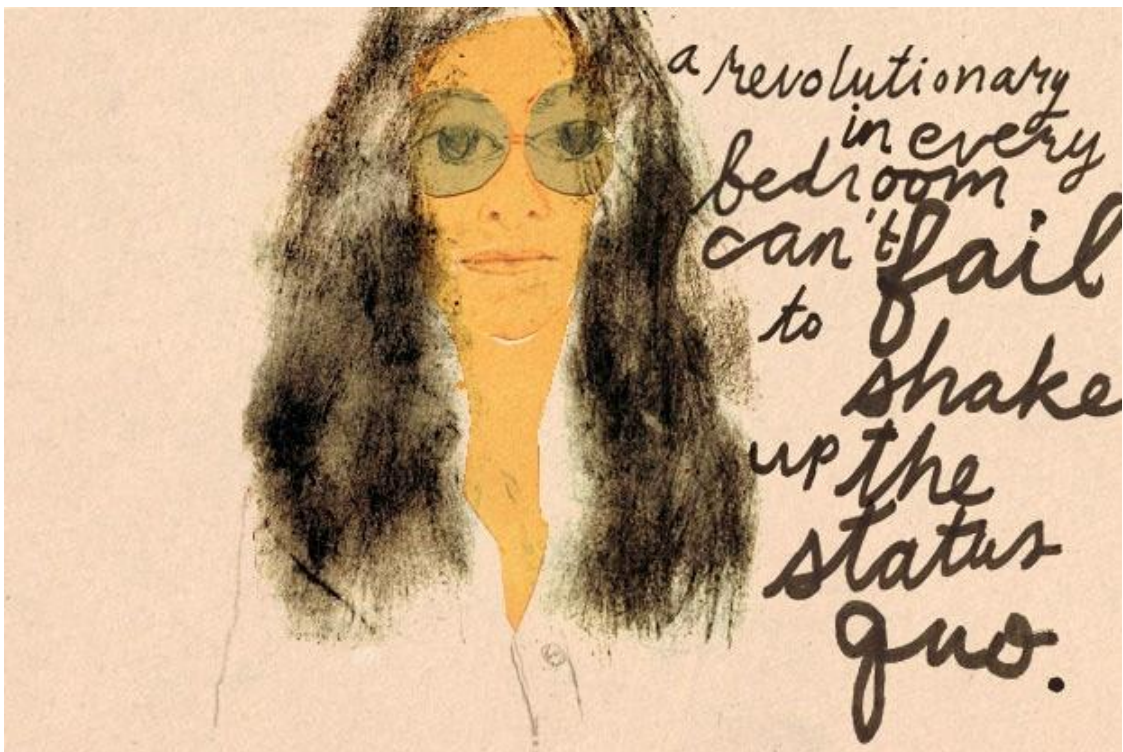


# Reclaiming utopia and the political imagination: Revisiting Firestone's dialectics of sex

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## **Abstract**

Utopianism is a way to imagine and conceptualise images of an-other world, to critique the current world, and to generate a desire to move to a better place. It is an endeavour aimed at the root of social and political life. Scholars writing on the utopian tradition, however, have suggested that there has been a demise of utopia, signalled in an inability or unwillingness to engage with utopian concepts of imagination and improvement. This thesis suggests a theory of feminist dialectical utopianism as one way to counteract the demise of utopia and draws on *The Dialectic of Sex*, a 1970 manifesto published by radical feminist Shulamith Firestone. The feminist dialectical utopianism draws on orthodox Marxist ideas and alters them simultaneously, creating a theory which prioritises the interrelation and conflict of things such as the individual and community, space and time and the ideological and material. While Firestone's utopian goals aim to resolve the inequality between men and women through an achievement of an androgynous cultural revolution, her methodology is crucial in understanding how we can reconceptualise utopia in a more general way. Firestone's work is typically disregarded and caricatured, however, this thesis aims to explore her work in a more honest manner, and explore how these 'dusty' ideas of radical feminism, dialectics and utopia are becoming increasingly relevant and important in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Introduction: The Demise of Utopia

Utopianism provides a way to imagine and conceptualise images of an-other world, to critique the current world, and to generate a desire to move to a better place. It is crucially important to progressive politics for these reasons. Zygmunt Bauman outlines the relationship between modernity and utopia, citing Thomas More's *Utopia* in 1516 as the signal of the beginning of a truly utopian era. "For the next few centuries", Bauman (2007) continues, "the modern world was to be an optimistic world; a world-living-towards- utopia" (p.95). While utopias were not a new phenomenon, for example Plato's *Republic* in 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE an earlier and similarly well recognised utopian construction, the period of modernity saw the rise of the use of utopias in literature and political ideology as modernity fostered the conditions which would encourage their growth. Bauman (2007) claims that the two major preconditions for utopianism are firstly, "an overwhelming... feeling that the world was not functioning properly" (p.96) and secondly, the confidence in human potency to rise to the task, the belief that "we, humans, can do it" (p.94) and that these conditions were present in the modern era.

Scholars writing on the utopian tradition, however, have suggested that since at least the 1950s there has been a demise of the utopian faith that people can change their social environment, and a wider loss of radicalism, undermining Bauman's utopian preconditions (Jacoby, 1994, p.4). More than just a loss of faith, Marxist geographer David Harvey (2000) argues that utopian challenges to the status quo are routinely mocked (p.154), feeding into a sense of helplessness that encourages us to believe that regardless of the situation, it is impossible to change on a large scale, because, indeed, there is no alternative

to the systems we have in place (p.157). Harvey's *Spaces of Hope* (2000) provides a crucial exploration of the links between dualism and the demise of utopia, as well as a new theory of utopianism which aims to revitalise the theory and overcome issues of inequality. Political and historical theorist Perry Anderson (2004) similarly traces the wider defeat of utopianism to the period between the late 1960s and late 1990s which he argues was characterised by the defeat of anyone who fought against the accepted political order (p.71).

Although dystopia is still a common theme in literature, arts, and politics, there is a contemporary acceptance of an end or failure of positive utopian thinking which contributes to a general dismissal of the concept as a social or political tool. There has been a change in narrative away from one of radical imagination which saw utopias such as More's *Utopia* (1516), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1979) and even superhero worlds such as Wonder Woman's Paradise Island (1941), to one of despair and hopelessness. As political frameworks such as neoliberalism and postmodernism arguably come to define our contemporary western moment, an integrated utopianism struggles to flourish. The metanarratives that drive utopian visions for social and political change are replaced by individual and partial explanations. The consequence of all of this is that we are at risk of becoming politically sterile and losing an element of progressive social and political change.

Disregarding utopian theory is in part, disregard for the political potential in its "radical otherness" (Sargisson, 2013, p.251) and its implicit criticism of the society from which it

emerges. The critique that utopianism offers of the current system acts “as a navigational compass for transformative decision-making in the present” (Curran, 2009, p.197), allowing one to view the situation from another place. The radical element of utopia comes from the common desire to replace the entire social and political system with a different one. By accepting a narrative of despair and inability to change the current situation, the potential for progressive change lessens, as the opportunities that utopian thinking provides, such as envisioning other, better places, either building on or completely reimagining the current system, are lost. The move away from utopianism is not limited to academia, it is typically a global, pervasive dismissal of themes such as idealism, imagination and communitarianism in favour of realism and individualism. Utopia is popularly understood as either an abstract way of viewing the world we inhabit, or, alternatively a totalitarian ideology. Alternatively, utopia has been described as a “code word on the left for socialism or communism”, and on the right “synonymous with ‘totalitarianism’, or, in effect with Stalinism” (Jameson, 2004, p.35). Rather than pushing these narratives of utopia which are tarred from their historical critiques, by reconceptualising utopia the demise can be replaced with a radical imagination once again.

Marxist political theorist Frederic Jameson, a scholar concerned largely with contemporary social trends, (2004) writes in “The Politics of Utopia” of “the great utopian production of the populist and progressive era in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century; and finally of the utopianism of the 1960s”. People in these periods, Jameson (2004) argues, understood reality as malleable, but not the wider system that creates it, and that this gap often opens up “a moment of ideational and utopian-creative free play in the mind



itself or in the political imagination” (p.45-46). Periods of social unrest are often paralleled with periods of no political direction. When people believe that they can change their reality, but are unable to see how they can change the system that determines their reality, it creates an opportunity for the creation of ‘utopian free-play’ (Jameson, 2004). For example, feminists of the second wave movement in the United States were unhappy with the effects of a highly patriarchal society, including discrimination in the public and personal realms and a lack of reproductive autonomy, and could see small ways to adjust their lives to make them slightly better. What the radical feminists of this time did, and where the radical feminist utopia emerges from, is the desire to change the system completely so that these small adjustments do not need to be made.

We can identify a similar gap in Bauman’s conditions for utopia in the two positions of being restless towards one’s situation and requiring the belief that this is changeable. What Jameson (2004) adds, and what is most important, is the invitation to consider if we are in a similar moment of history where we can engage in utopianism. If we diagnosed this current moment to be in that space between unhappiness and the beginning of willingness to engage in actions to end our unhappiness, then a contemporary conceptualisation of utopia which counteracted the demise of utopia would be necessary. A contemporary conceptualisation would need to overcome earlier, problematic aspects of utopianism that contributed to the demise. In “The Politics of Utopia”, Jameson (2004) answers himself, arguing that utopia no longer has the element of “free-play”, and instead, is trivialised through processes of precise and urgent political demands which blur the wider utopian imagination. Rather than a shared political imagination that visualises an alternative community, Jameson (2004) argues that this has been replaced by practical political

programmes aimed at correcting individual problems (p.44). Here we see a tension emerging between the oppositional desires of the community and those of the individual, where, in our current political climate of a neoliberal, western society the individual is prioritised, leaving little room for community or identity focused utopias.

Jameson writes that a revival of utopianism and a counteraction of its demise requires a confrontation with the anxieties that are associated with the term. Without doing so, “our visions of alternative futures and utopian transformations remain politically and existentially inoperative” (Jameson, 2004, p.53). The negative associations of the term utopia with authoritarianism and idealism, for example, must be confronted before utopia can be politically and socially useful again. Jameson argues for a paradoxical approach to the relationship between practical politics and utopia. While using different terms and frames of reference to Harvey, Jameson’s (2004) equally dialectical position is described as a situation “in which political institutions seem both unchangeable and infinitely modifiable” (p.44), a response to the postmodern, neoliberal tendency to dismiss the potential for change or alternatives. He positions utopia as simultaneously not possible and at the same time, generating new utopian visions because of this impossibility (Jameson, 2004, p.44), it is both closed and open.

Similarly, Harvey (2000) asks us to “consider how and with what consequences [utopia] has worked as both a constructive and destructive force for change in our historical geography” (p.159) and thus, this thesis will explore the themes (including the misuse of utopianism) that contribute to the demise of utopianism. By confronting these anxieties

and existing problems, Harvey (2000) argues that we become “conscious architects of our fates rather than ‘helpless puppets’ of the institution and imaginative worlds we inhabit” (p.158). The necessity to engage in a confrontation of anxieties and the acceptance of inherent contradictions present in utopian constructions foreshadows the practicality of using a dialectical theory which will become instrumental towards the end of this chapter, and the final chapters of the thesis.

This thesis defines utopia broadly as a place with ideal social and political conditions; a place that may or may not exist, but which requires an element of imagination to reach, either in conceptualising or occupying it. Utopia, in this definition, is situated in a better place or time, maintaining an element of freedom and potential and allowing it to take any shape the creator desires. While this definition may seem too vague, at its core is a fundamental characteristic of utopianism; utopia is a better place than the one we are currently occupying. The goals of utopianism, to create and inhabit a better place or time, align with the aims of politics as a method of bettering the current social environment in some way. Utopias, by their design, aim to change the social environment, and unavoidably change power relationships in the process. Utopias which are specifically feminist, for example, may target sexual power relations between men and women as one way of improving the social environment that they inhabit. Further, feminist utopias typically provide a collective vision for society and are reliant on group focused activism to ensure that the vision is achieved, drawing on the community to enact change. Maintaining such a broad definition of utopia allows for a flexible discussion of what

utopia provides in instances of political and social change, as well as encouraging a dialectical framing to emerge.

Editors of *Globalization and Utopia: Critical Essays* Patrick Hayden and Chamsy el-Ojeili (2009) argue that

To be utopian ... is the stuff of politics, and it first involves subjecting the politics of the present to critique. Secondly, it involves imagining human communities that do not yet exist and, thirdly it involves thinking and acting so as to prevent the foreclosure of political possibilities in the present and future. (p.1)

Politics without utopia is almost impossible to imagine; utopianism by its very definition is a political endeavour, and its role in political change is undeniable. As outlined in the above quote, engaging with utopianism provides a particular analysis of a political system and an impetus for change not found together in other political theories. These features however, are lost in a demise of utopia stemming from, in part, a wider demise of dialectical thinking. The dialectical method promotes a way of viewing the world as changeable and in constant flux. In *The Blackwell Dictionary of Modern Social Thought* Roy Bhaskar (1993) defines dialectics as a “process of conceptual or social conflict, interconnection and change, in which the generation, interpenetration and clash of oppositions, leading to their transcendence in a fuller or more adequate mode of thought or form of life, plays a key role” (p.158).

Jill Vickers, feminist scholar and author of *Reinventing Political Science* (1997) defines politics as “all activity aimed at changing, maintaining or restoring power relationships in a society, its communities or its institutions which usually involves activity undertaken within a collective or group context” (p.16). As this definition implies, politics is part of

all aspects of how we live and interact with others; it is unavoidable if one is to be part of society. All feminist utopias are political in the sense that they engage with the adjustment of sexual power relations in some sense (Sargisson, 2013, p.240), often, but not unanimously, providing solutions to the problems that they highlight. Radical feminist Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) directly responds to entrenched power relations and uses both a dialectical materialist method and a utopian vision to do so.

Underpinning this specific conception of politics is Ancient Greek philosophy which understands the goal of politics as achieving the 'good life', a particular type of happiness and fulfilment. Aristotle believed that by engaging in political community on a variety of levels, humans were able to reach their ultimate fulfilment, collectively and individually. Eudaimonia, a term used by Aristotle in particular to refer to a general human happiness or fulfilment, refers to the ethics and politics of living well and doing well on both an individual and a community level, as they are fundamentally one in the same. Without happy and healthy individuals, the community could never fulfil its eudaimonia. Interaction with one another is how we 'do' politics, and is at the core of utopian theories which prioritise the achievement of the good life for the majority of a society. Political change, therefore, may occur on an individual level, or a systemic level; a personal decision or a group movement; and while political change is not inherently good, some version of it is the only way to progress. Utopia is one way to exemplify what this good life would look like. For this reason, I argue that utopia should be understood as a collective endeavour furthered by individual actions, a theory intended to improve the quality of life of the individuals and the totality of a community simultaneously. A dialectical

utopianism, as this thesis will outline, allows for the incorporation of the individual and the community in a way that understands them as interdependent and interchangeable.

