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Feminist Encounters with Evolutionary Psychology

Introduction

Rachel O'Neill

This Section of Australian Feminist Studies is the product of an event that took place at King's College London in January 2015, hosted as part of the UK-based 'Critical Sexology' seminar series. Participants at this event – feminist scholars working across the fields of linguistics, cultural studies, sociology, and psychology – were invited to reflect on their encounters with evolutionary psychology (EP). As the event organiser, I was interested to prompt a discussion about how EP shapes the contours of contemporary feminist scholarship, insofar as arguments from EP are something feminist scholars continually find ourselves coming across and coming up against both within and outside the academy. Conversely, I was interested in thinking about how encounters with EP might illuminate certain limit-points in contemporary feminist theorising.

The antagonisms between feminism and EP are well known and have been extensively rehearsed (see e.g. Segal 2000; Tiefer 2004). However, in recent years it has been suggested that an entente cordiale between the two fields may be emerging. In 2011, *Sex Roles* published a Special Issue entitled 'Feminism and Evolutionary Psychology: Allies, Adversaries, or Both?' In their introduction to the volume, editors Christine Smith and Julie Konik (2011) retrace the acrimonious history between feminism and EP, while also signalling the possibility of a more conciliatory relationship between the two fields emerging. Elsewhere feminist scholars have placed renewed emphasis on developing both empirical rejoinders and ideological rebuttals to EP scholarship, as in the 2012 Hypatia Feminist Ethics and Social Thought (FEAST) Cluster 'Feminist Critiques of Evolutionary Psychology' (Meyers 2012), as well as the more recent *Dialectical Anthropology* Special Issue 'Challenging Dangerous Ideas: A Multi-Disciplinary Critique of Evolutionary Psychology' (Grossi et al. 2014).

Where these collections have, in different ways, debated the compatibility of feminism and EP, this Section charts an alternative trajectory. Using our own encounters with EP as a means to raise broader questions about the relationship between knowledge and politics, the essays collected for this Section attempt to think through some of the following problematics. To begin, how can feminists negotiate the double complexity of evolutionary psychology as a field of academic enquiry as well as a conduit for popular assumptions about sex and gender? Can the enduring appeal of EP as an interpretative schema or framework of understanding be mapped onto broader cultural patterns? In what ways does EP, in both its scholarly and popular manifestations, contribute to the naturalisation of sexual difference that has become a defining feature of contemporary postfeminism? Are there unexamined continuities between evolutionary psychology and neoliberal rationalities, particularly with regard discourses of individualism, hierarchy, and meritocracy? And, in a different vein, how might the concerted opposition to EP within much feminist scholarship inhibit or impede certain kinds of theoretical innovation? On what basis might feminist scholars be able to forge more productive engagements with EP? Is it possible to counter the

politically contentious elements of EP while utilising the insights scholarship in this field might provide for feminist theorisations of subjectivity and relationality, affect and embodiment?

Opening this Section, Deborah Cameron sketches some of the earliest engagements by feminists with evolutionary theory, beginning with feminist responses to Darwin's *The Descent of Man* ([1871] 2004). She then turns to reflect on her own initial encounters with EP during the 1990s, and discusses the trajectory through which EP went from being a relatively marginal academic enterprise struggling to cast off accusations of racism and sexism, to an extremely influential field of enquiry with reach far beyond the confines of academia. Cameron describes how EP came to impinge directly on her own area of research as a feminist linguist, as assumptions about sexual difference derived from and informed by EP began to pervade both academic and popular accounts of gender and language (see also Cameron 2007, 2009). Conspicuous in this regard has been the tendency for scholarly EP to invoke popular self-help texts such as John Gray's *Men are From Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992) as evidence of biologically-ordained gender differences, in direct contradiction to the wealth of research on this subject produced by linguists as well as anthropologists.

Situating these developments alongside broader social and cultural shifts taking place in societies of the global north towards the end of the twentieth century, Cameron argues that the renewed intellectual and cultural authority of EP at this time can be understood as part of a wider backlash against feminism. By locating the origins of sexual difference in the past, EP lends ideological support to the postfeminist credo that women and men are naturally and properly different. In this way, the *raison d'être* of feminism is undermined, as it is claimed that social relations between women and men are ultimately 'subject to the laws of nature, rather than man' (Edley and Wetherell 2001, 452).

