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Antoinette Brown Blackwell and the Evolutionary Theory: Darwinism Revisited by Feminism

At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, the majority of women, feminist or not, seemed to believe in biological differences between men and women and thus to adhere to evolutionary theories. In the United States, some feminists turned their eyes to nature for alternative and more objective readings of 'natural' sexual order and thus started to question the male bias inherent to these scientific theories.

Four years only after Charles Darwin's book, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), Antoinette Brown Blackwell (1825-1921) suggested to amend, in her book *The Sexes Throughout Nature* (1875), the Darwinian theory with the help of the feminine experience. In her book, she dwelled on the idea that the evolutionary theory represented a challenge to the religious dogma and to the restrictive laws for women. For her, contrary to religion, the evolutionary theory could be re-examined. Her methodology consisted in reviewing the data gathered by Charles Darwin in order to highlight the unnatural character of existing gender ideology and sexual order and thus to show that implicit equality between men and women could be found in his writings. She evaluated evolutionist principles for their potential to justify social reform arguments. She also engaged with Darwin directly and vigorously. Thus, Antoinette Brown Blackwell seems to constitute an attempt to bridge evolutionary theory and feminism.

This paper addresses how and why a late nineteenth century feminist took evolution theory to be such a positive force for the women's movement, how her criticism was received and also widens the study and focuses on other feminists of her time also interested in the evolutionary theory in order to compare their points of view.

EVOLUTION: CHARLES DARWIN, HERBERT SPENCER

The evolutionary theory is part of a philosophical, ideological, and scientific debate about the origin of man which has been going on for years in the United States. The interest in evolution had swept the intellectual, scientific, and popular Western world at the end of the nineteenth century.

Charles Darwin is not well known as a promoter of women's rights. Much of his work explicitly opposed the arguments for sexual equality put forward by first wave feminists of the nineteenth century.

Darwin's 1859 *On The Origin of Species* was followed by his 1871 *The Descent of Man*, in which he claimed that men are superior to women in their intellectual powers, reason, imagination, and capacity for deep thought: "if two lists were made of the most eminent men and women in poetry, painting, sculpture, music – comprising composition and performance, history, science and philosophy... the two lists would not bear comparison" (Darwin 327). Darwin discussed the male pursuit of and competition over females within the lower orders of animal life, which might have led, through sexual selection, to the cultivation of patience and perseverance in the male, closely connected to the formation of genius. "Thus man," he wrote, "has ultimately become superior to woman" (Darwin 329).

In the *Descent of Man*, he made explicit references to Harriet and John Stuart Mill's early feminist work, *The Subjection of Women* (1869), which, he said, ignored the fact that there existed fundamental and enduring "differences in the mental powers of the sexes". According to Darwin, the differences in the intellectual capacities of men and women were the inevitable product of the evolutionary process. Women had evolved primarily off the back of their physical attractiveness and as such were creatures of beauty, but *not* intellect:

Although men do not now fight for the sake of obtaining wives, yet they generally have to undergo, during manhood, a severe struggle in order to maintain themselves and their families; and this will tend to keep up or even increase their mental powers, and, as a consequence, the present inequality between the sexes (Darwin 329).

Then, according to the evolutionary process, women were naturally inclined towards a life of domesticity centred around the education of children and on ensuring the happiness of homes. He identified patriarchal gender order in the natural world. Although Herbert Spencer supported women's emancipation in his early work (*Developmental Hypothesis*: 1852), his revised interpretation of his data subsequently led him to become just as vigorous and public an opponent of it. He concluded that women must sacrifice themselves to the species, because the development and reproduction of the human species would suffer from women's selfish entry into public life.