I argue that dualisms are at the core of the demise of utopia, exemplified in the problematic separation of entities such as individual and community as previously mentioned, as well as man and woman, or material and ideal. This thesis frames the demise of utopia as a result of a utopianism which is restricted by the presence of dualist thinking, and unable to sufficiently incorporate multiple, conflicting ideas into its construction. For example, a typical utopian narrative implies a bad past or present and a good future located in a different space *or* time. The overreliance on dualisms in utopianism prevents it from being a theory which is politically relevant because of the limited analysis it provides, and its inability to deal with naturally occurring conflict, and instead positions it as one easily caricatured. A dualist approach to utopianism results in a theory which is unable to make itself both materially *and* ideologically useful for those wanting to engage in a form of political activism that is realisable and at the same time progressively ideological.

To explore the demise of utopianism and the radical potential that utopianism has, the feminist dialectical utopianism of Firestone will be used as an example throughout the thesis. Her 1970 manifesto *The Dialectic of Sex* provides an alternative to problems within utopianism which stem from a dualist approach to social issues and social change. The focus will be the particular feminist appropriation of dialectical materialism outlined in Firestone's book. Firestone incorporates feminist concerns into a Marxist theoretical method that while useful, often overlooks the gendered dimensions in its core. The ultimate

lesson that can be extracted from a re-examination of Firestone in regards to revitalising utopianism is how to reconceptualise it as a contemporary theory which encourages progressive social change by confronting and drawing on conflict, moving past dualisms to something dialectical in nature. Successful revolutionary activity can be two things at once, regardless of if they are positioned in opposition or not.

*The Dialectic of Sex* is famous for its unapologetic feminist utopia as well as its links to Marxism and radical feminist groups of the second wave feminist movement in North America. Firestone's radical feminism was concerned with the root causes of what she understood to be an inherently oppressive society in the United States at the time of writing. Faithful to radical feminism, Firestone wishes to dismantle the entire system and replace it with something different, rather than adjusting what currently exists. *The Dialectic of Sex* critiques the 1960s, North American society which Firestone was living in, puts forth new ideas for how society could function, and frames the future in such a way that plurality and flexibility is encouraged. As such, the manifesto is a useful case study when exploring the way that reconceptualising utopia as dialectical can positively affect political change because it engages with it so closely.

*The Dialectic of Sex* begins with an outline of first wave feminism, detailing its problematic elements as identified from a radical, second wave position, before moving into a diagnosis of Firestone's feminist context which would later be termed second wave feminism. The book then discusses the failures that Firestone sees in her social environment including the extent to which patriarchy, stemming from the biological differences between sexes,

dictates the lives of women, as well as women's lack of sexual liberation, a lack of children's liberation, racism and the problematic discourses of love and romance. Chapter nine, the penultimate chapter of *The Dialectic of Sex*, titled 'The Dialectics of Cultural History' provides a type of methodology for achieving a better world, and the final chapter, "The Ultimate Revolution: Demands and Speculations" is where Firestone's radical feminist utopia comes to the forefront, with an outline of demands which she views as necessary for a truly equal society.

Firestone's second wave feminist commitment to 'the personal is political' may seem outdated, but her dialectical method is well suited to a contemporary situation. This radical feminist mantra refers to the typically unexamined links between the private, personal realm, associated with the feminine, and the public, political realm, associated with the masculine. The personal is political argues that the two realms are inherently intertwined, and both affect the position of women in society and wider gender roles. A renewed interest in Firestone's work reflects a contemporary shift towards a reconsideration of materialism and the dialectic in feminism, after a period of feminist theory arguably dominated by postmodernism. Recently, Firestone has been the subject of a collection titled *Further Adventures of the Dialectic of Sex* (2010), featuring essays from prominent authors on different aspects of Firestone's manifesto. *Further Adventures of the Dialectic of Sex* identifies Firestone's influence in a wide range of disciplines, and similarly argues that her work is more complex, and adds more to feminist debates than she has previously been given credit for. *The Dialectic of Sex* has also been reissued in 2015, accompanied by a multitude of events and new considerations of her work.



When *The Dialectic of Sex* was published in 1970, the contraceptive pill was still a controversial technology. It was approved for contraceptive use in the United States only ten years prior and was the target of many debates regarding health risks and social effects. At this time, assisted reproductive technologies were still in their infancy, with the first IVF pregnancy occurring a decade and a half after the book was published (Nickolchev, 2010). Mothers were assumed to be the primary caregiver for children, and the nuclear family structure of a stay at home wife, an employed father and multiple children was the norm. In 1970 women did not have their own credit ratings and could be fired from a job if they fell pregnant (Williams, 2005). The social standing of women at the time of *The Dialectic of Sex* and the material aspects of a woman's life influenced the utopian goals that Firestone aimed for. She called for women to be able to move past these barriers to full participation in society in a multitude of different ways, some which still do not sit comfortably with people in contemporary society, specifically her comments on reproduction which include "pregnancy is barbaric" (Firestone, 1970, p.180) and that women need to be "freed from the tyranny of reproduction" (Firestone, 1970, p.11).

Firestone's activism was driven by a utopian vision and she was the founder or co-founder of three radical feminist groups; New York Radical Women, Redstockings and New York Radical Feminists. The groups were known for their highly visible and often shocking protests, such as the 'No More Miss America' protest in 1968 organized by the New York Radical Women which featured "girdles, high heels, hair curlers, bras, Playboy magazines" (Redstockings, 1968) being thrown into a trash can. Firestone was an incredibly important figure in the North American radical feminist community. Ann Snitow, a member of the

same movement, reminisced that “she was a flame, incandescent” and “it was thrilling to be in her company” as recounted by Susan Faludi after Firestone’s death (Faludi, 2013). The actions that Firestone undertook with other radical feminists in the 1960s were all part of a larger desire to move towards the utopian society that they had imagined. While the utopian ideal of each member remained unique, an overarching desire for a society without sexual division and oppression united them and drove them to make a difference to their environment. *The Dialectic of Sex* is inherently political on a personal level, a trademark of radical feminism, overtly critical of the structure of patriarchy and focused on a new future where these problems have been overcome.

The achievements of radical feminism affect most, if not all women in the western world in some way, at some point in their lives. Radical feminists in the west have been credited for improving access to safer, legal healthcare for women, including birth control and abortion; coining the term ‘the personal is political’ as a way to analyse and overcome oppression in the personal sphere including the home and family; raising the issue of sexual assault and rape of women as an epidemic and organising protests and marches against it; and creating the language that we use to talk about systemic oppression of women, including the concept of patriarchy. All of these achievements were in some way inspired by a radical feminist utopian vision, in which the oppression of women would no longer exist. The positive material changes in our social and political environment reconfirm how important utopianism is, and what a loss of opportunity the demise of utopia can cause. Without a united vision of how the world could be better, and the belief that it could be

achieved, it is impossible to say if radical feminism would have been as successful in its goals.

### **Firestone Fallacy**

Firestone has, typically, however been mischaracterised due to a lack of understanding of her goals and her method, particularly her usage of Marxist materialist dialectics, which she simultaneously draws on and critiques. Firestone's work faced a backlash when it was published, a reaction that still surrounds the book now. Firestone's work is frequently dismissed through what Sarah Franklin (2010) terms the 'Firestone Fallacy'. The fallacy does not engage with the highly theoretical, dialectical aspect of *The Dialectic of Sex*, and as such, misses the complexity of Firestone's work, promoting only the caricature of what chapter ten, "Ultimate Revolution: Demands and Speculations" has become. The demands include the "freeing of women from the tyranny of reproduction" (Firestone, 1970, p.185), socialised childcare, political autonomy and sexual freedom of women and children. The radical directives of this chapter are easy to follow, and, correspondingly, easy to criticise, while the manifesto style of 'rules' that Firestone exemplifies is not typically used in contemporary political theory. The fallacy categorises *The Dialectic of Sex* as an overly prescriptive and easily dismissible utopia.

The trope of women removing men from the biological process of reproduction has become the idea that Firestone is typically associated with because she called for the use of reproductive technologies such as contraception and pregnancy outside the womb in order to free women from their biological oppression. Firestone's claims such as 'pregnancy is barbaric' and her negative description of natural childbirth contribute to the

framing of her as anti-women and anti-natural pregnancies. What Firestone truly advocates in regards to reproduction is the socialisation of childcare and the responsibility of all people to contribute to child-rearing, rather than simply excluding men from these processes or designating them for women. The reduction of Firestone (1970) to radical systems of artificial reproduction often stems from her belief that women “must seize the means of reproduction—for as long as women (and only women) are required to bear and rear children, they will be singled out as inferior” (p.11). Franklin (2010), writing of this Firestone fallacy argues that the mischaracterisation of Firestone in this way misses the “care, intelligence, and skepticism” (p.31) bound up in her arguments, particularly regarding the way she discusses the relationship between emerging technologies and reproduction. Franklin refers to the way that Firestone repeatedly emphasises the necessity of women to choose if they wish to engage in the new reproductive technologies, and that the sexual and cultural revolutions would be beneficial for all people as they are released from social roles associated with their biological sex. The Firestone fallacy frequently misrepresents the utopian aspect of *The Dialectic of Sex* as well, and overlooks the desire of Firestone (1970) to generate utopian desires, questions and “stimulate thinking in fresh areas” (p.203) rather than to have people follow a specific set of directives.

The Firestone fallacy is not a new interpretation of Firestone and *The Dialectic of Sex*. Alice Echols (2002) argues that in the second wave feminist movement in the 1970s, Firestone was “the negative referent” (p.106) placed in opposition to the feminine focused liberal feminism exemplified by Betty Friedan. Firestone was the ‘bad girl’ who criticised the family, pregnancy and femininity, and as a result became labelled ‘male identified’ due

to her promotion of typically masculine ideas, such as socialism, polyamorous romantic and sexual relationships, and the primacy of technology (Echols, 2002, p.106). Firestone (1970) writes of second wave feminism in the United States that “we have seen that such defensive reactions ... may signify how close we are hitting” and that radical feminism in particular “immediately cracks through to the emotional strata underlying ‘serious’ politics, thus reintegrating the personal with the public, the subjective with the objective, the emotional with the rational – the female principle with the male” (p.188).

Part of the reluctance to understand or embrace Firestone’s work is due to the dismissal of the same themes that affect utopianism and contribute to its demise, including the reluctance to be seen as radical, and the belief that entrenched systems cannot be challenged. The frameworks that contribute to the demise of utopia, such as postmodernism and neoliberalism, similarly feed into the Firestone fallacy. Post-feminism, a feminist moment heavily influenced by this postmodern, neoliberal society, also contributes to the dismissal of Firestone as part of a wider dismissal of a type of second- wave feminism. *The Dialectic of Sex* highlights the link between the demise of utopia and the corresponding demise of dialectical thinking and provides the impetus for reconceptualising utopianism in an explicitly dialectical way. Further, the book provides an insight into the creativity and potential which can be lost when works are prematurely dismissed because of their use of theories such as Marxism, radical feminism and utopianism.

### **“Ultimate Revolution”: Firestone’s utopian demands**

*The Dialectic of Sex* is a deeply theoretical manifesto and requires unpacking to reveal the methodology that the Firestone fallacy obscures. The majority of these are contained in the final chapter “The Ultimate Revolution: Demands and Speculations” which outlines what a feminist utopia would look like for Firestone. The first demand, and the most relevant to this thesis, is “the freeing of women from the tyranny of reproduction by every means possible, and the diffusion of child-rearing role to the society as a whole, men as well as women” (Firestone, 1970, p.185). Some progress has been made on this goal, Firestone tells us, such as family planning clinics and contraception, twenty-four hour day care clinics and some shift in who staffs those clinics. In a truly feminist utopia, however, Firestone argues the need for a more radical solution including artificial reproduction similar to IVF, allowing for ‘pregnancy outside the womb’, and the disassociation of women with pregnancy. Firestone’s feminist utopia is repeatedly described as being androgynous, as the cultural and biological categories of gender and sex are to be dismantled. The erasure of the biological category of ‘female’ and its intrinsic link to pregnancy and child-rearing is a major aspect of Firestone’s method to free women from their continued oppression. In the introduction Firestone (1970) argues for the “seizure of control of reproduction: not only the full restoration to women of ownership of their own bodies, but also their (temporary) seizure of control of human fertility” (p.11), women would have control over population (whether to have children or not) and how those children would be raised.

The second demand is “the political autonomy, based on economic independence of both women and children” (Firestone, 1970, p.186). This demand refers to the radical alteration of social and economic structure, and where Firestone (1970) suggests alongside “radically new forms of breeding, a cybernetic communism” (p.186) to eliminate capitalism and the corresponding labour force which disregards ‘women’s work’ and makes paid labour mandatory. The third demand is “the complete integration of women and children into society” (Firestone, 1970, p.187), and calls for the power distinctions between these groups of people to be removed in order to make them all equal. The final demand in Firestone’s (1970) feminist utopia is “the sexual freedom of all women and children” which she describes as “now they can do whatever they wish to do sexually” (p.187) as they are no longer restricted by reproductive structures and monogamy. By giving children and women political, sexual and economic freedom, Firestone’s feminist utopia challenges the status quo of the 1960s society in which she was writing.

The demands that Firestone makes are still often viewed as overly idealistic or utopian. She writes in *The Dialectic of Sex* that she expects her revolutionary utopian demands to be met with disdain, be described as being unrealistic or hysterical (Firestone, 1970, p.188). Foreshadowing one of the major critiques of her work, she writes that people will accuse her of destroying motherhood “for babies in glass tubes, monsters made by scientists” (Firestone, 1970, p.188). Firestone (1970) goes on to argue that critics of her work will resort to questioning the utopia to the extreme in order to deflect the revolutionary anger of herself and other radical feminists (p.202). Rather than take

responsibility for answering these questions, she writes that marginalised groups are not responsible for educating others about the need for revolution.

While there are many demands outlined throughout *The Dialectic of Sex*, it is important to understand them in the context of Firestone's qualifications. They are that "the most important characteristic to be maintained in any revolution is flexibility" and that "they are not meant as final answers", they are "meant to stimulate thinking in fresh areas rather than to dictate the action" (Firestone, 1970, p.203). In *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone develops a conceptually unique methodology and understanding this is more important than the radical claims that she makes throughout. *The Dialectic of Sex* advocates for nearly the opposite of the view promoted by the Firestone Fallacy by encouraging flexibility and maintaining that the processes of imagining utopia and questioning how we achieve are equally as important as the finer, material details. While critics have designated Firestone's utopia as an overly simplistic and prescribed utopian manifesto which prioritises a 'right way' to achieve revolution, this is a misunderstanding of her work. Any reconsideration of Firestone's work should be concerned with her useful methodology and how it can be used in a contemporary situation. The flexible and changeable utopianism focused on process which Firestone develops is a progressive step away from the prescriptive and totalising utopia she is typically associated with.