That the relationship between EP and postfeminism requires greater attention has elsewhere been noted by Suzanne Kelly, who contends that the analysis of postfeminism is crucial to understanding why EP accounts of sex and gender continue to animate the popular imaginary (2014, 288). In her contribution to this Section Ngairé Donaghue articulates an understanding of postfeminism as a cultural sensibility in which feminist concerns appear to have been 'taken into account', while at the same time feminism is 'undone' through the assumption that gender equality has already been or is in the process of being achieved (see also Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009). She explores the workings of 'neuro-sexism' (Fine 2010) within the undergraduate social psychology classroom and describes how assumptions about 'hardwired' sexual difference based in EP routinely short-circuit classroom discussions of neuroplasticity. While her students readily embrace theories of neuroplasticity to explain differences between cultural groups, they are often hesitant to engage parallel explanations in the case of sex/gender.

In order to understand this hesitancy – as well as the more concerted forms of resistance such discussions often provoke – Donaghue posits that it is necessary to examine how evolutionary and neuropsychology work in tandem to create an 'evolutionary-neuropsychology heuristic' which frames sexual difference as simply and unavoidably biological. This heuristic is contiguous with contemporary postfeminism, as differences in the lives and experiences of women and men are understood as simultaneously 'natural'

and 'chosen'. In this way, sexual difference comes to be seen as inevitable, and is thus rendered an 'inappropriate target of political analysis or intervention' (363). Donaghue's experiences are sure to resonate with feminist scholars elsewhere, who similarly find that their class-rooms have become spaces for unexpected and perhaps unwanted encounters with EP. By elucidating the precise means by which she introduces students to alternative perspectives in order to promote more reasoned and nuanced understandings of sex/gender, she offers a valuable lesson in feminist pedagogy.

In an extension of these same themes, Laura García-Favaro develops an analysis of what she terms 'postfeminist biologism' in the comment threads and editorial content of online women's magazines. Examining the advice given to users concerned about their partners' furtive pornography use, García-Favaro demonstrates how assumptions about sexual difference informed by EP pervade these discussions, as users routinely mobilise lay accounts of 'sexual strategies theory' and 'parental investment theory' to explain and justify the use of pornography among heterosexual men. In this way, EP naturalises inequality in intimate relationships by reinforcing a discourse of male immutability and female adaptation. García-Favaro's research is consistent with arguments developed elsewhere by Martha McCaughey (2008), for whom the mainstreaming of EP has served to reinforce an evolutionary discourse of male sexuality. Her analysis also finds resonance with recent work by Alison Winch on 'postfeminist sisterhood' (2014) by considering how relationships among women – in this case, women's online peer networks – can perpetuate patriarchal gender regimes.

An especially important aspect of García-Favaro's analysis is the attention she gives to the discursive and linguistic parallels between women's online magazines and academic EP literature. So proximate are these registers, so closely do their logics mirror one another, that at times it becomes difficult to distinguish popular from scholarly discourse. In drawing attention to the burgeoning EP literature on pornography – a development García-Favaro notes has largely gone without commentary from feminist media and cultural studies scholars – her contribution spotlights concerns about the colonisation of the social sciences by EP (see also Rose 2001). García-Favaro's contribution underscores Cameron's contention that it is the meta-narrative of EP that poses the greatest difficulty for feminist scholars, while also highlighting the importance of paying attention to current developments in EP research and theory. It is not simply that assumptions about sexual difference derived from EP inform popular assumptions about sex and sexuality; rather, EP scholarship is consistent with and complicit in the depoliticisation of pornography as a key tenet of contemporary postfeminism (McRobbie 2008; see also Antevska and Gavey 2015).

In the final contribution to this Section, Celia Roberts explores the possibility that feminist scholars may have something to gain from our encounters with EP scholarship. Building on her recent book, *Puberty in Crisis* (2015), Roberts considers what value scholarship from the peripheries of EP – specifically the work of Stephen Porges – might have for understanding early onset puberty, providing insight into the evolutionary neurophysiology of emotions. She discusses her anxiety about engaging EP scholarship in this way, for fear of being met with accusations of biologism; after all, the very mention of biology is often seen as a transgression against feminism (Stacey 1993), returning us wholesale to the kinds of essentialism

that feminist theory is supposed to have gotten away from or moved past (Hemmings 2005). Confronting rather than eliding these difficulties, Roberts centres her analysis around the question: 'How might it be possible to think about biological processes, flows and encounters as part of sex and sexuality whilst remaining committed to feminist projects of recognising inequalities, resisting oppressive normativities and fostering and celebrating differences?' (377)

