoy wealth and political authority through their connections to powerful male relatives. Some women reigned as queens. More commonly, women's contributions to household production gave them leverage within their families.[12]

Women’s history is still today a vibrant field of research, representing the historical presence of half of humanity. There is still nothing invalid about the basic research questions, regarding the work conditions of women, asked by Louise Tilly and Joan Scott in their 1978 study *Women, work and family*, about the coming of modernity, wage labour and the historical conditions of women.[13] But during the 1980’s it became evident that there was something missing in the field of women’s history. Maybe feminist historical studies was not only a matter of excavating historical women and their public agency, like – for example – female workers, mothers, rulers, scientists, warriors, intellectuals and religious prominences. Maybe it was also important to find out why and how “public” women had remained historical exceptions, compared to the abundance of more noticeable male counterparts. Almost all the time in history. Almost everywhere on earth. “This question should be on top of the agenda for women’s history”, Bennet wrote in 1989.[14]

[10] Morgan, p. 221.
[11] Morgan, p. 105.
[12] Estelle B. Freedman, *The Essential Feminist Reader* (New York, 2007), p. xi.
[13] Louise Tilly, Joan Scott, *Women, work, and family*, (New York, 1978).
[14] Morgan, p. 64.

3. The concept of “patriarchy”.

The word *patriarchy* was first used in 1632, meaning “supremacy of the father” in family relations, legally specifying legal dependence of wives and children.[15] However, in feminist studies, the concept means much more and “provided feminists with their first all-encompassing theory through which to identify the distinctive, gender-related forms of female subordination by men”, writes Morgan and defines the term as “a system of interrelated social structures through which men exploit women”.[16] However, the concept of patriarchy has been criticised. In 1979 the Sheila Rowbotham wrote that it “implies universal and historical form of oppression which returns us to biology”.[17] The notion of a historical patriarchy implies a fixed structure, but women have always manoeuvred for a better position, argued Rowbotham. Even so, the word remained a well-established key theoretical concept for gender studies. It works because “patriarchy clearly has existed in many forms and varieties”, writes Bennet. Scientific concepts are seldom perfectly constructed[18] and they are consequently frequently debated. That does not mean they aren’t relevant.

4. The concept of “gender”.

In the late 1980’s scholars in women’s history found that they worked within a paradox. Their field of study had spread and was largely successful – but at the same time they were isolated. “Most historians are not feminists”, Bennet wrote in 1989, and remarked that women’s history “has become more entrenched in the academy”.[19] The concept of *gender*, used in historical research, could work to “to integrate women’s history into mainstream scholarship”.

The transition to gender studies during the 1990’s was a major change in all the humanities, not only history. Leaving the binary sexual and biological identities of “men” and “women”

[15] Merrriam-Webster dictionary, “patriarchy”.
[16] Morgan, p. 6.
[17] Morgan, p. 52.
[18] For example, the concept of *antisemitism* implies a linguistic meaning, which is not true regarding hate towards Jews; the concept of *islamophobia* implies a psychological reaction, which is not true regarding hate towards Muslims, and so on. Still, these concepts are used in science, since they have been well established.
[19] Morgan, pp. 60f.

partly in its wake, understanding gender constructions of femininity and masculinity meant that all kinds of new research fields opened up. This change did not, however, occur unchallenged. Marxists such as Joan Hoff criticised in 1994 "the potentially paralyzing consequences of post-structuralism"[20] being an "intellectual form of 'masturbation'"[21] representing a misogynic attack upon feminism. But still, for historians, gender theory meant that new questions could be entered into empirical studies of various source material. Even for traditional male-dominated fields as military history, gender theory made it possible for historians to venture further. For example: How was masculinity – and feminity – constructed in the armies of Julius Caesar, Napoleon and Hitler? And, even though wars generally has been fought among men, they have had "enormous significance for women and for the relations between and within the sexes", argues Gisela Bock.[22]