ANTOINETTE BROWN BLACKWELL (1825-1921)

She was the first woman to be ordained as a Minister in the United States. She was a social reformer and promoter of women's rights. A keen philosopher and scientist too, she published scientific works and corresponded with Charles Darwin. She turned to writing as an occupation which most easily coincided with family duties. She wrote articles for the *Woman's Journal*, edited by Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell. Her book, *Studies in General Science*, 1869, was a compilation of essays written over a decade. In one of these, "The Struggle for Existence," she answered Herbert Spencer who had characterized evolution as the "godless cruelty and wastefulness of the natural world." "The Struggle for Existence," she wrote, "is but a perfected system of cooperations in which all sentient and unsentient forces mutually co-work in securing the highest ultimate for good."

She pursued her evolutionary topic with *The Sexes Throughout Nature*, 1875, a corrective to Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. She argues: "Mr. Darwin has failed to hold definitely before the mind the principle that the difference of sex, whatever it may consist in, must itself be subject to natural selection and evolution."

Antoinette Brown Blackwell combined science and philosophy, writing *The Sexes Throughout Nature* she argued that evolution resulted in two sexes that were different but equal. She answered Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer who she considered to be the most influential men of her days. She was aware she would be considered presumptuous for criticizing evolutionary theory but wrote that "will never be lessened by waiting." Darwin had written a letter to her in 1869, thanking her for a copy of her book, *Studies in General Science*.

RELIGION AND EVOLUTION

Antoinette Brown Blackwell commented in the early pages of *The Sexes Throughout Nature* that "many women have grievously felt the burden of laws and customs interfering unwarrantably with their property, their children, or their political and personal rights" (Blackwell, *The Sexes* 6). Although the curtailing of women's liberty and a depreciation of women is traditional, she argued that it had never been rationally justified but was merely the product of laws and customs. Evolution theory represented for her the potential for a challenge both to religious dogma and to social laws and customs restrictive of women. Feminists could now deem traditional views about the proper

roles of the sexes unscientific and irrational, protected only by the weight of history and belief.

Unlike religion, laws, and customs, evolution theory did not have the “protection of accepted tradition” (Blackwell, *The Sexes* 6). It seemed to offer the potential of a clean intellectual slate for the reassessment of women’s competence and rights. The nature and roles of men and women were now renegotiated only on the basis of their scientific validity and only according to rational criteria. Her comments on the consequences and the question of the feminine intellect were “rather unexpectedly thrust forward for purely scientific recognition and settlement” (Blackwell, *The Sexes* 4).

Antoinette Brown Blackwell considered that the criteria evolutionism presented for its own acceptance was as promising as its content. The theory might contain problematic conclusions about women. Indeed, she would dispute Darwin’s account of women’s intellectual inferiority. But what mattered, and what she took to be crucial to feminism, was the terms on which the debate with scholars relying on scientific data would take place. In principle, all parties would have to accept the exposure of dogma or prejudice as discrediting. Rationality and objectivity would hold sway. As she expressed confidence in these ground rules, “it is to the most rigid scientific methods of investigation that we must undoubtedly look for a final and authoritative decision as to woman’s legitimate nature and functions. Whether we approve or disapprove, we must be content, on this basis, to settle all questions of fact pertaining to the feminine economy” (Blackwell, *The Sexes* 231-32). Though her feminist interest in evolutionism first presented itself as having an enormous confidence in scientific values, Spencer’s and Darwin’s conclusions about women might have early suggested that feminist confidence was misplaced.

THE “IVY” METAPHOR

Although late-nineteenth century feminists debating evolution theory thought it offered the potential to found new feminism, they considered Darwin and Spencer objects of the feminist critique their own work enabled. The discussion of Darwin’s impact on feminism was depicted in Antoinette Brown Blackwell’s apparently respectful ivy metaphor. Introducing *The Sexes Throughout Nature* she presented her relation to those “great names,” Mr. Darwin and Mr. Spencer, as that of the ivy to the oak. Those oaks, she writes, serve as “an excellent support to [her] overgrowing theses” (Blackwell, *The Sexes* 5). But she expressed her disappointment at the male bias

prevalent in the work of Darwin and Spencer, both of whom draw on modern scientific reasoning to ground themselves, as Blackwell said of Spencer, "anew upon the moss-grown foundations of ancient dogma" (Blackwell, *The Sexes* 231).

