
The Woman That Never Evolved

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Natural selection is not always good, and depends (see Darwin) on many caprices of very foolish animals. GEORGE ELIOT, 1867

1

Some Women That Never Evolved

Biology, it is sometimes thought, has worked against women. Assumptions about the biological nature of men and women have frequently been used to justify submissive and inferior female roles and a double standard in sexual morality. It has been assumed that men are by nature better equipped to conduct the affairs of civilization, women to perpetuate the species; that men are the rational, active members of society, women merely passive, fecund, and nurturing. Hence, many readers will open a book about the biology of female primates with considerable apprehension.

Feminists in particular may rebel at the thought of looking to the science of biology for information that bears on the human condition. They may be put off by the fact that among our nearest relations, the other primates, the balance of power favors males in most species. Yet, if they persist, readers may be surprised by what else they learn concerning their distant cousins and, by inference, their own remote ancestresses. They will find no basis for thinking that women—or their evolutionary predecessors—have ever been dominant over men in the conventional sense of that word, but they will find substantial grounds for questioning stereotypes which depict women as inferior to men—as naturally less assertive, less intelligent, less competitive, or less political than men are.

For at least two reasons, feminists have tended to reject biological evidence about females of other species in their thinking about the human condition. First, there is a widespread misconception that "biology is destiny."¹ According to this view, if even a portion of the human male's dominance is ascribed to evolutionary causes, an intolerable status quo will have to be condoned as fundamentally unalterable. Second, biological evidence has been repeatedly misused to support ideological biases, and field studies have been designed and executed in the thrall of such biases. Certainly, this has been the case in the study of other primates. Research has focused on the way adult males maneuver for dominance while females attend to the tasks of mothering; it has neglected the manifestations of dominance and assertiveness in females themselves, behavior that sometimes brings females into conflict with males and with each other.

Primateology is a rapidly expanding field. The most accurate information about female primates has only been collected in the last decade. Much of it is confined to Ph.D. theses and technical accounts and has yet to find its way into the mainstream of the social sciences. Disastrously, experts writing about sex differences among primates have relied upon stereotypes of the female primate constructed in the early sixties.² Pretend this is a quiz. Which of the following recent statements about primate social structure, all made by eminent social scientists, also happen to be obsolete?

"The dominant male is obviously the central figure in the group's persistence over time."³

"Competition is peculiar to the male sex."⁴

"There is reason to believe that the female hierarchies are less stable. A female's status tends to change when she is in estrus, and to reflect the status of her male consort while she is in the mating phase of her cycle."⁵

The answer is that all three are out of date. Yet such stereotypes have led to the widespread impression that "primate females seem biologically unprogrammed to dominate political systems, and the whole weight of the relevant primates' breeding history militates against female participation in what we can call 'primate public life.'"⁶ As we shall see in

the course of this book, few statements about the biological origins of sexual asymmetries could be quite so far from the truth.

An occasional voice has warned that there was another side to this story—the work of the anthropologist Jane Lancaster comes to mind⁷—but the reports about competitive males and mothering females continue to roll out of the textbook mills and are currently entrenched in college curricula and in popular literature. By comparison, more accurate accounts are technical and less accessible. Not surprisingly, otherwise broadminded writers and policymakers in psychology and the humanities (particularly those sympathetic to feminist goals) have ignored the primate record or chosen to reject it altogether.⁸ As a curious result, today we find that theories explaining the nearly universal dominance of males fall into two categories: hypotheses that are either biologically oriented and informed by stereotypes (that is, views which contain a kernel of truth but are, on the whole, quite misleading), or those that eschew the primate evidence altogether and thereby ignore much that is relevant to understanding the human condition.