When feminist studies changed, so did the history writing about feminism. Joan Scott wrote in her 1996 study *Only paradoxes to offer* that she tried to "rethink the history of feminism" and provide "an alternative to the typical approach to the history of feminism".[23] Scott analysed "modern Western feminism", stating that it "is constituted by the discursive practices of democratic politics that have equated individuality with masculinity".[24] Thus Scott criticised feminism, patriarchy and the post-cold war neo-liberal individualistic paradigm at the same time. Susan Mendus stated in 2008 that misogynic oppression is built into the foundation of modern liberal democracy:

> They are an indication of deep gender bias in democratic theory itself For feminists, democracy is not something which, as a matter of unfortunate fact, has failed to deliver on its promises to women. It embodies ideals which guarantee that it will never deliver unless it embarks upon extensive critical examination of its own philosophical assumptions. […] Women never have been and still are not admitted as full and equal members in any country known as a "democracy".[25]

---

[20] Morgan, p. 176.
[21] Morgan, p. 178.
[22] Morgan, pp. 112.
[23] Joan Scott, *Only paradoxes to offer: French feminists and the rights of man* (Cambridge, 1996).
[24] Scot, p.5.
[25] Susan Mendus, "Losing the Faith: Feminism and Democracy", John Dunn (ed.), *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey 508 BC to AD 1993* (Oxford, 2008), p. 208f.

In post-Marxist research, constructions of *power* became a more common area of study, than former questions regarding socio-economics. And gender related directly to this, as power had been discussed by thinkers such as Michel Foucault, etc., during the 1970's. Broader concepts such as *postmodernity*, the *linguistic turn* and *poststructuralism* became linked to gender studies, and they still are. According to Foucault, power in modernity is produced via norms.[26] Individuals are constantly moving in a myriad of social system's hierarchies (as students in school, at work, in leisure activities, in mating procedures, in the military, etc.) according to their ability to adapt to normative constructions. Thus, in a patriarchy, masculinity forms one of the guiding norms, making male supremacy and female subordination a part of a system. But since femininity can be found also in males – and masculinity can be found in women – this system of power system is far more complex than a binary dichotomy of "male" and "female" sexual construct.

5. The concept of "intersectionality".

Oppression is a manifestation of social power. Groups of people can be collectively subjugated, discriminated or even targeted by projects of mass political violence (ranging from beatings and rape to systematic murder) via social systems such as misogyny, racism, prejudice, etc.

The agents of oppression are far from always on the top end of hierarchical societies. On the contrary. Historically has oppression proven to be an effective mean of hierarchical movement upwards, for groups who are oppressed themselves – but not on the bottom. Oppressing people who are even more oppressed is a well-tested method for social advancement. When "they" are pushed down, "we" move up. This theoretical description exists between the lines in Elisabeth V. Spelman's 1988 accusation of feminist theory, being plagued by "white solipsism"[27] and failing to see the differences in experiences between white and black women.[28] Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar writes that "most

[26] Besides reading Foucault own thoughts regarding power, for example his lectures at the Collège de France, there is an abundance of commentary literature, for example regarding power, Magnus Hörnqvist, *En annan Foucault: Maktens problematik* (Stockholm, 2012).
[27] Morgan, p. 279. The word "solipsism" is derived from the Latin words "*solus*" (alone) and "*ipse*" (self). According to ontology, solipsism means that "only me and my consciousness exists", while according to theory of knowledge, the concept means that "I can only truly know things I experience myself".[27]
[28] Morgan, p. 280.

contemporary feminist theory does not begin to adequately account for the experience of Black women"[29] and ignores "the fundamental ways in which white women have benefited from the oppression of Black people".[30] Amos-Parmar goes on, arguing that white feminism is disrespectful regarding customs of women with certain cultural backgrounds, and exemplifies with traditions of arranged marriages:

> Many white feminists have argued that as feminists they find it very accept arranged marriages which they see as reactionary. Our argument is that it is not up to them to accept or reject arranged marriages […].[31]

This feminist debate touches the controversial current-day question regarding the Muslim veil. Some feminists argue that the veil is a symbol of oppression, while some Muslim feminists answers that they wear the veil by their own choice – and that anti-veil activists should mind their own business.[32] This kind of internal feminist conflict constantly surfaces between the lines in scholarly texts. For example, in the highly interesting study *Sex, Gender and the Sacred,* Joanna de Groot and Sue Morgan writes:

> For many migrant communities, the desire to minimise 'alienness' and encourage acculturation could result in conservative gender and sexual politics […].[33]

This statement can be interpreted in many ways, among them that "conservative gender and sexual politics" is something typical for "migrant communities", which may well be true. But this notion also acknowledges, as a fact, that anti-feministic notions are a part of "they" (immigrants), thus immigrants collectively representing an essentialist *otherness*. Is it scientifically possible, for example, to group together a multitude of different people as "migrant communities", just because these people are born abroad?

