



Women's advocates (left to right) Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Antoinette Brown Blackwell and Maria Mitchell.

EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY

Darwin and the women

Sarah S. Richardson relishes a study of how nineteenth-century US feminists used the biologist's ideas.

Two misplaced narratives dominate thinking on the historical relationship between feminism and evolutionary biology. The first is that nineteenth-century Darwinists presented a chorus of sexist views of women. The second is that feminism and evolutionary biology are wholly independent intellectual movements. In *From Eve to Evolution*, historian Kimberly Hamlin counters these misconceptions with the most comprehensive account so far of how nineteenth-century US men and women appropriated Darwinian ideas to argue for the equality of the sexes in the domestic and public spheres.

The US women's movement gathered fresh energy in the decades following the end of the civil war in 1865, launching calls for women's suffrage, access to property rights and education, and the freedom to divorce. Hamlin shows how prominent women's rights advocates enlisted science "as a force for positive change", even when excluded from lecture halls, as they often were. She demonstrates that evolutionary science offered US feminists a fresh intellectual framework from which to challenge the biblical dogma that stipulated women's inferiority to men and submissive role in domestic life. For social activists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, evolutionary theory "provided a new way for women to view the universe and their role in it, and a new language to describe what they saw".

As feminists rallied to respond to anti-woman screeds such as Harvard-trained



From Eve to Evolution: Darwin, Science, and Women's Rights in Gilded Age America

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Jacobi, astronomer Maria Mitchell and author and suffragist Helen Hamilton Gardener, argued for the importance of training women in science and for a science of sex free of misogynistic bias. Gardener's brain, left to science to prove the equality of male and female intellect, still stands on display at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

Other US feminists summoned the evidence of biology to argue for more-egalitarian marriage and child-rearing arrangements, and for the importance of women's work outside the home. Antoinette Brown Blackwell, the first US woman to be ordained a minister, cited Darwin's evidence of male provisioning and female extra-reproductive labour in animals to argue against the Victorian domestic

physician Edward Clarke's 1873 *Sex in Education*, which warned that women's 'enfeebling' menstrual cycles legislated against their participation in higher education, they began to articulate the need for better science relating to women. With lively examples, Hamlin relates how educated middle- and upper-class US women of the era, such as physician Mary Putnam

division of the "eight-hour husband" working outside the home and the "fourteen-hour wife" within it. Feminist intellectual Charlotte Perkins Gilman drew on Darwin's sexual-selection theory to argue that women's economic dependence on men was unnaturally skewing evolution to promote "excessive sexual distinctions". She proposed that economic and reproductive freedom for women would restore female autonomy in choice of mate — which Darwin posited was universal in nature, except in humans — and put human evolutionary progress back on track.

Darwin himself opposed birth control and asserted the natural inferiority of human females. The adult female, he wrote in *The Descent of Man* (1871), is the "intermediate between the child and the man". Nevertheless, appeals to Darwinist ideas by birth-control advocates such as Margaret Sanger led one critic to bemoan in 1917 that "Darwin was the originator of modern feminism".

Feminism in the late nineteenth century was marked by the racial and class politics of the era's reform movements. Blackwell's and Gilman's views that women should work outside the home, for example, depended on the subjugated labour of lower-class minority women to perform household tasks. And Sanger's birth-control politics appealed to contemporary fears of race and class 'suicide'. *From Eve to Evolution* acknowledges this legacy, but does not dwell on it.

For example, Hamlin argues that the anti-biological determinist arguments of white nineteenth-century feminists are more "nuanced and complex" than generally appreciated and were a resource "not just for white women but for everyone". On Gilman, Hamlin asserts that "at least most of the time, Gilman meant the 'human race' when she wrote the 'race' and that racism is not the defining characteristic of most of her writings". Although context is clearly crucial to a careful reading of this complicated intellectual history, it is hard to evaluate such claims without a more detailed treatment of the words and deeds of these feminist writers on the matter of race and class.

Nonetheless, this deeply researched and richly detailed picture of US feminism in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century is an important contribution to our understanding of the interrelation of gender politics and science. *From Eve to Evolution* firmly corrects the mistaken view that evolutionary biology and feminism are at odds. And it reveals a more diverse dialogue around the science of sexual equality in the era than is generally appreciated. ■

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