The scientific values, rationality, and impartiality by which evolution theory and claims about the role and nature of the sexes will supposedly be assessed give confidence to Blackwell. Antoinette Brown Blackwell asked at the outset of *The Sexes Throughout Nature* what kinds of intellectual avenues are available to women who are denied the resources necessary for fieldwork or scientific research:

Many women have grievously felt the burden of laws or customs interfering unwarrantably with their property, their children, or their political and personal rights. I have felt this also, but more than any or all other forms of limitation and proscription, I have realized in my inmost soul that most subtle outlawry of the feminine intellect which warns it off from the highest fields of human research." (Blackwell, *The Sexes*, 6)

Antoinette Brown Blackwell considered she was competent to assess the adequacy of the data presented by Darwin and Spencer on the strength of the presentation and she also argued that they might be especially competent because she was a woman with a special interest in the question. When she wrote: "I do not underrate the charge of presumption which must attach to any woman who will attempt to controvert the great masters of Science and of scientific inference. But there is an alternative!" her exclamation underscores her exhilaration.

Antoinette Brown Blackwell is however at pains to demonstrate the prejudice rife at the heart of science. She responded to scientific theories she believed are riddled with prejudice against women, but upon which she nevertheless relied. Her metaphor of the ivy and the oak is telling in this regard. Darwin's work allows her own to flourish. But is the ivy supported by the oak, or does it fit between the enabling debt to evolutionism and the project of questioning it? According to her, the data, the premises, the lines of arguments, and the conclusions of figures such as Darwin bear a second interpretation when it comes to the asserted inferiority of women. She offered close textual analyses of Darwin's findings to demonstrate that his text is working against his own best intentions and that his material belies his arguments and conclusion.

Retaining the notion of evolutionary superiority and the language of the high and the low, Antoinette Brown Blackwell argued that by Darwin's own

criteria, women are actually as "high" as men. She took his material to demonstrate the equivalence of men and women, not women's inferiority. This interpretation is, she argued, not hard to establish, for while Darwin presented data concerning characteristics gained by males and females via natural and sexual selection, his conclusions addressed only those characteristics gained by males. Antoinette Brown Blackwell reviewed the data he presented about species from the plants through fishes, birds, meat and vegetables, eating animals, and humans. One need only attend to this data, she claims, to note the greater equivalence of the sexes than is acknowledged. Where male plants have stamens, female have pistils; where male insects and fishes have more colour and are more active, females are larger and reproduce. Male birds are more pugnacious, but females nurture their young. Male humans are stronger, but females have more endurance. Antoinette Brown Blackwell did not assert these equivalences, but gleaned them from Darwin's data.

What did this depiction of evolutionary theory offer the feminism of Antoinette Brown Blackwell? She found material demonstrating women's equivalence to men, she saw a justification for the improvement of social and economic conditions for women. Her feminism generated from interpretations of the language of species' equivalence, biological inferiority and superiority, and evolutionary highs and lows. However, there is little consistency in the ways in which she understood herself to be subverting theories of evolution (bringing down the oak). According to Antoinette Brown Blackwell, the human race has been improving; women have equivalent characteristics to men, and should be seen as equals.

The tension between the ivy and the oak appeared repeatedly, in the conviction that scientists would be likely to accept alternative arguments for women's equality or superiority based on their data, though their interpretation of their scientific data is concurrently demonstrated as thoroughly partial. The oak stands for the values of objective science. Trying to bring down the oak, Antoinette Brown Blackwell claimed that "men see clearly and think sharply when their sympathies are keenly enlisted, but not otherwise" (Blackwell, *The Sexes* 14).

She argued that her interpretation is more reliable because informed by the woman's point of view. What, then, to make of the chastisement of science for its failure to be objective, an argument made only from a position given validity by its self-identifying partiality?