## **Chapter One: Key Themes and Dualisms in the Demise of Utopia**

The demise of utopia, a corresponding demise of dialectical thinking and arguably, collective feminist action, coincides with a trend towards a postmodern approach to western society. While there are problems which plague utopianism that emerge from misuse of the theory itself, the current political moment contributes to a particular characterisation of utopia, and furthers the term's move to obsolescence. What Anderson (2004) calls a "post-modern eclipse" (p.72) beginning in the mid-1980s is now a largely accepted (yet still disputed) social and political framework which has resulted in not only a "repression of the archetypal utopian themes" (p.72) but also a framing of them as caricatures "mimicking and nullifying the hopes or aspirations they once represented" (p.72). Such a use of the term postmodernism is contentious, however, with academics such as Bauman and sociologist Anthony Giddens instead arguing that this period should be termed 'late modernity'. For example, Giddens agrees with postmodernists regarding the characterisation of recent Western societies but maintains that this is just a development of modernity, rather than a shift to postmodernity, it is "modernity with bells on" (Gauntlett, 2002). For the purposes of this thesis, the term 'postmodernism' will be used to refer to the characteristics of this period. The specific term is less important than the characteristics which contribute to the wider demise of utopianism.

The trans-dualist approach of postmodernism frames it as a theory that would be beneficial for a revival of utopianism in the way that this thesis will outline. In a typical definition of postmodernism is a focus on its critical ability to assess ideas of difference and to disrupt existing ideas and meanings that frame our entire society, moving past dualisms present in

modernity and replacing them with something that straddles both or deconstructs the individual entities in the dualism. Lucy Sargisson (2013), a professor of utopian studies, writes that the influence of postmodernism is visible in the shift within contemporary feminist utopianism away from universalism or essentialism, and towards “new, open-ended, and multiple approaches towards the present and the future” (p.239). This idea is crucial to a reconceptualisation of utopia as exemplified by Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex*. Sargisson (2013) goes on to state that this type of utopianism reflects the situation of contemporary feminisms, and the many different viewpoints and methodologies represented within it.

Postmodernism, then, is located in an uncomfortable place in relation to utopianism, creating new ground on which to deconstruct dualisms that plagues the theory of utopianism, and at the same time, producing new rhetoric which undermines the concept of utopia. Highlighting one of the problematic elements in the relationship between the postmodernism she described and feminist utopianism, Sargisson (2013) writes of postmodernism that postmodernism represents “perpetual critique, the result of which is immobility as the postmodernist theorist talks his/herself literally into silence” (p.238). Postmodernism, as she outlines, is overly concerned with critique and must be accompanied by construction as well to ensure it can contribute to a newly understood conception of utopian theory (Sargisson, 2013, p.239). This aspect of postmodernism, while a theory which emphasises a breakdown of dualisms instead reinforces them, producing abstract or ideological critiques and lacking an element which grounds them in a material reality.

One of postmodernism's key characteristics is its dismissal of metanarratives, resulting in a sceptical approach to any systems of thought which attempt to explain our natural or social world as a totality (Newman and White, 2006). This is problematic for utopianism, especially for those utopias which engage with directives for how to achieve or run a more perfect society. The totalising approach of these utopias is in opposition to a postmodern rhetoric which refuses any 'blanket' fix to the problems in society. The Firestone fallacy frames Firestone in this way, as a 'blueprint' utopian who gives very final directives of what a feminist utopia would look like. Therefore, due to the arguable increase in postmodern thinking, Firestone is dismissed because she engages with this overly modern way of understanding and doing politics and progressive political change.

Further, Jameson (2004) argues that part of postmodernity is the "weakening of the sense of history" (p.36) and the corresponding ability to imagine any alternative histories or future. This symptom is an identifiable effect of the demise of imagination as a legitimate political endeavour. While the split between modernism and postmodernism will not be the focus of the thesis, it is useful to identify overarching themes that contribute to a demise of utopia. Marx's dialectical materialism, for example is dismissed by postmodern thinkers due to its totalising attempt to explain social, economic and political changes in reality through a class-focused analysis. Utopias which take a similar form and outline the best, or even a better, world engage in practices which contradict the postmodern disregard for totalising narratives and in turn, fall out of favour of what is arguably the philosophical understanding of our time.

In opposition to the potential of a Firestone-inspired feminist dialectical utopianism is the contentious feminist moment which has been called post-feminism. A highly contentious position, post-feminism has been explicitly shaped by neoliberal processes and retains its main tenets, most importantly, the prioritisation of the individual. Select feminist theorists and activists contend that contemporary Western society is in a moment of post-feminism, occurring after a third wave of feminism. While the definition is contentious, it is generally used to refer to the ‘pastness’ of feminism, especially radical feminism such as Firestone’s, where feminism is relegated to the past as no longer necessary since the goals of the ‘women’s movement’ have been achieved (Tasker and Negra, 2007). A revival of Firestone’s work and method would be unnecessary in a post-feminist moment, as her collective, radical activism does not fit the rhetoric of individualised feminist actions. Due to specific framing of feminism by post-feminists, scholars such as Angela McRobbie (2009) and Tania Modleski (1991) argue that post-feminism is part of an undermining and backlash against feminism, rather than an evolution of it. While post-feminism may appear to signify a situation where women are liberated and free to do what they wish, unconstrained by their gender or sex identity, it instead works against feminism by incorporating some core tenets of feminist ideology and misrepresenting them (McRobbie, 2009).<sup>1</sup>

Post-feminism emerges as a symptom of the dominating position of neoliberal values in that it stresses the individual responsibility of each woman to ensure personal success while disregarding the systemic challenges that women as a group face, a framing which stands

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the *Dove* beauty campaigns which appear to be about the celebration of natural bodies but simultaneously encourage the consumption of beauty products to alter them.

in direct opposition to the feminist idea that ‘the personal is political’. In the chapter “Girls Run the World?” (2013), which looks at sexism and post-feminism, the authors describe post-feminism as a “component of neoliberal strategy that enables girls and women to internalize the narrative of the self-determined subject who does not require support, for example, within education, government, and social services” (Pomerantz, Raby and Stefanik, p.186). There is a clear lack of focus on the community, as well as a lack of consideration of how the individual and the community can be incorporated to benefit both groups, reflecting a larger trend in neoliberal politics. This moment in post-feminism therefore occupies a different position than that one represented in *The Dialectic of Sex* which prioritises the shared experiences of women and other minority groups and which typically maintains a general view of a better world for *all* women. While first wave, second wave and to an extent, third wave western feminism relied on utopian imaginations or processes to fuel their activism, post-feminism lacks this utopian aspect largely due to the influence of neoliberalism, specifically the framing of gender equality as an issue that has already been achieved and any residual problems as individualised ones. The lack of community prevents a shared utopian vision where all in the society would be better off; as former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher maintained, ‘there is no alternative’ to the current political framework, and no better utopian world which is realisable.

### **Individual and Community**

What the wider trend towards postmodernism and post-feminism highlights is a dualist approach to the themes of the individual and the community. This contemporary moment in western society, if one is to accept the dominance of postmodernism, post-feminism and

neoliberalism, separates individuals and community and emphasises a dominance of individualism. The separation is problematic for utopianism, specifically feminist utopianism, and contributes to the prevention of collective political action by focusing responsibility on directed, individual actions rather than on society as a whole. This moment moves away from the Ancient Greek inspired understanding of politics which sees an inherent connection between the individual and the community, and, by focusing on the individual, minimises the need for collective action which advocates for a social group, rather than solely the individual. Resolving this dualism is a major aspect of Firestone's work and the dualism at the core of the radical feminist mantra 'the personal is political'. Resolving this separation is key to the revival of the theory of utopianism and is part of what Firestone's dialectical utopian method in *The Dialectic of Sex* concerns itself with.

Communitarianism is "a social and political philosophy that emphasizes the importance of community in the functioning of political life, in the analysis and evaluation of political institutions, and in understanding human identity and well-being" (Etzioni, 2015). The term was coined by John Goodwyn Barmy in 1841 to refer to the beliefs of utopian socialists and their tendency to prefer communal lifestyles. The theory posits that the individualist tendencies of modern liberal ideology result in negative social and political consequences such as an alienation of people from the political process, greed, loneliness and crime (Bell, 2013). The communitarian tradition argues for a system which prioritises the common good over individual good. This is, however, also a one-sided way of explaining society and political change, and as Harvey maintains in *Spaces of Hope*, furthers stereotypes of utopia which contribute to their demise such as their assumed links

with socialist and communist regimes. An over-reliance on the element of community in utopia undermines the role of the individual in promoting utopian change or reaching utopian goals, preventing the potential that can be generated by individual engagement with these larger ideas. As in Firestone's example of reproductive technologies such as the birth control pill, the individual action of taking the pill benefits the individual by giving her control over her reproductive capacities, but also contributes to changes in societal beliefs and behaviours. Therefore, a dialectical utopian method aims to reintegrate the community with the individual and avoid dualist thinking in order to capitalise on the progressive actions that can be achieved. By reintegrating community and individual needs and resolving another dualism in a similar way to the Ancient Greek understanding discussed earlier, the utopias that are created in a contemporary setting draw on the tension between them to create a utopia that is at once beneficial for the individual while still working towards larger community aims.

The decline in popularity of the theory of communitarianism can be linked to wider political trends, such as neoliberalism and postmodernism, which favour the individual over the social. The move away from considering the social, communal aspect of our political environments is intertwined with the wider demise of utopia as problems become individualised and group efforts for political action are dismissed. One can argue that the paralleled demise in utopianism and communitarianism is detrimental to the overall social and political environment, promoting a 'politically sterile' society through the dismissal of radical theorising and activity on a community level. By focusing on the individual rather than community groups, systemic issues are masked by individual responsibility,

and solutions to these wider ranging, typically institutional problems are stunted. Where shared experiences of oppression led radical feminists in the United States to imagine utopian worlds and make efforts to move towards them, arguably contemporary feminism is prevented from organising and undertaking similar collective action (McRobbie, 2005). The loss of radical political action is felt deeply in utopian theory given that at their core, utopias are radical and “contain challenges to the roots of contemporary socio-economic and political systems” (Sargisson, 2012, p.8). Echoing this idea, Jacoby (2005) writes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that “more than ever we have become narrow utilitarians dedicated to fixing, not reinventing, the here and now” (p.ix). The apparent lack of alternatives forces people to examine their current situation, rather than allowing themselves to imagine a different one altogether. The current social and political environment is ‘sealed off’ from any different possible futures (Jameson, 2005).

Utopia clashes with neoliberal rhetoric, specifically with its prioritisation of the individual over the community. Neoliberalism “denotes new forms of political-economic governance premised on the extension of market relationships” (Larner, 2000, p.5), and is simultaneously a policy framework, and ideology and a form of governmentality. Scholar Wendy Larner (2000) who writes on social economies including neoliberalism argues that neoliberal subjects are made to understand themselves as “individualised and active subjects responsible for enhancing their own wellbeing” (p.13) through a particular type of governance based on specific ideology. The ideology promotes the privileging of the individual as responsible for their own success, reflected in a decline of welfare policies, social services and laws which ensure the rights of workers. Neoliberalism attributes the



success or failure of individuals to only their own choices and actions, regardless of the influence that neoliberalism itself had over making them. While individuals have the freedom to make any choices, they make them in a specific framework that rewards specific choices (Smith, 2015; Young, 2011). As flagged previously, neoliberal rhetoric criticises the idealist aspect of traditional utopias, as well as their specifically social or communal element. Neoliberalism prioritises the individual in the dialectic between the individual and community. In contemporary, western political environments, the way that the concerns of the individual takes priority over the concerns of the community creates an analysis of society which is one-sided and fails to understand the links between the two. The prioritisation of the individual in a neoliberal framework also directly influences the demise of utopia as the ability to imagine a better alternative for all through community effort is discouraged.<sup>2</sup>

Social narratives, much like Thatcher's 'catchphrase' "there is no alternative" (Harvey, 2000, p.17) form the ideology of the cultures we live in, they are often what guide and determine our thoughts and actions. As Jameson (2004) argues, the notion that any politics which attempts to challenge the status quo or radically change the system is dismissed as 'utopian', plays into the wider belief that the political system we currently inhabit is natural to us, and that changing it requires authoritarianism or violence. Neoliberal government policies, for example, often reflect a narrative of individual progress and success. This can be seen in policies such as the dismantling of unions and welfare states, the focus on

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<sup>2</sup> For example, people are encouraged to set goals for themselves which may or may not be possible, and then strive to meet them. 'Rags to riches' stories exemplify these individual utopian imaginations which are still valid in our current political climate.

individual productivity in all aspect of one's life, and an individualisation of education and health (Smith, 2015; Young, 2011). Author of *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Richard Rorty (1999) suggests that the narrative that has taken the place of imaginative hope is one of despair and impossibility. These claims are all evident in the previously mentioned reaction Firestone expected, and received, in response to *The Dialectic of Sex*. Although Firestone expected the radical and 'far-fetched' reaction, the element of imagination and 'otherworldliness' present in *The Dialectic of Sex* allows her to surpass the overarching systems that structure her reality, such as capitalism and patriarchy and work towards the real possibility of a radical feminist utopia. The negative consequences of these structures, today also including neoliberalism, therefore, can be overcome, and a vision of reaching another world is possible.

The trend towards a de-legitimisation of imagination and its processes result in it being used less often in political theory. The overarching social systems that structure our lives, such as capitalism, patriarchy and globalisation, become almost invisible and consequently, impossible to alter to any major extent. Political imagination encourages an alternative conception of society, and thus creates a utopian image to move towards, instigating social and political progress. The utopia that is often derided in the demise of utopia is linked to revolutionary or progressively liberal ideas. It is here where the dismissal of Firestone's radical feminist politics is most closely paralleled to the demise of utopianism and politics in general. Utopianism, abstract or not, should be seen as a contribution, as it adds to existing knowledge regarding social and political change. This, in turn, affects any material expression of the theory, including activism, the 'doing' part

of the theory. However, the processes of political imagination which ignite and make possible utopian theorising and action are tarred by the dismissal of imagination in general. Sargisson (2013) writes that "because it is explicitly imaginative, utopian theory and literature has been devalued in the schools of political theory and philosophy as escapist, fanciful and above all, unscientific in disciplines which favour rational debate, logical argument and serious scholarship" (p.239). These criticisms are most evident in Harvey's category of what he calls 'social process' utopias which are temporal, abstract, and similarly criticised for their fantasy element. In a contemporary world, imagination does not conform to the rational, scientific forms of knowledge that are legitimate and is therefore irrelevant in political discussions. Sargisson (2013) goes on to highlight the similarity between the dismissal of that which is designated 'feminine' and the parts of utopianism which attract the most critique. For Sargisson, imaginative utopianism is in direct tension with masculine knowledge, a concept echoed in Firestone's work.