When I refer to dominance among humans, I mean the ability to coerce the behavior of others. Among nonhuman primates, a simpler definition is often feasible because dominance hierarchies can be recognized from observations of one-on-one interactions between individuals competing for the same desired resource. When speaking of nonhuman primates, then, I use "dominant" to describe the animal that usually wins in a one-on-one encounter, the animal that typically can approach, threaten, and displace another. No one is particularly satisfied with the concept of dominance. Typically, dominance is difficult to assess and highly dependent on context; furthermore, dominance is not necessarily related among different spheres of activity. Hence, the publicly acclaimed emperor may be ruled by his wife at home; a sated tyrant may lose a wedge of meat when matched against a particularly hungry minion; and the richest or most powerful male may not beget the most children if his wives are routinely unfaithful. Nevertheless, the ability of one individual to influ-

ence or coerce the behavior of others, usually by threatening to inflict damage but also by promising to give (or withhold) rewards, remains a real phenomenon, and a term for it is useful. Even the most ardent critics of the concept do not advocate total expurgation of the term.

Whatever definition we might choose, though, there seems to be a general consensus among anthropologists that for most human societies, sexual asymmetry appears in dominance relations, and it gives the edge to males. Hence,

Whereas some anthropologists argue that there are, or have been, truly egalitarian societies . . . and all agree that there are societies in which women have achieved considerable social recognition and power, none has observed a society in which women have publicly recognized power and authority surpassing that of men . . . Everywhere we find that women are excluded from certain crucial economic or political activities . . . It seems fair to say, then, that all contemporary societies are to some extent male-dominated, and that although the degree and expression of female subordination vary greatly, sexual asymmetry is presently a universal fact of human social life.⁹

The obvious question is, Why?

Psychologists and anthropologists have proposed a variety of explanations for male domination among humans. The following is not an exhaustive list, but it includes the major current theories.

Following Marx and Engels, one scenario begins with an egalitarian species. Only when an economic transition facilitated the accumulation of surpluses and trade, which in turn led to warfare in the defense of material goods and trade routes, did women lose out. As valuable producers but inferior warriors, they yield their autonomy to male capitalists.¹⁰

Post-Freudian theory holds that subordination of women results from conditions of socialization. Long periods of close association between mother and offspring foster close identification of daughters with their mothers. Whereas daughters fail to form any strong sense of separate identity, boys must struggle to define their own gender role, and in the process not only deny but also devalue all that seems feminine.¹¹

Anthropologists from the structural school tell us that people associate women and their procreative functions such as

menstruation and childbirth with Nature and natural processes. By contrast, men are identified with Culture and civilized processes. Because people perceive Culture to be superior to Nature, females by analogy are perceived as inferior.¹²

For many "biobehaviorists," it was Man the Hunter who usurped the independence of women: big-game hunting, a peculiarly human adaptation, led to social inequality between the sexes. In one widely cited version of the theory, as hunting became important, the strength of males combined with their freedom from encumbering babies quickly permitted them to monopolize the chase and the distribution of meat. Success depended on special male skills: visual-spatial capacities, stamina, stalking abilities, and especially cooperation. According to a now notorious extension of this scenario, "our intellect, interests, emotions, and basic social life—all are evolutionary products of the success of the hunting adaptation."¹³ (Curiously, few anthropologists have asked why intelligence never became sex-linked or why—if intelligence evolved among males to help them hunt—Nature should have squandered it on a sex that never hunted.) The hunting hypothesis was later refined to emphasize the importance of male predispositions to bond with other males: such bonds provided the power base for subsequent political preeminence achieved by men.¹⁴ Furthermore, male hunters were able to cement reciprocal relations with an even wider network of allies through the presentation of meat. Men engendered obligations and gained recognition by such gifts. Once male preeminence was established, females themselves became objects of exchange and were given in marriage by brothers or fathers who received wives for themselves in return.¹⁵