Antoinette Brown Blackwell considered her own conclusions to be more acute interpretations of the data, though based on data collected by a figure whose prejudice they work to demonstrate. Her certainty that there is bias in the conclusions but not in the collection and presentation of the data is intriguing. There is a recurrent irony in the arch and dry tones repeatedly used by Antoinette Brown Blackwell to declare, "from the facts elaborated by our guides in this matter," or "we are told," or "Mr. Darwin informs us." The tone mocks Darwin, insinuating that we can have no confidence in his objectivity. The implication that Mr. Darwin should be our guide is both archly sarcastic and literal. But the conflicting conclusions drawn from Mr. Darwin's data suggest that the feminist reinterpretations, preoccupied with such points as whether both the sexes should be considered degraded, whether males are the "very summit of the organic scale" while females remain at the bottom, or the contrary, are no more reliable than are Darwin's conclusions.

DARWIN AND WOMEN'S CORRESPONDENCE

Given his views on women's intellect and their corresponding social role, Charles Darwin's correspondence with a woman such as Antoinette Brown Blackwell comes as something of a surprise, and she was not the only one.

Indeed, Lydia Becker (1827-1890), who was a leading member of the suffrage movement, a paid secretary of the National Society of Women's Suffrage, president of the Manchester Ladies' Literary Society, editor of the *Women's Suffrage Journal*, founding member of the Married Women's Property Commission, most well known for publishing the *Women's Suffrage Journal* between 1870 and 1890, a successful biologist, astronomer and botanist, initiated tentatively a correspondence with Charles Darwin in a detached letter in 1863. She thus was between 1863 and 1877 an occasional correspondent of Charles Darwin. The majority of their correspondence concerned the topic of botany. She provided him with samples from plants indigenous to her home town, Manchester. She also provided detailed observations which helped feed into his ongoing work on plant dimorphism. In return, Darwin acted as mentor to Becker, he responded to her questions, gave feedback on her writing and advised on where best to publish her articles.

What is interesting is that despite what he said in the public context about women's intellectual in-capabilities and designed social role, in private his thoughts and actions were very different. Darwin was happy to work in collaboration with many women. He encouraged women's scientific interests wherever possible, frequently sharing observations, samples, reading mater-

ials with women across the world. His private actions dramatically defied his public statements. His attacks on men like J. S. Mill (whose support for sexual equality rendered him "feminine" to the Victorian mind) can be explained by the fact that respectable men of science were required to tow 'the establishment' line, irrespective of their personal convictions.

A closer inspection of his work alongside his correspondence reveals that the Darwinian canon was not straightforwardly conservative. Alongside his explicit conservative arguments about the sexes sits a rarely acknowledged, decidedly more implicit and subversive set of ideas and arguments about gender. At the heart of Darwin's theory of evolution lies an argument which centres on the concept of monism – a belief that the sexes are descended from a single, hermaphroditic life form. As he put it in *Descent of Man*: "some remote progenitor of the whole vertebrate kingdom appears to have been hermaphroditic or androgynous" (Darwin 249). In short, all life forms evolved from the same, genderless ancestor or, as Darwin scribbled in a notebook "every man and woman is hermaphrodite." For Darwin, then, sexual differentiation was merely a process of speciation; having evolved according to variations in their environment and experience, men and women were different in degree rather than kind.

What is clear is that Darwin's work contained not one but two discourses on gender; while his work in many ways helped to shore-up established 'separate spheres' gender ideology in the West, it also presented a new way of thinking and talking about the sexes which had significant subversive potential for those seeking to rethink or reshape ideas about gender.

This subversive potential helps to explain why we find so many nineteenth century feminists (both British and American) among his women correspondents, from Lydia Becker to America's most voracious nineteenth-century promoter of women's rights, Phebe Ann Hanaford.

They were however far from the equals of Darwin, they were denied access to scientific education and refused membership of formal societies, so women scientists existed somewhere on the periphery of the world of institutional science. The notion of the private, domestic middle class woman was so pervasive in nineteenth century Britain that scientific women often felt compelled to publish their works anonymously.