Foregrounding the dense entanglements of the social, the psychological, and the physiological, Roberts is part of a broader cohort of feminist theorists seeking to reengage questions of biology and nature in order to think differently about soma, psyche, affect, and materiality (Cvetkovich 2012; Fannin 2014; Gunnarsson 2013; Martin 2007; Wilson 2015). This kind of scholarship refuses conventional distinctions made within much feminist work between biology and culture in order to pursue more complicated trajectories of theorising, exploring questions which have tended to remain out of bounds for feminist theory. Roberts demonstrates that engaging with EP scholarship need not mean ceding ground to conceptually simplistic and politically regressive modes of biological determinism. Indeed, it may well be that engaging the insights of EP for understanding embodied processes and relational dynamics may enable feminist scholars to counteract the reductive impulses of biologism that manifest in this and other fields.

While the purpose of this set of interventions is not to debate the compatibility or otherwise of feminist and EP scholarship, it is instructive to consider how such debates have played out elsewhere. In their contribution to the aforementioned Sex Roles Special Issue, prominent evolutionary psychologists David Buss and David Schmitt praise what they view as the 'maturation of the interface of evolutionary psychology and feminist perspectives' (2011, 768) and herald the 'beginnings of a rapprochement between feminism and evolutionary psychology' (2011, 771). The authors summarise what they take to be the similarities and differences between EP and feminism: 'Evolutionary psychology is a scientific meta-theoretical paradigm designed to understand human nature and has no political agenda [...] Feminism, in contrast, is partly a scholarly scientific enterprise, but also often contains explicitly political agendas' (Buss and Schmitt 2011, 770).

Indexing the political agenda of feminist scholarship while maintaining that EP has none, Buss and Schmitt seamlessly reproduce a discursive pattern Maria do Mar Pereira has elsewhere characterised as 'dismissive recognition' (2012, 296), whereby the value of feminist scholarship is both asserted and denied. For Pereira, such rhetorical configurations are the equivalent of 'yes, but' statements: there is an acknowledgement that feminist scholarship is important and useful, while at the same time the credibility of such work is called into question. In Buss and Schmitt's formulation, feminist scholarship lacks epistemic authority because it fails to adhere to the ostensibly 'objective' and 'scientific' approaches to knowledge production enumerated within EP. In a familiar rhetorical move, the authors portray themselves as sympathetic to feminist concerns, but simultaneously raise doubts over the validity of feminist knowledge claims.

To appreciate the full implications of this, it is necessary to recognise postfeminism as a cultural sensibility which not only shapes the social landscape but also patterns academic discourse (see Gill and Donaghue 2013; McRobbie 2009; O'Neill 2015). In the academy as elsewhere, the undoing of

feminism is frequently achieved not through repudiation but through incorporation. This is a theme touched upon by Pereira when she notes that 'one of the biggest obstacles to producing a comprehensive feminist transformation of social science theory and research is the continued mainstream defusing of the critical thrust of feminist contributions' (2012, 286). While not explicitly articulated as such, Pereira's analysis is nevertheless concerned with the same 'double move' critically interrogated by scholars of postfeminism, whereby feminism is both 'taken into account' and 'undone'. Through processes of 'epistemic splitting' (Pereira 2012), feminist scholarship is separated out into that which is valuable and may be retained, and that which is irrelevant and can be disregarded.

In the context of an apparent rapprochement between feminism and EP, these kinds of partitions enable non-feminist scholars to engage the insights of feminist work – and thereby access the various benefits this can yield – while shrugging off the fuller implications of feminist arguments regarding the politics of knowledge as well as feminist demands for a radical transformation of society. Contributions to this Section demonstrate that, whatever its pretensions to political neutrality, EP has political implications and political effects. To this end, feminist scholars may ask: is it really sufficient for EP scholars to claim that their work is without a political agenda, when EP concepts and theories not only rely on and reproduce normative gendered assumptions, but are routinely invoked elsewhere to maintain and justify gender inequality? If an entente cordiale between feminism and EP is to be reached – the desirability of any such arrangement notwithstanding – it remains to be seen whether and how this can be done in a manner that preserves the intellectual integrity of feminist scholarship and actively contributes towards realising the political goals of feminism as an emancipatory project.

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