The concept of *intersectionality* is key in this discourse. A person is many things. Humans have different skin colours, sexual identities, ethnicities, religions, class affiliations, economic

---

[29] Morgan, p. 285.
[30] Morgan, p. 286.
[31] Morgan, p. 292. Amos-Parmar does not discuss the problems that arises when arranged marriages are illegal.
[32] At the same time, other Muslim feminists argue that the veil is a symbol of oppression – and that pro-veil Muslim feminists should mind their own business.
[33] Joanna de Groot, Sue Morgan (eds) *Sex, Gender and the Sacred : Reconfiguring Religion in Gender History: Gender and History Special Issues* (London, 2014), p. 6.

possibilities and so on. All these relate to power norms in a web of social positions. Spelman points out "the many varieties of oppression that different populations of women have been subject to".[34] It is not possible to analytically place "blackness" on top of "womanhood" in a feminist study, for example. These two constructs are mixed together in certain persons; they intersect – thus intersectionality.

Amos-Parmar writes about Black lesbians, who "have had to face the profound homophobia of both Blacks and whites",[35] showing that lesbianism is another field where the humanities comes in touch with intersectionality in many and complex forms. Just as the male gay movement, lesbian activism was also a child of the political awakening during the 1968 era. But what constitutes being "a lesbian"? Lillian Faderman writes that "pre-twentieth century women would not have thought that their intensest feelings toward other women needed to be hidden".[36] During history, societies has displayed many forms of normative sexualities which all have been considered "normal" in their specific environment. The free male citizens of ancient Greece had same-sex relationships without being seen as "queer". Female "passionate friendships" were not seen as lesbianism in the novels of Jane Austen during the early 19th century. At the same time, taking all this in consideration, historians risk to produce a history of lesbianism without lesbians. "No one today is really sure what 'lesbian' means", writes Judith Bennet.[37]

Male homosexuality connects the field of intersectionality and gender, studying men who's sexual identity differs from the normative heterosexual men of patriarchal society. In a way, homosexual men can be seen as male feminity in a normative context of male masculinity, therefore being an example of gender constructions. Homophobia as a form of socially organised subjugation and oppression relates to both misogyny and racism. But is the history of male homosexuals and homophobia a part of feminist studies? It is not an easy question to answer, because it depends how the scholar defines feminism. Does feminism relate only to biological women or to all people who differs from the sexual norm of the heterosexual masculine man? Robert Beachy writes about "the German invention of homosexuality" in

[34] Morgan, p. 282.
[35] Morgan, p. 290.
[36] Morgan, p. 206.
[37] Morgan, p. 249.

inter-war Berlin.[38] Beachy passionately – but somewhat anecdotical – describes how English bourgeoisie-men travelled to the German capital in order to enjoy same-sex love. "Berlin is a buggers daydream",[39] one of them wrote in 1928, showing that the English language in these day didn't have a well-established short word for the homosexual man, while the German language had the slang-expression "*schwul*" (to be compared with today's English slang-word "*fag*").[40] While not being feminist history, this is a good example of gender history in practice.

Epilogue:
The real achievement is that inequality has lost all its moral justification?

In 2007 Jeffrey Weeks argued that today's world is marked by significant progress regarding sexual democracy. He stated that people are able to "proudly proclaim not only their gayness, bisexuality, sado-masochisms, trans-identities, fetishisms and fantasies in all their infinite variety; they can dwell in a world of polymorphous non-perversities" and continued triumphantly:

> Millennia of male dominance over women have been fundamentally and almost certainly irreversibly undermined, even as on a global scale the impact is still uneven. The story is not so much that men and women are now equal, or treated equally. The real achievement is that inequality has lost all its moral justification.[41]

Weeks has empirical support for his claims – and he provides much-needed optimism to the discourse of a research field that often highlights dystopic samples of oppression, subjugation and prejudice. Still, there is danger in the notion that a final achievement has been reached.