Although essentially male-centered and to some tastes "sexist," these theories rely on traditional anthropological tenets. Feminist reconstructions of this stage in human evolution are based on the same assumptions about early human ecological adaptations; they also focus on division of labor, sharing, the right to allocate resources, and the importance of ritual bonding. (Theory has even found its way into practice. Feminist educators, for example, have absorbed the notion that in order to compete successfully for power, women's socialization must

begin to incorporate the lessons and social reflexes to be learned from teamwork. In a recent book on managerial women, the authors advocate competitive team sports so that women leaders-in-training may participate in this contemporary analogue of hunting and tribal warfare.)¹⁶ In developing a new perspective, revisionists highlight female contributions to subsistence, tool manufacture, and cultural traditions, but they leave the basic outlines of early human ecology unchanged. For example, the feminist anthropologists Adrienne Zihlman and Nancy Tanner concur with the conventional view that people diverged from other primates around five million years ago, and they hypothesize that as early humans shifted from forest to savanna they increasingly shared resources, differentiated assignment of task by sex, and relied on tools. Zihlman and Tanner regard these changes as central to the transformation of our primate ancestors, but they also emphasize that women were gathering a large proportion of the food, that the vegetables women gathered were crucial to subsistence, and that it was women who tended to invent new food-getting technologies and to transmit this information from generation to generation.¹⁷ It is different wine in the same bottle: now woman is the toolmaker. From this perspective, male "superiority" is simply an impression conveyed by biases in data collection and analysis.¹⁸

Here, then, are five theories to explain male dominance, each highly informative in its own right. But they all share one striking deficiency. Each focuses upon the human condition and lays the burden of sexual inequality, real or mythical, at the doorstep of specifically human attributes: the production of surpluses and the subsequent rise of trade economies; the discovery of the "self" and the formation of ego boundaries; binary conceptualizations of the universe which engender oppositions such as Nature and Culture; big-game hunting; and a sexual division of labor related to subsistence. Each of these theories may contribute to our understanding of the human case, but even taken together, they are insufficient to explain the widespread occurrence of sexual inequality in nature, inasmuch as they account for only a small portion of known cases. They cannot explain sexual asymmetry in even

one other species. Yet male dominance characterizes the majority of several hundred other species that, like our own, belong to the order Primates. Save for a handful of highly informative exceptions, sexual asymmetries are nearly universal among primates. Logic alone should warn us against explaining such a widespread phenomenon with reference only to a specialized subset of human examples.

IT IS of course completely appropriate in some respects that theories to explain the peculiar status of women relative to men should focus as they do on uniquely human attributes. We do differ from other animals in our use of language, in our creation and transmission of value systems and advanced technologies, and, most importantly, in our capacity to formulate and articulate conscious decisions. Other creatures simply fall into place within social systems that persist because they happen to be evolutionarily stable. We, by contrast, exhibit an insatiable desire to imagine or bring about novel social systems, some of them idealistic or even utopian in character.

So our idealism—and our ability to consciously change our society—sets us apart from other creatures, but that does not give us license to devalue the facts about other primates. Indeed, awareness of the differences, when combined with knowledge of our close relation by common descent with the other apes, ought instead to make us wonder out loud how we could have come to be the way we are. Although opinions differ as to whether chimpanzees or gorillas are our closest living relatives, it is clear that we are more closely related to these two species of great apes than either chimps or gorillas are to the third great ape, the orangutan. By current estimates, only five million years have elapsed since the nearest common ancestor we share with chimps. The genes of humans and chimps are biochemically almost indistinguishable—a fact which has led scientists to suspect that a relatively small number of genes governing the timing of development make all the difference between speaking, culture-hearing humans and our less talkative cousins.¹⁹