Utopianism and neoliberal ideology are uneasy bedfellows and at the core of their tension is the relationship between the individual and the community. What many traditional utopias emphasise in a political discussion regarding social and political change is a focus on collectivism and making society a better place for all, rather than for the individual. There are few instances of utopianism which focus solely on an individual, either by way of achieving the utopia or occupying it. This can be seen in the way that utopias typically transform the totality of society, for example Firestone's *Dialectic*, Plato's *Republic*, More's *Utopia* and Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, as well utopian inspired

movements such as western radical feminism and many environmental groups. Individualist neoliberal ideology overlooks the collective element of social and political change, and therefore is limited in its ability to analyse these changes on a societal level. While Harvey discusses the phenomena of neoliberal, market driven utopias which are individualised, I argue that this conception of utopianism is not the one that should be re- legitimised in a contemporary moment. Utopianism based in communitarianism but which can also incorporate the individual, such as *The Dialectic of Sex*, has a unique perspective on social and political change which contrasts the individualist rhetoric of neoliberalism. As a renewed political theory, utopia should therefore maintain its roots in collectivism as a way to directly challenge systemic issues, such as how Firestone attempts to overcome institutional and entrenched gender oppression. This does not mean, however, that a reimagined utopianism ignores the individual; rather, utopianism has the ability to renew Ancient Greek understandings of politics in a specifically dialectical way by reincorporating the individual political life with the wider community one; simultaneously making relevant the community life and legitimising it in the daily struggles of individuals. By engaging with a dualist form of utopianism that does not view the interconnections of the individual and social, utopianism is not able to function as a politically and socially useful theory.

### **Space and Time**

In *Spaces of Hope* (2000), Marxist theorist Harvey attempts to create a theory of utopianism which contributes to political change in order to address the loss of radicalism, utopianism and the belief that the world can be better than it currently is. He terms this

theory ‘dialectical utopianism’ (Harvey, 2000, p.13). I argue that what Harvey intends to do with this theory is what Firestone has exemplified in *The Dialectic of Sex*, and thus, his term is used throughout the thesis to classify Firestone’s work. Dialectical utopianism is suggested as the best way to resolve the dualisms at the core of the theory and reconceptualise utopianism as a theory which incorporates difference rather than being overcome by it. Dialectics is a trans-dualist theory, bridging the gaps between two oppositional entities and moving past them. The dualism that Harvey focuses on in his example of dialectical utopianism is that of space and time, a relationship that overlaps with the problems which arise from the division of the individual and community, and later, Firestone’s material and ideological dualism. What Harvey’s analysis of the dualism between space and time provides for this thesis is further answers to why the division of oppositional entities is problematic to utopianism as a politically and socially relevant theory. He highlights how approaching utopia as either a better place *or* time, rather than a theory which can advocate for *both*, prevents utopianism from reaching its full potential as a theoretically driven political activism.

Harvey’s *Spaces of Hope* (2000) starts from the understanding of utopianism as a theory traditionally dualist in nature, located in either a better time or a better geographical space. A dualist approach results in the creation of utopias which are framed as either a frivolous pursuit, ‘castles in the sky’ theory which is not useful for any reason other than dreaming or a second type of utopia associated with the authoritarianism of failed communist states of the twentieth century such as those of Stalin, Lenin and Khrushchev. Harvey highlights that famous utopias are often characterised as one or the other because of their

prioritisation of either time or space, and for this reason, he argues that dialectical utopianism must be explicitly spatiotemporal and trans-dualist. Dialectical utopianism, as Harvey intends, corrects many of the problematic forms of utopia, and attempts to counteract the demise by moving utopianism away from this dualist way of thinking.

The first half of what Harvey identifies as the problematic dualism present in utopianism is a temporal or time-focused utopia. These utopias are typically located in a better time than the current one, be it in the past or future. Temporal utopias are less concerned with the practicality of the utopia and more with the inspiration they provide, and can often be identified in feminist utopian literature, including *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1979) by Piercy. The novel is speculative and tells the story of a female protagonist who can travel to a future that is free of gender roles, racism, homophobia and pollution. Similar to Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, *Woman on the Edge of Time* outlines possible technologies that have contributed to the progressive societies, including new reproductive technologies and socialised childcare, however in the novel, nobody in the protagonist's current society uses them. What *Woman on the Edge of Time* provides is a feminist thought experiment located in the future and a utopia that exists on the pages of a book, but not in our reality or the novelist's reality. The utopia is idealised and exists in imagination, and does not have to negotiate from its feminist aims by changing itself to be a realistic material experience or explain how it would become a materialised experience.

These idealised utopias are not often materialised or placed in a specific geography. While they allow the author or the inhabitant to engage in imaginary, radical and seemingly

impossible processes, they are accompanied by a critique of being overly abstract and thus, not useful to any practical politics. Harvey (2000) argues that these “idealized versions” are “literally bound to no place whatsoever” and gives the example of Hegel’s processes which prioritise the end goal of an Aesthetic or ethical state (p.174). The lack of material or geographical element in these utopias mean that they do not have to engage with the ‘real world’ or provide realistic steps to achieving their utopian goals. These utopias are therefore unconcerned with practicality, therefore, the purity of the utopian ideal is not upset by materialising them or making them realistically inhabitable (Harvey, 2000). While the temporal element is the benefit of this form of utopianism, it is also where it is the most criticised because any dreams, to create liveable social and political change, must be materialised in some sense, at some point.

The other side of Harvey’s dualism is those utopias which base themselves in specific geographies (space), or alternative geographies. These utopias are often located in a better place, and are not concerned with when the utopia occurs or how it will develop over time. An example of this type of utopia is More’s *Utopia*, argued to be the first use of the term in published literature. *Utopia*, published in 1516 in Latin, was one of the first uses of the word in literature and details a fictional society located on an island. The society of *Utopia* is similar to that of Plato’s *Republic*, and there are strict rules for its citizens such as maintaining specific household structure, having no private property and keeping to a strict population guideline. The community rules are maintained largely through the geographical position of the island, allowing only certain people and ideas in, and keeping

all others out. The utopia is materialised and the book details the experiences of people on the island living in this utopian world.

These utopias are seemingly more materially relevant to the everyday lives of the reader and more useful to political and social change, however, typically have a structured, singular, blueprint of the perfect world. A utopianism like this is framed as a more rational and realisable form of utopia and may feel more straightforward to those who dismiss the imaginative previous form of utopia. Yet, they too have problematic elements, including the generation of authoritarianism and totalitarianism deemed necessary to achieve specific perfect worlds. For example, the utopia of Plato's *Republic*, an inhabitable city created to be the most ideal example of a state. Critics argue that Plato's republic is totalitarian in achieving its aim, forgoing the happiness of the individual for the harmonious running of the state. Citizens of the city must live in an entrenched class hierarchy by strict rules created by a small group.

Further, while temporal utopias do not have to alter their goals when being materialised, spatial form or geographical based utopias do. Harvey (2000), on this point, writes that "any contemporary struggle to envision a reconstruction of the social process has to confront the problem of how to rethrow the structures (both physical and institutional) that the free market has itself produced as relatively permanent features of our world" (p.186) because any new utopian action has to work within the structures it wants to overthrow at first. Harvey (2000) argues that often, this means that utopia will be taken up by the very forces that it attempts to overthrow arguing that "the historical process (capitalism) takes



control of the spatial form that was intended as a counter-movement to it” (p.140). What he means here is that the desires and outline of the utopia may not fit into a specific geographic situation, causing the utopia to change in such a way that it can be realised. Harvey (2000) goes as far as writing that utopias are at risk of being “perverted from their noble objectives” in this negotiation, losing their “ideal character, producing results which are in many instances exactly the opposite of those intended” (p.180). For example, a practical utopia may compromise on its ideal aims to present itself as realistically inhabitable, becoming more like the system it is against in order to be achievable.

This criticism has been similarly picked up on by Ruth Levitas, utopian scholar and author of a book review of *Spaces of Hope*. Levitas (2003) argues that materialised utopias, even dialectical ones “must compromise with the dominant order in ways that undermine their radicalism” (p.140), which, if true, would in turn compromise the legitimacy and potential of Firestone and Harvey’s dialectical utopianism. Similarly, Jameson argues that the act of conceptualisation, let alone materialisation, makes the utopian process ‘less than pure’ as it interrupts its potential (Levitas, 2003, p.148). Visualising the utopia, for Jameson (2004), prevents the full potential of utopianism as it begins the process of limiting what the utopia could be. Rather, utopianism should be about the process of being able to think about different worlds, rather than beginning to describe or picture what those worlds should be. This criticism of dialectical utopian must be acknowledged and considered when using the theory, as it has potential to undermine the ethos of dialectical utopianism.

The forms of utopia discussed in Harvey's *Spaces of Hope* reflect a dualist approach to understanding society, and are overly concerned with either time (the future) or space (the material), respectively. The recreation of dualisms in this way generates specific criticisms which contribute to the dismissal of utopianism as a theory, which is why Harvey suggests a dialectical utopianism. Harvey's (2000) argument is that the separation of space and time results in "defects and difficulties" (p.182) in utopianism and that this can be overcome by an "explicitly spatiotemporal" (p.182) utopia, which he calls dialectical utopianism. One can argue that the separation of oppositional poles of utopianism (in Harvey's example space and time) and the corresponding criticisms results in a framing of utopia which undermines its very existence because they create a version of utopia which is either too ideological or too focused on the material. Harvey's dialectical approach addresses this problem, forming a theory which transcends the dualist utopian theory of the contemporary moment.

### **Ideas and Material**

The previous section focused on the respective dualisms of time/space, and individual/community as issues at the core of the demise of utopianism. A further important dualism which must be resolved in a reconceptualisation of utopianism is the separation of the ideological and the material. This dualism overlaps with the time/space dualism discussed in *Spaces of Hope* in particular due to the characteristics associated with each respective element of the dualisms. Temporal/time-based utopias could be largely paralleled with ideological utopias, while geographic/space-based utopias could be paralleled with material utopias. The relationship between ideal and material is the one which Firestone uses in *The Dialectic of Sex*'s penultimate chapter "The Dialectics of

Cultural History” to explain her feminist dialectical utopian method and I argue, is the most important dualism to be resolved in this thesis, and for the achievement of a dialectical utopianism. Firestone uses the term ‘Aesthetic’ to refer to the ideological and ‘Technological’ to refer to the material. A dialectical synthesis of the Aesthetic (ideal) and Technological (material) overcomes the traditional dualism and is Firestone’s ultimate goal, and what she believes will generate a feminist utopia. The second half of this chapter will outline *The Dialectic of Sex* in order to understand why the dualism between the ideological and the material is crucially important to Firestone’s work, and how she resolves this dualism using a dialectical method inspired by Marxism.

### **Firestone’s Marxist feminism**

Firestone writes from a Marxist inspired perspective, praising the orthodox Marxist framework, but arguing that the ongoing oppression of women is fundamentally due to the dialectic of sex and that Marxist theory does not go far enough to address this. Rephrasing a definition of historical materialism written by Frederic Engels, Firestone (1970) argues that the dialectic of sex is

the division of society into two distinct biological classes for procreative reproduction, and the struggles of these classes with one another; ... and in the first division of labour based on sex which developed into the [economic-cultural] class system (p.12).

She therefore positions sex class as the most important category for tracing history, specifically women’s history, and it is this belief that shapes her radical feminist utopia which intends to overcome the sex dialectic. While economics is at the core of Marxism, and production is the major way of analysing society, *The Dialectic of Sex* uses an analysis of sexual reproduction to explain the systemic oppression of women in society. Therefore, as Marxist theory focuses its interrogation on the capitalist system and condemning

reformist solution, Firestone's feminist theory uses the same framework to examine patriarchy and the way it affects women. It is the dialectical method used throughout *The Dialectic of Sex* where she is most inspired by orthodox Marxism even though she prioritises sex class over economic class. Firestone diverges from orthodox Marxism by engaging with utopianism, applying the dialectical method when describing how to achieve this utopia. I use the term feminist dialectical utopianism, because of this aspect of Firestone's wider theoretical method. Harvey's (2000) concept of dialectical utopianism is similarly concerned with transcending dualisms in a dialectical manner, where the oppositional poles generate a productive antagonism realised in a utopian outcome (p.182). Firestone uses this method but draws on different dialectics than orthodox Marxism would. Her feminist dialectical utopian method is a useful case study when attempting to reconceptualise utopian theory in a way that can counteract its demise as *The Dialectic of Sex* provides a unique and interesting methodology for achieving this goal.

Firestone, while disagreeing with many aspects of Marxist theory concerning women and reproduction, is still a Marxist theorist herself, and therefore is subject to similar critiques as orthodox Marxism. Appropriating Marxist theory to analyse sexual oppression, Firestone overcomes the sexist dualism found in much original Marxist work which prevents it from being truly trans-dualistic. As Firestone's work is a feminist interpretation of Marxist theory, the solution to the oppression of the female sex class is a seizure of the means of reproduction, rather than production as in Marxism. *The Dialectic of Sex* is an example of how feminists can draw on classical Marxist theory to analyse specific feminist issues although the issue of women is an area which Marxism, and Firestone herself, are

often critiqued for. Firestone (1970) celebrates dialectical materialism in her introduction to *The Dialectic of Sex*, writing that Marxists were the first to see “the world as process, a natural flux of action and reaction, of opposites yet inseparable and interpenetrating” (p.4). It is this approach to understanding the world that allows Firestone to position the achievement of a dialectical utopianism as a solution to the oppression of women, as the outcome incorporates all processes and aspects that contribute to the oppression.

In “Technology, Nature and Liberation”, a chapter by Tim Fiske (2010) in *Further Adventures of the Dialectic of Sex* the historical materialist influence on Firestone’s process of dialectics is highlighted. Fiske outlines Firestone’s engagement with Marx and Engels, and the way that she positions herself in a historical moment of female oppression which can be overcome by dialectics. Fiske (2010) goes on to write that what makes Firestone genuinely dialectical, is that “this existence of opposed elements is the condition of possibility for an overcoming of this opposition” (p.199). Fiske (2010) identifies the way that Firestone moves past simply identifying an objective process by which to understand the world, but rather makes “our own relationship to the process of history a moment of that process” (p.199). By doing so, we position ourselves as part of the messy, boundary crossing work of dialectical theory. This is a clear example of why Firestone is crucial to understanding the wider history of the new materialist feminisms, an emerging movement in feminist theory, in particular their materialism, as well as their engagement with trans-dualisms, and the ‘biosocial’. While the language may have evolved from *The Dialectic of Sex* and the Technological/Aesthetic to the new materialist ‘biosocial’, the dialectical spirit that champions the overcoming of dualisms as well as the process of doing

so began earlier than the new materialisms and is clear in Firestone's engagement with these transgressive ideas.