The successes of feminism during the late 20th century are today challenged by a global antidemocratic rhetoric, stating that *feminism has gone too far*. Even in countries generally perceived as progressive – for example Sweden – there are nowadays strong political forces

[38] Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York, 2014).
[39] Beachy, p. X.
[40] Beachy, p. XI.
[41] Jeffrey Weeks, *The world we have won (*Oxon, 2007), p. 7.

who successfully attack feminism. Especially the concept of "gender" is under siege. The highly successful ultra-nationalist party Sverigedemokraterna has named "the gender madness" ("*genusvansinnet*", "*genusgalenskapen*", etc.) as one of its main enemies.[42] The extreme-right publication *Contra* writes about "gender hysteria"[43] and the influential Nazi web-site *Nordfront* attacks the concept of gender as an example of Marxist "radical feminism".[44] These examples can be dismissed as extremism, but they have successfully penetrated Swedish mainstream politics. The traditionalist conservative party Kristdemokraterna prefers gender theory to be banned in Swedish universities, as it constitutes ideological manipulation, according to one of its leading politicians.[45] The rightist editorial page of major daily *Svenska Dagbladet* reoccurringly campaigns against gender "brainwashing" being conducted at "Swedish universities and many other places".[46] In 2014, at a conference for Swedish historians, there were testimonies regarding death threats against gender theorists.[47] But why does this strange and intense hatred towards gender theory exist?

Democracy is a popular word, but in practice "democracy is hard to love", argues political scientist Iris Marion Young.[48] When more people are included into the democratic dialogue of society, the privilege of former power-groups are lessened. Thus feminism – *the radical notion that women are people* – is a continuing threat to the patriarchy. As the power structures of societies in history is always undergoing change, there are no guarantees that democratic ideas such as feminism, anti-racism and other inclusive notions will prevail. Democracy only survives as long as its social power is being reproduced in an effective way. This does not seem to be the case in the world of humanity in 2018.

---

[42] See for example http://sd-strangnas.blogspot.se/2011/08/genusvansinnet-med-tanja-bergkvist.html (hämtat 180528).
[43] *Contra*, (no. 1, 2012), p. 5.
[44] *Nordfront*, "'Genusvetare' ignorerar biologiska könsskillnader", https://www.nordfront.se/genusvetare-ignorerar-biologiska-konsskillnader.smr (hämtat 180528).
[45] Sara Skyttedal, twitter (dec 28th, 2015).
[46] Ivar Arpi, "Hjärntvätten av Sverige fortsätter", *Svenska Dagbladet* (feb 19th, 2018).
[47] Svenska historikermötet 2014, "Tredje uppgiften i näthatets era: Ett vittnesseminarium" (Stockholm, 2014).
[48] Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and democracy* (Oxford, 2000), p. 16.

Literature.

- Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York, 2014).
- John Dunn (ed.), *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey 508 BC to AD 1993* (Oxford, 2008).
- Estelle B. Freedman, *The Essential Feminist Reader* (New York, 2007).
- Joanna de Groot, Sue Morgan (eds.) *Sex, Gender and the Sacred : Reconfiguring Religion in Gender History: Gender and History Special Issues* (London, 2014).
- Magnus Hörnqvist, *En annan Foucault: Maktens problematik* (Stockholm, 2012).
- Bettyann Kevles, *Females of the Species: Sex and Survival in the Animal Kingdom* (Cambridge, 1986).
- Sue Morgan (ed.), *The Feminist History Reader* (Oxon, 2006).
- Joan Scott, *Only paradoxes to offer: French feminists and the rights of man* (Cambridge, 1996).
- Louise Tilly, Joan Scott, *Women, work, and family*, (New York, 1978).
- Jeffrey Weeks, *The world we have won (*Oxon, 2007).
- Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and democracy* (Oxford, 2000).