While Lydia Becker and Antoinette Brown Blackwell were able to access the world of science through the private and appropriately feminine channel of letter-writing, their involvement in the public world of science was severely limited by dominant gender ideology which celebrated women as moral and

feeling but ultimately irrational and thus destined by nature to be domestic, nurturing creatures.

OTHER FEMINISTS AND EVOLUTION

Feminists who had defended women's equality by reference to the principles of justice, fairness, and consistency with the claims of men, now confronted the question of whether scientific and pseudoscientific concepts of selection and species transformation offered a new means of redressing traditionalist accounts of women's nature and social role. It was common to see feminists argue that a modification in women's behavior, habits, or capacities that was produced in one generation through social reform could be passed on to the next, and common also to see feminists suppose that evolutionist principles could provide a justification for specific social reforms.

Toward the end of nineteenth century, white American feminist theorists assessed the potential of evolution theory as a feminist resource. Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote: "nothing so important to the women's movement [as the theory of Evolution] has ever come into the world." The author of *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1898) and *Herland* (1879), Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) supported herself through public lectures, journalism, and other writings; along with Jane Addams, she was one of the founders of the Women's Peace Party in 1915. She advocated radical reforms in religion, economic, and domestic social arrangements.

For her, evolutionism was a revolutionary resource for feminism, one of its greatest hopes (Ceclair 28). She believed feminism's needs and hopes were almost entirely satisfied by it: "The development of the theory of Evolution alone was enough to give glory to this age; practically the entire range of the Woman's Movement was within it" (Gilman, *The Living* 234).

Eliza Burt Gamble published *The Evolution of Woman* in 1893. Like Antoinette Brown Blackwell, she revisited Darwin's data with the aim of showing his implicit defence of the superiority of women. She wrote: "His ability to ignore certain facts which he himself adduced, and which all along the line of development tend to prove the superiority of the female, is truly remarkable" (Gamble, VIII). She repeatedly expressed her disappointment at the male bias prevalent in Darwin's work. She wrote: "after a careful reading of *The Descent of Man*, by Mr. Darwin, I first became impressed with the belief that the theory of evolution, as enunciated by scientists, furnishes much evidence going to show that the female among all the orders of life, man included, represents a higher stage of development than the male" (Gamble, V). The irony

was that those feminists responded to scientific theories they believed were riddled with prejudice against women, but upon which they nevertheless relied. As a matter of fact, a tension is felt between the enabling debt to evolutionism and the project of questioning it.

CONCLUSION

This turn-of-the-century feminist, along with others who appropriated evolution theory, is generally considered both unscientific and overly faithful to the theorists she criticized. But her work also served as a good reminder of the complications constituting the project of feminist, reappropriative derivation. And as Antoinette Brown Blackwell wrote, "it is easier to pull down than to build up; yet I have earnestly attempted to do something of both" (Blackwell, *The Sexes* 4).

Ruth Hubbard has commented that some female centred approaches to evolution theory can be unsatisfying because this appropriation "except as a way of parodying the male myths...locks the authors into the same unwarranted suppositions that underlie those very myths...Carefully constructed 'scientific' mirror images" do not, she wrote "do much to counter the male myths" (Hubbard 66).

It seems unsettling to see Antoinette Brown Blackwell rely on, even as she also contests, Darwin's material. She makes a case for the contestability of the data collected by Darwin, but only through relying on it does she contest it. The importance of her work does not lie in her contribution to establishing the most reliable account of women's function in evolution. Rather, the importance of her work lies in the feminist methodology she made available to herself: the data can be interpreted to purposes contrary to and subversive to the author's intentions. While the data she interpreted is derivative from Darwin, perhaps the method at her derivation is less so. She claimed that evolutionary status of women and men must be decided by the facts. "By all means let the sexes be studied mathematically," Antoinette Brown Blackwell declared gamely (Blackwell, *The Sexes* 111).

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