### **Essentialism**

The modernist markers of *The Dialectic of Sex*, such as the essentialism and positivism, are a sign of the time that Firestone was writing in and while not wholly forgivable, feed into the dismissal of the book and the trope of Firestone as an outrageous radical feminist with little to add to contemporary feminist theory. Firestone is critiqued for engaging in essentialism, a theoretical approach which reduces differences between men and women to unchangeable biological essence, as well as reproducing the link between gender categories and essential, natural properties. In many ways, Firestone does just that throughout *The Dialectic of Sex*, linking the oppression of women with a natural patriarchy which is maintained through oppressive biological practices. Firestone often relies on a correlation between the gendered category of women with those who possess a uterus and therefore can become pregnant. Using a biologically reductionist argument is problematic for a multitude of reasons, not least because of its exclusionary practices, however, it also reinforces a dualist approach to biology and society which Firestone attempts to overcome in other aspects of her work. Essentialism positions biological sex in opposition to societal gender norms and simplifies this relationship by not acknowledging the processes that occur between the two.

The essentialist parts of *The Dialectic of Sex* stem from the reductionist tendencies of the Marxism that inspires Firestone's work. Just as Firestone (1970) claims in regards to the

economic reductionism of Marxist theory that “there is a level of reality that does not stem directly from economics” (p.7), critics of *The Dialectic of Sex* argue that Firestone similarly reduces social issues to the perceived biological differences between the sexes. Her essentialism, or reduction of everything to the differences between man and woman, is because of her belief that biological sex is the most fundamental class, from which a particular level of reality stems. From this comes the claim that women are oppressed by men because of their natural biologies, as well as her method to overcome sexed oppression in a radical feminist utopia. Firestone (1970) goes on to argue that the unequal division of the sexes is, seemingly, natural, writing “unlike economic class, sex class sprang directly from a biological reality: men and women were created different, and not equal” (p.8). By reinforcing that these differences are natural, Firestone reproduces the essentialist rhetoric surrounding sex and gender.

Not surprisingly, Firestone is largely dismissed because of the essentialism and reductionism that plagues *The Dialectic of Sex* due to the exclusionary rhetoric it engages in and the way it undermines the complexity of sex and gender. The reductionist tendencies of *The Dialectic of Sex* are somewhat acknowledged through Firestone’s (1970) disclaimer that “to grant that the sexual imbalance of power is biologically based is not to lose our case. We are no longer just animals. And the kingdom of nature does not reign absolute” (p.9). In this way, Firestone addresses the critique by arguing that although ‘naturally’ we may have started off as two biologically different sexes, we are able to go past this, and indeed we transcended the state of nature. Feminist political scientist Debora Halbert (2004) explains this line of thought in a paper on Firestone, arguing that the manifesto uses

biological differences as only the beginning of a deconstruction of female oppression, and ultimately Firestone wants to render these differences irrelevant to equality between genders. This reinforces the idea that although *The Dialectic of Sex* begins from an essentialist place, resolving this essentialism and removing sex and gender categories is Firestone's ultimate goal. Ultimately, the essentialist dualism that Firestone uses to construct her argument is replaced with a dialectical approach to sex and gender categories. Firestone's issues with essentialism cannot be entirely overlooked in any discussion of her work, however I contend that her dialectical methods and specific construction of a feminist dialectical utopianism can still be useful for contemporary feminists, regardless of these issues. The essentialism does not need to be part of what is brought into a contemporary interpretation of *The Dialectic of Sex*.



## Chapter Two: The dialectical method of *The Dialectic of Sex*

In the chapter “Dialectics of Cultural History”, the penultimate chapter of *The Dialectic of Sex*, one can gain an insight into why I argue Firestone is an example of a feminist dialectical utopian theory. It is in this chapter where she outlines her dialectical method which will bring about a feminist utopian revolution. While she outlines her utopian goals later in the book, it is her method of achieving revolution and questioning the current social and political environment here that should be emphasised in any discussion of her work. Firestone argues throughout the chapter that both sides of the dualism are necessary to achieve any cultural revolution, and the feminist utopia that would accompany it. “The Dialectics of Cultural History” paints a picture of two seemingly oppositional entities, which, being understood only as entities in opposition, are unable to achieve any positive social change. The tension between the two generates the possibilities of a better feminist world and this is the key to *The Dialectic of Sex*’s dialectical approach.

Dialectics is a contentious theory with many different interpretations. Two forms of dialectical theory are now closely associated with Georg Hegel and Karl Marx (“dialectic”, 2015). Hegel and Marx’s particular conceptions of dialectics share an emphasis on the connectedness of the world, and the belief that to understand the world truthfully, one must view it as a whole. Focusing analysis on one entity, according to Hegel and Marx’s dialectic, would never unveil truth as the relationships and context of the entity contribute to what it is. Marx and Hegel’s dialectics, while sharing some basic concepts, are often viewed in contrast. In “Afterword to the Second German Edition” of *Capital* (1999/1873), Marx declares that “my dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its

direct opposite.” Marx is here referring to the Hegelian argument that the process of thinking (‘the Idea’) is the ‘real’ world, while the material world is external to it (Lam, 2015). Gillian Howie, author of *Between Materialism and Postmodernism*, (2010a) calls Marx’s dialectical method an ‘infamous inversion’ of Hegel’s. The materialist aspect of Marx’s dialectic is crucial to the understanding of the theory that this thesis explores, as well as to Firestone who draws on Marx’s work. For this reason, the dialectical theory discussed in the thesis from this point onwards will be Marxist dialectics, often referred to elsewhere as ‘dialectical materialism’.

The dialectical method has evolved over history from as early as Ancient Greek philosophers and the theory has many different interpretations and definitions. In Ancient Greek philosophy, the synthesis of two arguments was often understood as the truth, and dialectics was a form of dialogue intended to discover these truths. By discussing the dynamic aspects of certain ideas, the belief of Ancient Greek philosophers were continuously altered or replaced with more developed arguments (Ollman and Smith, 2008, p.2). In the introduction to *Dialectics for the New Century*, Ollman and Smith argue that the Ancient Greek understanding of dialectics provided the starting point for the now diverse and multifaceted theory of dialectics, at its core a dynamic theory in search of truth. This influence can be identified in Marxist dialectics, particularly the belief that nature is in a constant state of flux (Kovel, 2008). This materialist element becomes crucial to Marx’s dialectics, and more so in the new materialisms which will be further discussed in the final chapters.

As touched on throughout the thesis, dialectical theory aims to overcome traditional dualisms and allows for a synthesis to be reached between two oppositional sides by considering them in unison. On dialectical theory, Engels (1970) explains that “the two poles of an antithesis, positive and negative, e.g., are as inseparable as they are opposed and that despite all their opposition, they mutually interpenetrate” (n.p). The interpenetration of the two poles is crucial to dialectical theory, and is why the theory is useful in contemporary situations, regardless of how ‘rusty’ the concept may seem. In each interpretation of dialectics, the world is understood as full of contradictions, and dialectical theory is one way of attempting to make sense of them (O’Connor, 2003). While Marxism may no longer be in vogue, our contemporary society still consists of contradictory and interconnected ideas and material. The theory explores how the contradiction between two poles can result in a productive synthesis, rather than viewing it as a dead end (O’Connor, 2003). It is about the dynamic between two poles or two sides of a dualism and the attempts to “transcend the limitations and contingencies of reality” (O’Connor, 2003). As Levitas (2003) writes, the separation of poles leaves us torn between dreams that do not seem possible, and material situations that do not seem to matter (p.155). She argues that they “need to be reconnected in a revitalization of the utopian tradition that will give us ways to imagine and pursue the possibility of real alternatives to our current condition” (Levitas, 2003, p.155).

In *The Dialectic of Sex* Firestone highlights the potential of a dialectical relationship between the individual and community through the use of new technologies in reproduction. Artificial reproductive technologies bridge the gap between the benefits to

an individual and the benefits to the community, suggesting that by incorporating the two, both groups will benefit. This is a dialectical approach because the synthesis of individual acts and community goals create something unable to be achieved without both sides of the dualism. The individual acts are possible (for example, we can personally take birth control pills daily, an act aimed at transforming an individual experience of reproduction) and the revolutionary outcome is still conceivable (for example, the sum of all individual acts of reproductive autonomy contribute to a wider desire for full sexual autonomy for women as a societal group). Technology, as Firestone (1970) defines in *The Dialectic of Sex* is “the realisation of the conceivable in the possible” (p.154), otherwise understood as the synthesis of the conflicting opposites, and the transcendent outcome. Technology acts as the bridge between the dualisms that are highlighted throughout *The Dialectic of Sex* and is therefore not identified as inherently male or female, but in that place of transcendence beyond the dualism that the dialectical method emphasises as the most important. Firestone therefore positions technology as a crucial part of the realisation of a feminist dialectical utopianism, as it incorporates both sides of the dialectic which must be present in a utopian situation. Science, in *The Dialectic* is paralleled with men, and masculine traits, but it is a specific type of empiricist science that Firestone is referring to. We can separate technology from the science that reflects the masculine part of the dialectic of sex and understand technology, as Firestone uses it, as free from gendered associations.

Firestone’s discussion of technology includes the idea of cybernetics, not uncommon at the time *The Dialectic of Sex* was published, which again frames the difference between technology and science present in the book. While contemporary feminist science scholar Donna Haraway has explicitly tied cybernetics with the masculine, patriarchal system which

Firestone attempts to overcome (Fisken, 2010, p.207), cybernetics in *The Dialectic*

*of Sex* is tied to liberal politics and a “notion of control that does not depend on domination of an external object” (Fisken, 2010, p.207-208). As Firestone argues, empirical science is concerned with the control and domination of nature, a theme we see clearly in “The Dialectics of Cultural History” chapter, however, she explicitly frames technology, and in particular, cybernetics as reflecting the dialectical result of the merger of nature and science.

Firestone refers to the ‘modes of culture’ as the dialectic with which she is concerned in the chapter “The Dialectics of Cultural History”. The modes of culture can be understood to be specific consciousnesses or perspectives on society and represents two sides of a societal dualism. Firestone draws on the binary between man and woman to explain the relationship between the two perspectives, a theoretical tool which can be problematic in the reductionist and essentialist sense previously discussed. What Firestone achieves with her discussion of the relationship between these two perspectives is an example of how applying a dialectical method to dualisms can result in a situation which is better than what is currently possible. In this example, the better situation is a society free from sex and gender categories and therefore, as Firestone argues, as inherently more equal for the inhabitants. It should be noted that Firestone does not fully advocate for these binary categories, but that she is writing within an existing social structure which she is working to overcome. Harvey, (2000) a fellow Marxist, argues of this point that although we all have the will to change our society, we “do so under conditions not chosen or created by ourselves” (p.231). The binary categories that Firestone works with are conditions not chosen by herself.

It is possible to criticise Firestone for prioritising the domination of nature by science even in her feminist utopia if one interprets technology as empirical science, as we might today. For example, in Firestone's utopia, society overcomes the oppressive, natural biological process of pregnancy with what could be interpreted as scientific advances such as artificial reproduction and birth control pills. This would not be a dialectical outcome; instead, this result would be the opposite of what Firestone advocates for as the masculine would dominate the feminine. Rather, what Firestone describes in her feminist utopia is the production of specific technologies which reflect the incorporation of both science and nature, and which removes the distinction between the two (Fisken, 2010, p.208). Artificial reproduction and birth control materialise the definition of technology that Firestone (1970) provides, or "the realization of the conceivable in the possible" (p.154).

The first perspective that Firestone examines in "The Dialectics of Cultural History" is the Technological one. This is one side of the dualism which she frames as dominating the mainstream world view. The Technological perspective is described as being concerned with the material reality of our world, altering physical aspects and realising particular ideas. Firestone (1970) describes the Technological perspective as being related to "the mastery of reality" (p.156), concerned with the domination of nature via science. The perspective is characterised by its emphasis on science, empiricism and positivism, logic, consciousness, rationality and stability (p.157). In a more negative light, she later describes it as deterministic and 'soulless' because of its use of scientific method. This world view or perspective is concerned with understanding society through a lens which prioritises knowledge emerging from these scientific, logical endeavours. Firestone writes that Locke

and Bacon had previously exemplified this perspective, transforming philosophy from an abstract attempt to understand life to one concerned with the “uncovering to the *real* laws of nature, through proof and demonstration (empirical science)” (Firestone, 1970, original emphasis, p.161). This perspective, she argues, develops from the male principle and therefore reflect ‘male’ personality traits to the extreme.

The second perspective is the Aesthetic one. Firestone (1970) describes this perspective as the idealistic perspective, associated with art, the humanities, and the “non-materialist ‘metaphysical’ mode of thought” (p.156, n.2). This perspective is described in *The Dialectic of Sex* as one where religion, mythology, art and prophecy, for example, are the framework for understanding the world. Firestone (1970) writes that these ways of understanding the world “imposed only an artificial, imaginary order on a universe still mysterious and chaotic” (p.159). This perspective corresponds with ‘female behaviour’; including being subjective, wishful, dreamy, emotional and focused on the subconscious and is framed as primitive and undesirable in comparison with an ordered, scientific Technological one. The Aesthetic perspective is positioned as the perspective which creates a utopian imaginary, however one that is unable to materialise these dreams because of its lack of engagement with reality and science.

Firestone (1970) describes the two perspectives as being in opposition, arguing that they are incomprehensible to one another, and as far disconnected as possible (p.154). She goes on to argue that her utopian goal, a world free from sex distinctions and female oppression, will only come about when the dreams of the Aesthetic perspective can be realised in the



‘real world’ by the scientific advances of the Technological perspective. On their own, Firestone writes, they are not useful for utopianism, as they are either unconcerned with the limitations of reality and therefore not practical (Aesthetic perspective) or a slow trial- and- error type of process with no obvious goal to work towards (Technological perspective).

What Firestone (1970) suggests as a way to “realise the conceivable [Aesthetic] in the possible [Technological] (p.155) and achieve a feminist utopian revolution is the ‘merging’ of the two perspectives in an inherently dialectical way. The synthesis of the two perspectives produce something better than what would be possible by just adding the Aesthetic dreams to scientific advances. In this case, the dominant perspective of society in the revolution that followed would be an androgynous one, not bound by gendered or sexed traits because the synthesis of them would result in their cancellation. Firestone (1970) describes the androgynous culture as “surpassing the highs of either cultural stream, or even the sum of their integrations. More than a marriage, rather an abolition of the cultural categories themselves, a mutual cancelation – a matter-antimatter explosion” (p.174). The merging of the sex dialectic, man and woman, would result in people taking on androgynous genders, which Firestone argues is better than prioritising either man or woman as they were. The merging of the cultural dialectic, Technological and Aesthetic would result in a culture also free from gendered traits. In this androgynous feminist utopia which results from a dialectical synthesis, women and men would be free from oppression as they are no longer bound to their biologies, and more than this, they would be equal with all others as distinct gendered and sexed categories would no longer exist.