There is an impressive degree of continuity in the experi-

ence of humans and other higher primates (this includes both monkeys and apes) that goes far beyond similar anatomy and biochemistry, fingernails, and stereoscopic vision. We and the other higher primates perceive the world in a similar fashion, and we process information in similar ways. For example, we share striking neuroanatomical patterns in those portions of the brain concerned with memory.²⁰ Expressions of emotion, such as the smile, can be traced from species to species and identified in very rudimentary form in the "open-mouth display" of other primates.²¹ Under appropriate conditions female primates, from hamadryas baboons living in a harem to women living in college dormitories, tend to synchronize their menstrual cycles. At the beginning of the school term, young women arriving from all parts of the country are cycling on different schedules; by the end of the school year, close friends menstruate around the same time of the month.²² Several recent studies have shown that women, like other primates, are more likely to initiate sexual activity around the time of ovulation (a controversial finding, discussed in detail in Chapter 7), and there is increasing evidence that other aspects of woman's sexuality, such as her capacity to experience orgasms (Chapter 8), are shared by other primate females. Most importantly, as we shall learn in Chapters 5 and 6, it is competition among individuals of the same sex (not just competition among males, but also among females) that has permitted reproductive exploitation of one sex by the other to evolve and be maintained (that is, a member of one sex manipulating another to his or her own reproductive advantage). In this respect, humans may be far more similar to other primates than we are different from them.

On the other hand, by refusing to talk about biology, we effectively hide the fact that there are important ways in which human females are in a worse position than are females in other species. (One of the justifications, after all, for ignoring the animal evidence is that supposedly it paints a picture prejudicial to the aspirations of women.) Among humans there is a universal reliance on shared or bartered food. In many societies, a woman without a man to hunt or earn income, or a man without a wife to do the cooking, is at considerable disad-

vantage. By contrast, among all nonhuman primates each adult is entirely responsible for supplying his or her own food. The only exceptions involve occasional meat sharing among chimpanzees, but even here males tend to monopolize meat from cooperatively hunted prey (small ungulates and other primates); females rely for animal protein on termites and other individually obtained small prey. Among chimpanzees there is a rudimentary division of labor by sex, but in no case does one sex depend on the other for any staple.²³

In this respect, female primates (and also, one could argue, the males) enjoy greater autonomy than do either men or women. In roughly 80 percent of human societies, fathers or brothers exercise some control over adolescent and adult females. Such *authority* does not exist among other primates. The Marxists have a point, patriarchy tends to develop where women produce commodities and not just offspring. We have a uniquely elaborate division of labor by sex, and a unique reliance on sharing.²⁴ But more basic asymmetries between the sexes, based on reproductive exploitation of one sex by the other, long predate the human condition. The fact that males are almost universally dominant over females throughout the primate order does not mean that males escape being used! But dominant they are, with only a few (very important) exceptions (Chapters 3 and 4). Since we are typically primate in this respect, it seems foolish to continue to focus our attention exclusively on those features of our way of life in which we are *untypical* of other primates. Male authority is indeed uniquely human, but its origins are not.

PRIMATOLOGISTS tend to see the world a bit differently from other people. Not surprisingly—it's an odd occupation, after all, crawling under brambles to keep a monkey or an ape in view. Primatologists pay attention to what animals do, not to what they say they do. And primatologists tend to be excessively curious about ancestry. What sort of ancestor did the creature at hand evolve from? And why? What social and environmental pressures made it advantageous for an individual to possess a certain trait? Because of the taxonomic

relationship between us and the other primates, few primatologists can resist the temptation to combine an anthropocentric concern for *Homo sapiens* with this urge to understand origins. A peculiar perspective, no doubt, but it is my contention that a broader understanding of other primates is going to help us to expand the concept of human nature to include both sexes, and that it is going to help us to understand the problems we face in attempting to eliminate social inequalities based on sex. In the process, we will also find out why some current notions of what it means to be female depict natures that never did, and never could have, evolved within the primate lineage.