For an example of how this dialectical method could be applied to another part of Firestone's feminist dialectical utopia one can again look towards reproductive technologies. Without women's collective desire and imagining of specific types of control over reproduction, as well as the desire and ability of scientists to provide the means for this control, the contraceptive pill may not have been developed. By highlighting the dialectical relationship between the Technological and the Aesthetic, Firestone explores the way that these typically oppositional and antagonistic ideas can produce positive outcomes. In regards to the contraceptive pill, the wishes of feminists to control reproduction were not materialised before the Technological development, and the scientific advances may not have had the drive to create a solution without women's social and political activism. It is in this productive antagonism between the poles of the dialectic that the revolutionary forces of Firestone become clear and the ability to achieve smaller, concurrent utopian goals via this method emerges.

When Firestone discusses in chapter nine the way that the Technological and Aesthetic perspectives need to be dialectically synthesised to create a cultural revolution, she is simultaneously calling for the same method to be applied to other dialectics discussed throughout *The Dialectic of Sex*, and most importantly, the dialectic between the sexes. Firestone repeatedly parallels the dialectics between Technological and Aesthetic with other dialectics throughout *The Dialectic of Sex*, arguing that, ultimately, the Technological and Aesthetic dialectic emerges from a deeper sex dialectic and are related to cultural and economic dialectics as well. By applying the same approach to the dialectics in *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone is advocating for the synthesis of traditional dualisms in

order to transcend them. She argues that overcoming the current oppositional relationship that defines these dualisms is the way to achieving a better feminist world.

The incorporation of oppositional entities and the transcendent result that emerges from a dialectical approach is key to reigniting the theory of utopianism. The contradictory sides, are engaged in a productive antagonism that generates a deeper and more nuanced understanding than looking at each individually. Dialectical utopianism has the potential to continuously create these transcendent moments, as well as not being subject to many of the same criticisms of other utopias, such as those described by Harvey. By drawing on a Marxist dialectical method in particular, the materialism that is often crucial to realising utopian dreams in a real, physical sense is equally valued to the ideological, abstract part of utopia. Earlier theories of dialectics, most notably that of Hegel, prioritised ideas over the material. Marxist dialectics allows for a more equal analysis of the material and the ideological, and explores how each part of our lives is part of a larger, interconnected whole (Bhaskar, 1993). It is the realisation of the progressively ideal world that Firestone is ultimately concerned with, exemplified in the way she frames her ultimate goal as the incorporation of the ideal with the material.

### **Firestone's feminist dialectics**

Further to the problematic elements of the prioritisation of dualist thinking in specific utopias, and wider political trends such as neoliberalism and postmodernism, orthodox Marxist theory has often been at the centre of perpetuating a mischaracterised form of utopia. It is for this reason that I suggest Firestone's work is an extension of, or a building

on, orthodox Marxist theory in this area. She draws on dialectical materialism as the basis of her methodology in *The Dialectic of Sex*, while advocating for certain positions which stand in conflict with the beliefs of orthodox Marxists, particularly Marx and Engels. The rest of this chapter will explore Firestone's relationship with Marxism in order to more deeply understand her own version of a feminist dialectical utopianism.

First and foremost, feminism is about changing the world we live in; changing ideological systems and the systemic oppression that accompanies them. Dialectical theory, specifically dialectical materialism, provides tools for feminists to analyse the world and in particular, the relationships that make up the patriarchal system which they wish to change. Viewing the oppression of women in a dialectical way, multiple axes of oppressions and situational experiences can be taken into account while still focusing on gender. Marxism is a theoretical framework at its core about revolution and social change, and targeting specific injustices and dominations. This trait makes it easily compatible with feminist theory, a framework which prioritises similar ideas.

Marxist dialectical theory allows one to understand and explain a complex set of dynamic relationships, focusing on how the parts themselves, and the relationships between them are constantly evolving. Marxist scholar Bertell Ollman (2008), discussing the materialist element of Marxist dialectics, describes this way of thinking as replacing “independent and essentially dead ‘things’” with “a world of processes in relations of mutual dependence” (Ollman and Smith, p.10). Social, historical and political context in Marxist dialectics is crucial to understanding what something is and that the relationships between it and other

aspects of society are important to its construction and interpretation. Focusing only on the individual entities which make up parts of a dialectical analysis offer “one-sided accounts of a complex reality” (Ollman and Smith, 2008, p.3) thus, it is important to view these partial truths in relation to each other if any concept of ‘truth’ is to be reached. In Harvey’s examples in *Spaces of Hope*, each utopia offered a one-sided account of the best way to construct a utopia. The individual utopias prioritised either the partial truth that geography determines the utopia or that temporal processes do. Neither of these truths are complete, which is what a dialectical method intends to explore and overcome.

Gillian Howie (2010a), author of *Between Feminism and Materialism* and contributor to the new collection on Firestone, refers to this part of Marxist dialectics as the “context principle” and explains that Marx stated “the relations between things are not conceptual”, as they were in Hegel’s dialectical method, “but social and historical” (p.5). This highlights the materialist aspect of Marx’s dialectics, compared to Hegel’s idealist aspect, which privileges ideas over the material. In the contemporary new material feminisms, the dialectical impulse extends to viewing the conceptual, the social and the historical as inherently intertwined and unable to be separated.

Marx believed that the politics of a society is directly related to the way that its members organise themselves to meet basic needs (Ollman and Smith, 2008). The economic perspective of society is crucially important to social organisation for traditional Marxist theory. Marx was a materialist, and thus, his writing is based on the idea that all lived material realities, particularly the production and reproduction of these basic needs,

influence our consciousnesses (Singer, 2000). His famous belief contends that “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Marx, 1977). The materialist aspect of Marxism influences the theory of dialectics discussed in this thesis and is visible in Firestone’s work as well where she draws on Marxism. The social experiences of women are centralised throughout *The Dialectic of Sex*, and Firestone’s engagement with the link between reproduction and consciousness places her squarely within a Marxist framework.

Howie (2010a) attempts to “revive a dialectical method that helps to engage with questions of class, exploitation, alienation, mediation, ideology, and reification” (p.7). Discussing the merits of a dialectical approach, Howie (2010a) argues that it would allow feminists to encompass contradictory aspects in their work without having to solve the contradiction and instead be able to live with the complexity present in our lives (p.3). Being able to embrace these conflicts instead of trying to solve them removes a barrier to feminist progress. A feminist dialectical approach therefore would value the processes of our lives and the productive elements that emerge from tensions between them, particularly the axes of domination and inequality. This is exemplified in *The Dialectic of Sex*, and I would argue, where Firestone best uses Marxist theory.

Dialectics is often used in revolutionary politics, particularly those from a Marxist background or influenced by Marxism, including in Firestone’s *Dialectic of Sex*. It is the ability of dialectics to “transform the real” through an incorporation of idealism and material activism that positions dialectics as a radical theory, particularly in the way

Firestone uses it to radically reform society to remove the categories of sex and their corresponding oppression. Author of “Dialectics as Praxis” Joel Kovel (2008) argues that dialectical theory is “inherently emancipatory” in that “it allows otherness its presence and welcomes difference even as it eschews relativism” (p.238). It is for this reason that dialectical theory is useful to achieving the goal of revitalising dialectics and making it a theory which is useful in social and political change. While other political theories may focus on either the material ground work needed for activism, and what is possible currently, or on the ideological, including visions of a better world, what dialectics allows for is the discussion of the contradictions and tensions between the two, and an ability to find a synthesis of them.

Conflict is a major aspect of the theory of dialectics, both the acceptance and resolution of it. As Kovel (2008) writes, “conflict is its matrix, as well as what it overcomes not with finality, but only to arrive at new levels of contradiction” (p.235). Bhaskar’s (1993) definition of dialectics, noted in the introduction to the thesis, similarly emphasises the process of “conceptual or social conflict” and the way that the incorporation of these conflicting oppositions leads to their transcendence and a “more adequate” way of knowing (1p.154). The contradiction between oppositional poles is crucial to the ability of the theory of dialectics to transcend current thinking, and what makes it useful for reconsidering utopianism.

As Harvey and Jameson both argued, the acceptance of contradiction and the ability to be comfortable with it provides an opportunity to develop ideas that may seem counter-

intuitive and it is this acceptance that Firestone exemplifies in *The Dialectic of Sex*. Rather than prioritising, for example, either the ideological aspects of feminism or the material experiences of the women in activist groups, Firestone instead champions a dialectical approach which incorporates both and gives them both room in developing her resulting feminist utopia. Being open to contradictions and wider, more subtle interconnections, leads to an in-depth level of knowledge that may not have been possible otherwise as an array of previously hidden relationships are identified. By understanding how ideas correlate, we are more able to understand their individual parts; their positions in a wider context inform our knowledge of them. What it means to be material is understood in contrast to what it means to be ideal, but even further, understanding how they connect can produce knowledges beyond what is currently possible. Dialectical theory, in this way, provides a unique analysis of structures such as capitalism, globalisation, gender, as well as smaller scale day to day life by viewing nothing as disconnected. Due to the inherent contradictions that arise when thinking in a dialectical way, the theory can be understood as heuristic; an aid to learning and analysing situations rather than a theory which will produce definitive answers.

Howie (2010a), drawing on materialism in her feminist work, explains that a materialist “need neither believe that there is direct access to the world nor dismiss the existence of consciousness” (p.4), a point true of Marxism and Firestone in particular. Howie writes that a materialist is likely to believe that some things exist independently from us and our consciousness, and that we can discover ‘facts’ about these things, however these facts will always be tied to the people and social situations which discovered them. The emphasis on



connectedness contributes to the creation of a new class consciousness in Marxist work. In particular, dialectical thinking reveals a new possible society and results in a shift in how one inhabits the world. A moment of praxis can be reached where one “consciously acts in the world, changing it and testing it and deepening one’s understanding of it all at the same time” (Ollman and Smith, 2008, p.11). It is this moment that Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* emphasises, and what the book can contribute to understanding utopia in a contemporary setting. By combining the ability (or even necessity) to act with the need to learn more about it, the utopianism that is created goes beyond current understandings of the theory as they stand. It allows for small changes to occur, alongside a committed and engaged citizenry, while still generating a desire for knowledge that will call for different actions in the future. This, therefore, allows the utopia to avoid criticisms of authoritarianism and closure generated by action, as the action is always responsive to developing situations and knowledges.

Marx’s dialectical materialism has, in the words of Howie, received bad press in recent decades, echoing the experience of utopia discussed in the previous chapter. Marxism no longer has a dominant voice in western academic culture, instead, it is often incorrectly characterised and fundamentally misunderstood (Howie, 2010a). Issues such as economic reductionism and, in particular for feminists, an inability to comprehensively deal with sexual oppression, have dominated the contemporary conception of the theory, contributing to an increasing unpopularity of Marxism. In a time where Marxism is inexplicitly linked with communism, and communism is linked with totalitarian and violent regimes in the political imagination of the majority of the public, the public image

of Marxist theory is not good. Using Marxist theory, therefore, becomes less common, and the useful tools of Marx and Engels continue to remain unused and out of fashion.

Howie (2010a) describes Firestone's materialism in particular as the inclination to "hold that a number of things exist independently from us and that these are not artefacts of the mind, language, or conceptual scheme" (p.4). Marx (1873) argued that in his form of dialectics "the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought". It is this belief that shapes his dialectical materialism, a response to Hegel's dialectics which focus on the idea and which inspired Firestone's own position. Firestone's dialectical materialism holds that the interaction between factors can bring about something different, as well as the prioritisation of historical and class context which is absent in Hegel's dialectic. "The significance of Marx and Engels" for Firestone, Howie (2010b) writes, "lies in their attempt to interpret historical and cultural change and the development of economic classes in terms of organic causes" (p. 219). Firestone uses a similar method to identify natural causes (female biology) to locate the historical oppression of women. Further, Howie (2010b) emphasises that Firestone is a dialectical materialist in her commitment to a scientific method of enquiry. Firestone does this by exploring the historical evolution of institutions like the family and the state, conceptualising them as material entities which can be researched and evaluated with a scientific, empirical method. This is in contrast to a more typical understanding of these entities as ideological constructs, lacking in material consequence. By questioning the development of these institutions, Firestone attempts to identify the interests of political

coalitions, as well as the interests of current political structures; crucial knowledge for feminists who are actively trying to change these interests (Howie, 2010b, p.219).

In particular, the materialist and Marxist aspects of the work of Firestone and Howie call for an analysis of the world which emphasises relations of oppression when engaging in politically progressive work. Questions of class, exploitation, ideology and other social frameworks maintained via power relations contribute to the oppression of marginalised communities and are therefore necessary to engage with, particularly when attempting to build a feminist utopianism that works against sex and gender oppression. The dialectical work of Firestone and Howie (2010a) respond to these questions in a specific way, requiring issues to be placed “in [a] context that is at once social, political and historical” (p.5). As *The Dialectic of Sex* argues, there is not a sole answer to be discovered which will solve the issues of sex and gender oppression, however, the mere discussion of these questions from a dialectical point of view is important as they contribute to the evolution of multiple perspectives and solutions that contribute to progressive feminist change.

## **Tensions**

Somewhat ironically, Firestone initially participates in the dismissal of utopianism, influenced by her Marxist roots, writing on page five of *The Dialectic of Sex* that earlier thinkers who engaged with utopianism did not understand the root causes of social injustice, and thus they existed in a cultural vacuum. The orthodox Marxist reaction to utopianism largely stems from the emphasis placed on scientific method and positivism. Engels (1908) wrote that “to make a science of socialism, it had first to be placed upon a

real basis” (p.75); socialism would need to be ‘scientific’, employing empirical methods, in order to become a reality, rather than being constructed around ideas and hopes. Given the tendency of these thinkers to dismiss utopianism (as we conceptualise it now) as an overly ideological theory, it is unsurprising that Firestone also uses this language in *The Dialectic of Sex* as Marx and Engels provide her initial framework. However, as outlined earlier, Firestone does engage with what Engels may classify as utopianism, although she does not use the term to classify herself, and seemingly corrects for the parts of the theory that Marxists critique. Firestone’s utopia uses a scientific socialist method championed by Marxists in its dialectical material methodology while incorporating a utopian socialist one that is not typical in orthodox Marxism.

Heavily influenced by positivism, orthodox Marxist theorists, specifically Engels, disregard utopianism due to its lack of engagement with scientific method and the material.

Positivism is defined as

recognizing as genuine knowledge only verifiable facts which can be established through scientific method (the empirical methods of natural science). In social science, it can refer to a search for general laws drawn from direct observation and objective measurement. (Chandler and Munday, 2011, n.p).

The positivism which influenced traditional Marxism perpetuates an underlying dualism between the material and the ideal or in Engel’s terms, scientific socialism and utopian socialism. This is the same dualism that is at the core of Firestone’s “The Dialectics of Cultural History”, and again places her in a position where she builds on the orthodox Marxism which grounds *The Dialectic of Sex*. Firestone, while heavily influenced by orthodox Marxism, diverts from the theory on this issue, and incorporates her own type of utopian socialism into her manifesto. This dualism contradicts the core dialectical methods

present in Marxism and prevents orthodox Marxist theory from engaging fully with the potential of utopianism. The positivist approach and its influence on utopia is problematic as it is typically associated with other dualisms regarding legitimate knowledges, such as the relationship between science and masculinity, and nature and femininity. Ultimately, male designated knowledge is viewed as more legitimate than female knowledge, and in turn, the masculine point of view becomes the standard of neutrality. The sexist elements of scientific positivism complicate using Marxist work for feminist aims.

In Engels' *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, he differentiates between the ideological utopian socialism of 18th century philosophers, and the materialist driven scientific socialism of classical Marxists. Scientific socialism is described as "the theoretical expression of the proletarian movement" (Engels, 1908, p. 139) and is framed as the way to achieve universal emancipation. Scientific socialism, therefore, is Engels' way of discussing what we understand as Marxist theory, rooted in economic and empirical scientific method and politics. Engels' scientific socialist theory is used to explain the historical development of capitalism, for example, by way of these specific methods in a way that utopian socialism could not. The description of scientific socialism as a theoretical expression of the beliefs of a political group is similar to Firestone's description of dialectical method as an expression of the incorporation of the ideal beliefs and material experiences of women, however, their language is different.

In *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Engels (1908) writes that scientific socialism would be able to explain any social and political developments as determined by economics and

historical context, rather than the ideological optimism of utopian socialists. What would be described as 'utopia' by other theorists in a contemporary moment would not be by Engel's scientific socialist; instead, scientific socialism would describe a Marxist inspired, socialist community as something which is historically determined and a product of social evolution, rather than the desires of the people. The Marxist 'utopia' then, would not be a 'utopia' by name, regardless of any shared characteristics. The tendency of some orthodox Marxists to engage with a one-way interaction between socioeconomic aspects of an environment and their impact on material and ideological life is visible in Engel's argument. In orthodox Marxist theory, utopia is repeatedly placed as outside of legitimate knowledge due to its abstract elements and its incorporation of imagination and hope and it is in this sense that one can see the determinist element of scientific Marxism as anti- utopian. The ideological aspect which drives some utopian constructions does not have a place in the realisation of socialist results in Marxist theory, and therefore, the suggestion that abstract utopian desires can result in a significant alteration of material life would be dismissed.

Engels characterises utopian socialism as overly abstract and idealist, echoing wider criticisms and mischaracterisation of utopian theory discussed previously, a theme also visible in the critique by Firestone of the Aesthetic perspective as unconcerned with material reality. This form of knowledge is dismissed as irrelevant and not logical, due to its lack of engagement with materialism. Engels (1908), in regards to the founders of socialism, argues that "these new social systems were foredoomed as Utopian; the more completely they were worked out in detail, the more they could not avoid drifting off into

pure phantasies” (p.58). As he frames utopian socialism as unrealistic dreaming, Engels mischaracterises the totality of utopian theorising, conflating the descriptor ‘utopian’ with an overly fantastical theory which is determined to drift into fantasy rather than being realised. The criticism which forms his arguments is based on an assumption which understands his ‘utopian socialism’ as unable to remain in connection with the material elements of life, and therefore, as unable to make any fundamental changes to society.

Reflecting the views of Engels and other orthodox Marxists, Phil Gasper (2008) writes that the weakness of utopian socialism was that it lacked a realistic plan to bring about a new world that went further than describing alternative possibilities. Compared to the scientific socialism of Marxism and its accompanying historical materialism, Gasper (2008) identifies a theoretical weakness in utopian socialism as its inability to explain the history and context of the ideas and desires that drove it. This, however, perpetuates the same problematic dualist approach to utopianism as has been discussed throughout this chapter. Engels does not identify the scientific method or empirical aspects of utopian socialists, and therefore engages in a dismissal of utopianism as an illegitimate political theory.

A more contemporary example of Marxist disassociation with utopianism can be seen in Ollman and Smith’s *Dialectics for the New Century*, as they paint a picture of a binary opposition between Marx’s imaginative aspect and utopianism; claiming that it is not utopian to believe or hope that a better society is possible. They argue that what is utopian is to “construct this society out of such hopes; to believe, in other words, that such a society

is possible without any other reason or evidence but that you desire it” (Ollman and Smith, 2008, p.12). Ollman and Smith characterise utopianism as an exercise in imagination, hope and desire, which lacks a materialist aspect or a justifiable cause. Reflecting their own links to orthodox Marxism, the authors reinforce the anti-ideological stance of the theory and the historical determinism that replaces the imaginative optimism found in ‘utopian socialism’ and a wider understanding of utopianism. These traits are unable to be observed empirically, meaning they are less legitimate ways of thinking in a Marxist, positivist environment.

By framing utopia in such a specific way, these theorists emphasise a difference between traditional understandings of utopianism and orthodox Marxism’s scientifically informed views on achieving social transformation. The result of this is that they perpetuate a characterisation of utopianism which is dualist and unable to connect ideological and materialist aspects, continuously positioning utopianism as a non-legitimate form of knowledge. This prevents a dialectical utopianism from emerging, as the imaginative or ideological aspect is constantly undermined, regardless of the useful part that this can play in revolutionary activity. One can understand how Firestone may be read as problematic in this regard, and *The Dialectic of Sex* does not seem to fit into either a ‘utopian socialist’ framework or a ‘scientific socialist’ one because she confuses the dialectic between them. Firestone draws on scientific socialism when she uses the work of Marx and Engels, and frames the oppression of women as a historical and explainable phenomenon. However, she could be categorised as a utopian socialist as she draws on imagination and the abstract through the incorporation of the Aesthetic perspective when outlining her methods, as well



as her feminist dialectical utopia in *The Dialectic of Sex*. This tendency of Firestone to begin from a Marxist point and then diverge away from it in a very significant way is a theme and key tension of her work.

Firestone's introduction to *The Dialectic of Sex* outlines the way Marx and Engels provide an analysis and methodology rich in its ability to confront oppression and argues that this is what feminists should take from Marxist theory. On the subject of women, however, Firestone (1970) writes that when it comes to women, or, "the condition of women as an oppressed class", Marx and Engels "know next to nothing, recognising it only where it overlaps with economics" (p.4). Shortly after this comment, she argues that the work of Marx and Engels surpass socialists who wrote before them, and specifically cites their dialectical materialist approach as being of value. Firestone is a Marxist feminist and is influenced by many key features of orthodox Marxism, however she simultaneously recognises and accounts for the limited ability of orthodox Marxism to explain women's oppression. Firestone therefore utilises feminist theory to correct this issue. Positivism reinforces the dualism between masculine science (for example, scientific socialism) and feminine nature (the utopian socialists). This dualism has been critiqued by Firestone, as well as other feminists such as feminist science studies theorists Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding who largely agree that the dualism is based in sexist assumptions of the characters of science and nature. As Firestone explains and exemplifies the Technological perspective (or science) is typically designated masculine while the Aesthetic perspective (or nature) is heavily associated with women and the non-scientific. Bodies are historically associated with nature and women, who are somehow "more biological, more corporeal,

and more natural than men” (Grosz, 1994, p.14). In feminist science studies, academics have identified the separation of personal viewpoint from scientific knowledge creation as inherently problematic, yet, science continues to be understood as neutral. This results in a dismissal of female experiences of the world, or indeed, of any person who is seen to draw on feminine aspects of it, such as emotions, nature or the body which are not considered neutral (Vickers, 2002) .

A similar positivism influences the work of Firestone which can be seen as a mark of her Marxist roots, as well as the overwhelming belief in the legitimacy of science at the time she was writing, regardless of her ultimate engagement with some aspects of ideological utopianism. However, *The Dialectic of Sex* confronts the issue of positivism privileging ‘male’ knowledges by correcting the sexist undertones of the approach and overcoming the surprising dualism that remains in orthodox Marxist theory. Firestone’s approach to knowledges and cultures is a much more dialectical approach than the orthodox Marxist relationship to science and, although her problematic engagement with essentialism is visible here, she attempts to incorporate the male/Technological culture or knowledge with the female/Aesthetic culture or knowledge, valuing them equally and using their previously dualistic and antagonist positions to produce a culture of androgyny and a new type of legitimate knowledge or way of knowing. While Firestone does fall victim to some of the same critiques of Marxism and 1970s western radical feminism, the usefulness of her work in exploring ideas around the intersections of utopianism, Marxism and feminism is not diminished.

### Chapter Three: Dialectical Utopianism

As outlined so far in the thesis, the demise of utopia is not mono-casual, and many wider changes in the political landscape, as well as previous uses of the theory, have contributed to its fall from popularity. What is missing from earlier utopias, such as the worlds of More and Plato, is a dialectical analysis which overcomes the criticisms at the heart of the demise of utopia. Crucial issues such as authoritarianism, closure, abstraction as well as a lack of materiality present in non-dialectical utopias provide the ammunition for those who wish to disregard the theory. The notion of a dialectical utopianism offers a new way of thinking about utopianism that would overcome many of the problems highlighted, most notably the separation of key dualisms explored in chapter one, and replaces it with a theory focused on synthesis, as well as one able to be comfortable with the conflict and uncertainty that emerges through this synthesis. The previous chapters have outlined key issues and themes in the demise of utopia, as well as introducing Firestone and her dialectical method. This chapter explores how the dialectical method and utopian impulse in Firestone's work can be used to resolve issues contributing to the demise of utopia. A feminist dialectical utopianism such as Firestone's provides this resolution.

Dualisms prevent a politically useful and dynamic utopian theory from emerging because they generate one-sided analysis rather than one which values the inherent dynamism between ideas. As Harvey introduces his theory of dialectical utopianism in *Spaces of Hope*, his goal is to reconnect spatiality and temporality to ignite a "revitalization of the utopian tradition that will give us ways to imagine and pursue the possibility of real alternatives to our current condition" (Levitas, 2003, p.137). The importance of dialectical

utopianism for Harvey, and I argue for Firestone and for contemporary uses of the theory, is its ability to engage people politically in issues they would not engage with otherwise. By reconsidering what utopia is, we can replace a dualist utopia with a dialectical one as outlined in *The Dialectic of Sex* and supported by the work in *Spaces of Hope*, resulting in a more politically progressive and active community who feel capable of making social change on either an individual or societal level.

The importance that is often placed on individuals, especially in a contemporary feminist utopia, may be dismissed as neoliberal individualism and therefore not a worthy contribution to wider social and political change due to its seeming dismissal of the community. However, this is a misguided criticism, and one overcome by Firestone's roots in the second wave radical feminist movement in particular. The individual, located in the private realm, contributes as much to the dialectical utopian movement as does the community, located in the public realm. Both are necessary to draw on in order to move past their individual contributions.

*The Dialectic of Sex* reflects the condemnation of reformist solutions in its famous radical demands for societal change. As outlined in the previous chapter, the end goal of Firestone's dialectical theory is the incorporation of two oppositional poles resulting in a revolution that would emerge from the synthesis of the two. The synthesis would generate a utopian outcome from the fundamental conflict between two entities, in this case, the biological male and female division and the prescribed social roles that accompany it. The dynamic between the two perspectives highlights the gap between what exists (the

Technological perspective) and what is possible (the Aesthetic perspective), and reinforces the way that a dualist approach does not incorporate both of these things and fails to see the antagonistic potential in that gap. Firestone highlights that neither perspective, Technological or Aesthetic, ever achieved universality as *the* one theoretical framework, unable to fully explain the complexities of society with a dual approach. The Aesthetic perspective “was holistic but divorced from the real world”, while the Technological perspective “achieved ‘progress’ at the price of cultural schizophrenia, and the falseness and dryness of ‘objectivity’” (Firestone, 1970, p.171).

Firestone’s focus on the productive tension that the gap between sides of a dualism generates, an influence of the dialectical materialism that inspires her work, ensures that the interrelation or conflict between the two sides of a dualism will produce something new and progressive, and it is here where feminism and utopianism can most benefit from this approach. Firestone’s theory understands the gap as a space to generate better, utopian outcomes, incorporating the two entities and using them to produce something radically different and with progressive potential. This method produces a utopian outcome which is able to “transcend the limitations and contingencies of reality” (Firestone, 1970, p.157) through the synthesis of typically exclusive oppositions. This transcendence is what generates the radical element of *The Dialectic of Sex*. In this book in particular, an androgynous society with no sex or gender categories and their accompanying stereotypical roles (the transcendent result of Firestone’s dialectic) is a radical departure from the culture of North America in the 1960s when Firestone was writing.

Firestone's feminist dialectical utopian efforts in *The Dialectic of Sex* are reflected in Harvey's *Spaces of Hope*, where he outlines his own desire for a dialectical utopianism. Harvey (2010) makes explicit the somewhat subtle methodology of Firestone, writing in *Spaces of Hope* that this dialectical type of utopia must be rooted in present possibilities and pointed towards a different one (p.196). Similarly, Howie (2010) argues that "every philosophy is practical, its method a social and political weapon" and further that she believes all philosophy must be concerned with "the intelligibility of the world" (p.9). Both Harvey's goals and Howie's 'practical philosophies' parallel the dialectical materialism in *The Dialectic of Sex*. All three theorists consider the way that materialism can be incorporated with the ideological, drawing on interconnections between traditionally separated parts of our society. To achieve a utopianism that can reflect both of these elements simultaneously requires the identification of relationships, including conflict, erased in a dualist vision of utopia. Dialectical utopian theory overcomes the problems of dualism and allows utopia to reclaim its position as a politically relevant and influential concept by using materialism to ground idealism and create an interconnected and complex understanding of different ideas.

### **The personal is political**

Firestone's work is not consigned to imagination, rather it is an instance of feminist praxis, a Marxist term for the combination of theory and practice. This is where her incorporation of the dualism of materialism and idealism result in a clear progression on other theories of utopianism. Her dialectical utopianism, exemplified through praxis, is a more engaging utopianism as it can be materially realised, and retain an evolving ideological element.

Praxis draws on a specific worldview (or multiple worldviews), resulting in particular beliefs and behaviours which would differ from those informed by other understandings of the world. While a useful term, praxis suffers the same fate as 'dialectics' and so is not typically widely used. Praxis is at its core a dialectical idea, as the tensions between theory and practice generate a synthesis which contributes to transformation of systems and revolutionary activity. Kovel (2008), author of the chapter 'Dialectic as Praxis' in *Dialectics for the New Century*, defines praxis as a "consciously chosen, transformative activity grounded in and reflective of a particular worldview" (p.236).