For example, the belief that women once ruled human affairs still enjoys a certain currency among some feminists, particularly those who work in a Marxist tradition. They inherit the notion, by way of Friedrich Engels, from a Swiss jurist and student of Roman law, Johann Bachofen. Supporting his ideas with copious references to ancient mythology embellished with bits of archaeology and pre-Hellenic history, Bachofen in 1861 published an outline of human history entitled *The Law of the Mother* (*Das Mutterrecht*). In it, he proposed that people first lived in a state of cheerful promiscuity which then gave way to a more orderly society controlled by women. Matriarchy was supplanted, gradually, by systems in which men were dominant, and those have persisted until the present. Bachofen believed that a matriarchal phase was universal in the history of human societies and was not a special adaptation to environmental or political circumstances.²⁵

Yet the weight of evidence from anthropology and archaeology since Bachofen's time has not favored his view. To be sure, there have been societies in which property was passed through the female line and children were identified primarily as their mother's offspring rather than their father's. Such matrilineal (not matriarchal) arrangements are far from rare among human societies. About 15 percent of the world's cultures reckon inheritance through mothers, and in about half of these a man goes to live with his wife's family when he marries. (As a rule these societies are horticultural, and the property in question is a garden plot passed from

mother to daughter.) Yet even in these circumstances men tend to become the administrators of the family's wealth and retain the governing voice in collective affairs.²⁶ It is certainly possible that some groups of women banded together to live like Amazons, but such societies were never a universal stage in human evolution.

Myths about women ruling the world usually come linked with a theory about the true nature of women. The prototypical matriarchs, the Amazons, were believed to be on the whole aggressive and warlike—masculine spirits in drag. At the other extreme, the idealized women of *Herland*—Charlotte Perkins Gilman's marvelous 1915 utopian novel about an all-female society—were even-tempered and utterly rational creatures whose solidarity dumbfounded a male spy into exclaiming, "Women can't cooperate—it's against nature."²⁷ Both traditions have recent exponents. Valerie Solanis revived the Amazonian ethos in her 1967 manifesto for the Society for Cutting Up Men (SCUM),²⁸ while Elizabeth Gould Davis refurbished Gilman's vision in her book *The First Sex*, which averred that there once was a "golden age of queendoms, when peace and justice prevailed on earth and the gods of war had not been born."²⁹

The matriarchal fallacy and the myths linked with it about the nature of women are not merely a misreading of the anthropological and paleontological records. They have also provided a refuge from and a defense against another, more popular nineteenth-century belief about the nature of women: that they are sexually passive creatures devoted to the tasks of mothering and that they are devoid of political instincts. This doctrine of female inferiority has disfigured several ostensibly impartial realms, particularly the study of human evolution. Such ideas have predisposed biologists to some curious conclusions about women and female animals in general. For example, it is often assumed—most often implicitly—that only males gain an evolutionary advantage from being competitive or sexually adventurous. To the extent that female behavior contradicts these assumptions (the subject of Chapter 7), it is dismissed as merely a by-product of the masculine character.

I am scarcely the first person to point out that the evolution of female traits is no less subject to the rigors of competition than that of males. Just four years after Charles Darwin published *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), Antoinette Brown Blackwell published a polite critique of the book. She made no bones about her commitment to both feminism and to Darwin's theories about natural selection. But Blackwell wished that she could broaden his perspective.

Mr. Darwin, also, eminently a student of organic structures, and of the causes which have produced them, with their past and present characters, has failed to hold definitely before his mind the principle that the difference of sex, whatever it may consist in, must itself be subject to *natural selection* and to evolution. Nothing but the exacting task before him of settling the Origin of all Species and the Descent of Man, through all the ages, could have prevented his recognition of ever-widening organic differences evolved in two distinct lines. With great wealth of detail, he has illustrated his theory of how the male has probably acquired additional masculine characters; but he seems never to have thought of looking to see whether or not the females had developed equivalent feminine characters.³⁰

In accepting the theory of natural selection, Blackwell firmly rejected the doctrine of female inferiority and the idea that females are somehow incomplete versions of males—beliefs which “need not be accepted without question, even by their own school of evolutionists.” But the evolutionists were not listening.

In the late nineteenth century the popular understanding of evolution became permeated by social Darwinism, a philosophy most closely identified with Herbert Spencer, who was energetically adapting Darwin's theories to fit his own political views. Spencer thought females never had been inherently equal to males and could never be; subordination of women was not only natural but, in his view, desirable.³¹

Social Darwinism has, almost indelibly, tainted most people's understanding of evolutionary theory—certainly as it applies to human beings. Yet social Darwinism differs from Darwinism-without-adjectives in one all-important way, and ignoring this distinction has been one of the most unfortunate

and long-lived mistakes of science journalism. Darwinism proper is devoted to analyzing all the diverse forms of life according to the theory of natural selection. Darwinists describe competition between unequal individuals, but they place no value judgment on either the competition or its outcome. Natural-selection theory provides a powerful way to understand the subordination of one individual, or group of individuals, by another, but it in no way attempts to condone (or condemn) subordination.

By contrast, social Darwinists attempt to *justify* social inequality. Social Darwinism explicitly assumes that competition leads to “improvement” of a species; the mechanism of improvement is the unequal survival of individuals and their offspring. Applying this theory to the human condition, social Darwinists hold that those individuals who win the competition, who survive and thrive, must necessarily be the “best.” Social inequalities between the sexes, or between classes or races, represent the operation of natural selection and therefore should not be tampered with, since such tampering would impede the progress of the species. It is this latter brand of Darwinism that became popularly associated with evolutionary biology. The association is incorrect, but it helps to explain why feminists have steadfastly resisted biological perspectives.

Blackwell's informed dissent was drowned out in the wake of popular acceptance of social Darwinism. Her contribution to evolutionary biology can be summed up with one phrase: the road not taken. This turning point, over a century ago, left a rift between feminism and evolutionary biology still not mended. Historically and politically, there was obvious justification for the split. There has been a prevailing bias among evolutionary theorists in favor of stressing sexual competition among males for access to females at the expense of careful scrutiny of what females in their own right were doing. Among their recurring themes are the male's struggle for pre-eminence and his quest for “sexual variety” in order to inseminate as many females as possible. Visionaries of male-male competition stressed the imagery of primate females herded by tyrannical male consorts: sexually cautious

females coyly safeguarding their fertility until the appropriate male partner arrives; women waiting at campsites for their men to return; and, particularly, females so preoccupied with motherhood that they have little respite to influence their species' social organization. Alternative possibilities were neglected: that selection favored females who were assertive, sexually active, or highly competitive, who adroitly manipulated male consorts, or who were as strongly motivated to gain high social status as they were to hold and carry babies. As a result, until just recently descriptions of other primate species have told little about females except in their capacity as mothers. Natural histories of monkeys and apes have described the behavior of males with far greater detail and accuracy than they have described the lives of females. Small wonder, then, that audiences sensitized to both the excesses of social Darwinism and conventional sexism have found this emphasis upsetting.

Yet evolutionary biology, and its offspring, sociobiology,³² are not inherently sexist. The proportion of "sexists" among their proponents is probably no greater than the proportion among scientists generally. To be sure, contemporary analyses of mammalian breeding systems can cause even a committed Darwinian like myself to contemplate her gender with foreboding. Yet, it is all too easy to forget, while quaking, that sociobiology, if read as a prescription for life rather than a description of the way some creatures behave, makes it seem bad luck to be born either sex.

THE purpose of this book, then, is to dispel some long-held myths about the nature of females, and to suggest a few plausible hypotheses about the evolution of woman that are more in line with current data. Throughout the discussion, it will be well to keep in mind a central paradox of the human condition—that our species possesses the capacity to carry sexual inequality to its greatest known extremes, but we also possess the potential to realize an unusual social equality between the sexes should we choose to exercise that potential. However, if social inequality based on sex is a serious prob-

lem, and if we really intend to do something constructive about it, we are going to need a comprehensive understanding of its causes. I am convinced that we will never adequately understand the present causes of sexual asymmetry in our own species until we understand its evolutionary history in the lines from which we descend. Since we cannot travel back in time to see that history in the making, we must turn to those surrogates we have, other living primates, and study them comparatively. Without the perspective such a study affords, we will remain ignorant of the most fundamental aspects of our own situation, in part because of a diminished ability to ask interesting questions about it.

morality which could be articulated and set down in the form of legal systems. In the Western world, the rights of "man" were gradually extended to both sexes. Women can now aspire to a degree of independence corresponding to that of men. In this respect people are in a class by themselves. Of all females, the potential for freedom and the chance to control their own destinies is greatest among women.

[First college president:] Dear Lord, what next. First blacks, now women.

[Second college president:] Just give it another couple of years and it will all go back to normal.

Conversation in an elevator, overheard by a third college president,

JAQUELYN MATTFELD OF BARNARD, 1979.

Afterword

This effort to correct a bias within evolutionary biology, to expand the concept of "human nature" to include both sexes, continues an endeavor begun over a century ago. As early as 1875, Antoinette Brown Blackwell warned of the intellectual hazard from imagining that only one sex evolved. A major goal of this book has been to describe the female primates that did evolve over the last seventy million years. [By and large, these females are highly competitive, socially involved, and sexually assertive individuals.] Competition among females is one of the major determinants of primate social organization, and it has contributed to the organisms women are today. Yet, social scientists have collected little information on this facet of feminine personalities. Never before now, I suspect, has it been so important to take account of the full range of woman's nature.

Throughout millions of years of evolution, mammalian mothers have differed from one another in two important ways: in their capacity to produce and care for offspring and in their ability to enlist the support of males, or at least to forestall them from damaging their infants. Female primates have differed from one another in their capacity to influence the reproductive careers of their descendants. Here is a sex

wide open to natural selection, and evolution has weighed heavily upon it.

Those same forces which predisposed females to intelligence and assertiveness also selected the highly competitive individuals among them. This is the dark underside of the feminist dream. If it is shown—as I believe it will be—that there are no important differences between males and females in intelligence, initiative, or administrative and political capabilities, that women are no less qualified in these areas than men are, one has to accept also that these potentials did not appear gratuitously as a gift from Nature. Competition was the trial by fire from which these capacities emerged. The feminist ideal of a sex less egotistical, less competitive by nature, less interested in dominance, a sex that will lead us back to the “golden age of queendoms, when peace and justice prevailed on earth,” is a dream that may not be well founded.

Widespread stereotypes devaluing the capacities and importance of women have not improved either their lot or that of human societies. But there is also little to be gained from countemyths that emphasize woman’s natural innocence from lust for power, her cooperativeness and solidarity with other women. Such a female never evolved among the other primates. Even under those conditions most favorable to high status for females—monogamy and closely bonded “sisterhoods”—competition among females remains a fact of primate existence. In a number of cases it leads to oppression of some by others; in other cases competition among females has forestalled the emergence of equality with males. As it happens, a particular subset of human societies (patrilineal and stratified) takes the prize for “sexism.” Yet the same human ingenuity that eroded the position of women in those cases scattered—in other soils—the seeds of sexual equality.

The female with “equal rights” never evolved; she was invented, and fought for consciously with intelligence, stubbornness, and courage. But the advances made by feminists rest on a precarious framework built upon a unique foundation of historical conditions, values, economic opportunities, heroism on the part of women who fought for suffrage, and perhaps especially technological developments which led to

birth control and labor-saving devices and hence minimized physical differences between the sexes. This structure is fragile. Should it collapse, it is far from certain that the scaffolding needed to surmount oppressive natural and cultural barriers could ever be pieced together again.

To assume that women today are regaining a natural preeminence, or reinstating some original social equality, belittles the real accomplishment and underestimates its fragility. However well-intentioned, these myths pose grave dangers to the actual progress of women’s rights. They devalue the unique advances made by women in the last few hundred years and tempt us to a false security. Injustices remain; there are abundant new problems; yet, never before—not in seventy million years—have females been so nearly free to pursue their own destinies. But it won’t be easy.