*The Dialectic of Sex* encourages a notion of utopia as something practical, a theory which can be applied in reality, and at the same time, ideological and aimed at achieving multiple revolutionary goals, rather than the problematic utopias described in *Spaces of Hope* which attempted to control how a new society would be run. In the introduction to Carol Hanisch's famous radical feminist essay declaring 'the personal is political', first published in 1969, she wrote that "political struggle or debate is the key to good political theory. A theory is just a bunch of words – sometimes interesting to think about, but just words, nevertheless". Hanisch frames feminist theory as ungrounded and not useful to feminist change without the incorporation of struggle or political debate into it. The combination of theory and practice is crucially important to the process of reframing utopia as it places it in the material realm, and can be manifested through political activism, either on a societal or individual level.

While the discussion of utopianism as an ideological theory is useful, for instance Firestone was explicit that her manifesto is intended to generate fresh thinking, the material realisation of utopia is equally as important and in a dialectical framework, both can be achieved simultaneously because of the acceptance of conflict. As Levitas (2003) argues, “Utopianism is too important to be consigned to the realm of art and literature, where its political impact may be limited. Dialectical utopianism must be rooted in real possibilities for change, while pointing towards alternative human futures” (p. 142). What the idea of practical philosophies allows for is incorporation of political struggle and theory, producing something that is better than solely ‘a bunch of words’ or activism without ideology. The material personal and political experiences of women inform their ideological or theoretical beliefs, and synthesised, produce an informed activism with potentially radical utopian goals as was demonstrated in the sexual revolution throughout the western world beginning in the 1960s, for example. The link between revolutions that affect entire communities and individual revolutions cannot be underestimated.

As dialectical utopianism is occupied with materialism as much as idealism, the utopian worlds that are produced through this theory can be an expression of the incorporation of both of these aspects of utopianism. The dialectical utopianism created could be physical as easily as it is ideological, a space or place as well as a theory. The creation of a utopian world, either permanent or temporary, that can be physically occupied and informed by ideology has positive consequences for activism and utopian theorists and allows them to inhabit their best situation, even if only for a small period of time. Small acts of



sociological change provide opportunities to engage with utopia building, regardless of situational factors.

Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* emphasises the utopian results possible if a dialectical method is applied to all aspects of social and political life. There are multiple dialectics used throughout the book, but we can look at the way that Firestone uses the dialectical relationship between the personal and the political to examine how her dialectical feminist utopian method can be useful specifically for political progress. *The Dialectic of Sex* exemplifies 'the personal is political', a radical feminist mantra which refers to the wider, often ignored, connections between the personal aspects of women's lives and the political realm. The political, or public, realm was typically designated a space for men while women were associated with the personal realm of the home or family. The political realm refers to institutions such as government and law, often lacking in an analysis of how personal or social issues were affected by changes in political space. These oppositional parts of society were not seen as interrelated, regardless of the inseparably personal and political character of such things as family structure, reproduction and gender roles. For Firestone and other radical feminists, the personal is inextricably bound with the political in a traditionally dialectically antagonistic manner, however the tendency to consider utopia as dualist dismisses the relationship between these two ideas. The dialectical approach does not hierarchize interconnections as current political frameworks may, such as the neoliberal tendency to prioritise the individual over the community, and thus, in a feminist dialectical utopianism, the personal and the political are equally legitimate realms and are unintelligible without the other.

Throughout the manifesto, Firestone positions the individual and the community as paradoxically in tension and inseparable, and while they may seem incompatible, the conflict between them is crucial to Firestone's dialectical methodology. The individual act of using artificial reproductive technology is positioned as part of a movement against oppression of all women by giving individual women choice over their reproduction, resulting in the achievement of a feminist utopia. The importance of this can only be recognised by understanding that individual choice over reproduction, and separating one's life from what Firestone's saw as a 'natural' link to reproductive roles is an undeniable part of the political realm. Using the contradictions between previously separated personal lives and political change, Firestone aims to move beyond her current oppressive environment. It is for this reason that I suggest Firestone's dialectical approach shown in the manifesto is more contemporary than it is given credit for, and has contemporary value.

While Firestone was writing, the examples she was using had already begun to have an effect on society, in particular, the birth control pill. The changes that women were undertaking for themselves and the politicisation of these choices contributed to a larger feminist revolution characterised by an increase in female sexual power and autonomy, the ability for women to prioritise different aspects of their lives over pregnancy at certain times, the option for people who were previously unable to biologically reproduce to have children, as well as an alteration of what family, motherhood and female sexuality represented. Although this is not an exhaustive list, the benefits of changes in reproductive technology

have been well documented and constitute a feminist revolution in this area. Firestone did not achieve this alone, however, she is a centrally important figure in reproductive politics of the era she was writing in, and she is still regarded as such (in both a positive and negative light) today.

By incorporating the material experiences of women in the private realm with radical feminist political goals, Firestone positions herself and the activism she engaged with as dialectical in spirit. Firestone's activist goals address the gendered/sexed experience of reproduction, an issue typically located in the personal realm, by utilising a radical feminist praxis focused on political activism to overcome biological female oppression and produce a feminist utopia where women would be liberated. Firestone's "The Dialectics of Cultural History" chapter exemplifies the way that the personal and the political can be reconnected and used to produce progressive political action towards equality, in particular her arguments for increased acceptance and accessibility of artificial reproduction and the deconstruction of the patriarchal family reflect this position.

In *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone advocates for socialised childcare, taking an issue from the private realm (the expectation of women to be the primary caregiver) and moving it to the public realm (childcare becomes a public issue, effecting all citizens equally). Rather than the child being dependant on its mother for a long period of time, the child would be raised by a group for a small period of time. She writes that babies would be born "to both sexes equally, or independently of either" through the uptake of what Firestone (1970) refers to as "modern embryology" (p.185) but what is commonly termed artificial

reproduction now. These technologies would overcome the problematic reproduction of the species by one (women) for the benefit of both (men and women) (Firestone, 1970, p.11). The traditional patriarchal family structure would be dismantled as women were no longer tied to pregnancy and childcare as they were at the time of the publication of *The Dialectic of Sex*, therefore eliminating what Firestone understood as the reason for the 'natural' oppression of women by men.

Firestone argues that women can use artificial reproduction to overcome the 'tyranny of reproduction'. Ironically, these technologies are ones that could also be used to allow those unable to have children naturally to experience pregnancy or parenthood. These are utopian goals for Firestone, and contribute to one of her larger goals to disrupt the link between biological sex and gendered social roles. It is important here to remember that technology in *The Dialectic of Sex* is framed as one way to exemplify the utopian goals of incorporating the achievable and the possible, and thus, using reproductive technologies to synthesise the personal and the political in these ways is inherently utopian for Firestone. Individual actions become political as women seize control of their reproductive outcomes through these technologies, in turn affecting the way we think about the political concepts of women, motherhood and questions of equality. Firestone emphasizes the way that individual reproductive choices are typically excluded from political discussion, and utilising a dialectical method, identifies the utopian potential from engaging the tension between the personal decision and the political outcome.

The utopian goals described throughout Firestone's book, while not entirely achievable at the time of publication, have since been materially realised, in particular, the progress in reproductive technologies, including the technology to allow pregnancy outside the womb that she signals as an important future development for women. The discussion around Firestone's utopian goal of women seizing control of their reproduction contributed, in part, to a wider acceptance and ultimately, achievement of the materialisation of this goal. By valuing the part that both the physical and ideal elements play in creating a dialectical utopianism, the criticisms that Firestone faced, especially being overly authoritarian and 'blue-printed' can be overcome.

### **Firestone's productive tensions**

Dialectical theory as Firestone uses it in regards to utopia in *The Dialectic of Sex* reconceptualises the traditional utopianism plagued by the dualist approach outlined in Harvey's *Spaces of Hope*. This part of Firestone's dialectical method places her in the category of orthodox Marxism, however, it is her application of this method when discussing utopianism and feminism that position her outside of it by directly engaging with issues that orthodox Marxists typically dismiss (utopianism) or do not largely focus on (feminism). Firestone's method draws on contradictions to produce these new utopian moments, which are both radical, engaging and accessible (both in the material and the idealist sense), another exciting part of this theory.

Dialectical utopianism is the thread that weaves together Firestone, Harvey and the new materialist feminists which will be discussed in the following chapter. One of the most

contemporary aspects of the manifesto is the notion that revolution must be flexible and multiple which is discussed in the “Demands and Speculations” chapter. Firestone (1970) maintains that multiple utopian revolutionary options must exist simultaneously, “interweaving with each other, some transitional, others far in the future” (p.204). Part of the reasoning for this temporary, changing utopian vision is due to her belief that individuals will desire different revolutionary practice and outcomes at different points of their lives and being able to accommodate this is important to the liberation of women’s personal and political choices. Further to Firestone’s work in this area, Harvey (2000) similarly writes of dialectical utopianism that it encourages the idea of simultaneity which highlights “choice, diversity and difference” (p.186), something increasingly important in contemporary feminism.

In “Dialectical Utopianism”, a chapter in *Spaces of Hope*, Harvey (2010) engages with similar reconsiderations of Firestone’s utopias, most importantly here, the importance of multiple utopias which are not mutually exclusive as they may have been in other, dualist understandings of utopianism. Both Harvey and Firestone discuss the productive aspects of considering utopias which are simultaneous and encourage variety. Harvey argues that these multiple utopian spaces are the place from which we can critique norms, as well as disrupt social homogeneity, echoing Firestone’s desire for alternative, fleeting utopian moments to become places of revolution or disorder. This desire is outlined in the final chapter of *The Dialectic of Sex*, where Firestone (1970) writes that her programme of revolution must be flexible and open to “multiple options to exist simultaneously, interweaving with each other, some transitional, others far in the future” (p.204) much like

the way new reproductive technologies have developed and been theorised and politicised by feminist in liberal democracies.

Firestone argues for this due to the different life situations that women find themselves in at certain points of their lives, for example, she writes that an individual may be focused on a profession, on living with other people or a partner, or living in a household. She highlights that the individual may want to be non-monogamous or non-fertile at some points, and able to naturally reproduce or get married in others (Firestone, 1970, p.206), and these require specific, different revolutionary outcomes. However, Harvey's (2000) need for multiple utopias is due to his social geographical approach, focusing on the way that alternative spaces allow us to experience life differently and can be explored "not as mere figments of the imagination but through contact with social processes that already exist" (p.184). The conflict between these multiple utopias is also beneficial for the overall theory of dialectical utopianism, with Levitas (2003) arguing that "the strength of this way of thinking about utopia is that it accepts the flawed nature of all actual utopian proposals" (p.149). While other instances of utopianism may have been undermined by co-existing and conflicting utopian goals, a dialectical utopianism that embraces simultaneity and accepts the uncomfortable and unquantifiable makes this theory worthy of reconsideration in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Chapter Four: Contemporary feminisms

Dialectical utopianism is a theory that can be used to revitalise utopianism and reframe it as a theory useful for social and political change. Exploring how contemporary feminisms are exhibiting aspects of Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, allows us to map a brief history of the dialectical utopian impulse and history and how it could be applied in a way that overcomes the demise of utopia. This thesis has argued that the theory of feminist dialectical utopianism is present in Firestone's work, and will now suggest that reading Firestone with the contemporary thinking of the new materialist feminisms, amongst other contemporary examples, creates a frame of reference for how we should conceptualise what utopia is and what it means to inhabit and progress towards it in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. I argue that the Firestone fallacy characterises the utopia in *The Dialectic of Sex* as only an all-encompassing, radical revolution, and that this portrayal of the manifesto misses a crucial, more subtle suggestion of how to conceptualise utopia exemplified in Firestone's engagement with the personal and the political. Firestone outlines revolution as a series of these smaller steps, which ultimately contribute to a wider social revolution.

Firestone's dialectical utopianism has many key aspects which make it a useful case study when reconceptualising utopia. These include Firestone's emphasis on the synthesis of oppositional elements and the resulting productive antagonism, her unique definition of technology as a way of exemplifying utopia's potential in a material situation, as well as her methodology that is at once Marxist in its beliefs yet progresses past some of the critiques that have been used to dismiss Marxism. Firestone is unashamedly utopian in her radical feminist manifesto, and although the fallacy reduces her to an angry, anti-man



trope, her feminist position creates a unique and dynamic conception of utopia that is largely a new idea. There are some aspects of this theory which are particularly useful for a contemporary feminist moment, and which emerge as a starting point in reconsidering Firestone and consequently, utopianism. While I argue that Firestone's feminist dialectical utopianism is the best way to reconceptualise utopia, both when she was writing and today, it is unlikely that the entirety of her work and her methodology will be taken up by feminists for a variety of reasons, not least the Firestone fallacy.

One of the aspects that I suggest may be most applicable for contemporary feminisms is the way that Firestone frames utopianism as an open endeavour and in conflict, exemplified in her willingness for multiple utopian possibilities in *The Dialectic of Sex*. These possibilities are as wide and varied as a full sexual and cultural revolution, to women choosing to engage with the traditional family structure, to women freely being able to prioritise their career, and are a major idea that is often overlooked. This corresponds with a trend towards a trans-dualist feminist perspective, and a dismissal of essentialist politics. Further, Firestone's dialectical materialist tendency to see things as constantly changing and in flux frames utopianism as a theory which is not definitive and instead temporary and without the heavy burden of a directive feminist blue print. Firestone's feminist dialectical utopianism is echoed in at least one interpretation of the feminist moment termed the new material feminisms, which aim to disturb chronological order as well as dualist categories. By focusing on these aspects and the way they relate to the contentious, contemporary feminist moment, the relevance of Firestone's work becomes clear, as does the potential of the methodology of *The Dialectic of Sex*.

The diagnosis of the contemporary feminist moment is a contentious undertaking, one worthy of its own thesis, and therefore unable to be entirely and sufficiently explored in this final chapter. As mentioned in the introduction to the thesis, some theorists believe we are in a moment of post-feminism, while others have suggested we are in a third, or even fourth wave of feminism. Issues raised by Sargisson on the effect of postmodernism impact the popular position and construction of feminism. Her construction of postmodernism as useful for dismantling dualisms and simultaneously forcing feminist utopias into silence characterise the contemporary feminist moment, and yet there are plenty of developments which point towards the reconceptualisation of utopia for a feminism occurring now. The ‘postmodern eclipse’ may be influential, but the fresh thinking emerging in feminism may signal a demise of postmodernism itself. Further to the waves of feminism and where we are located within it, feminist theorists such as Lykke van der Tuin, Hinton and Lam have identified an emerging ‘new material feminism’ which undermines the wave metaphor. Rather than diagnosing the contemporary feminist moment with any definitive categorisation, I suggest that there are feminisms which are more suited to a revival of *The Dialectic of Sex* and a reconceptualisation of utopianism in the way that Firestone wrote. The new material feminisms share many of the same impulses as *The Dialectic of Sex*, and so is the feminist theory that this chapter will largely focus on.

Further to the new material feminisms, third wave feminism’s plurality, acceptance of conflict and tendency towards a vision of a feminist future also places it as a sympathetic feminist moment by which to reconceptualise utopia and revitalise Firestone’s work. In a chapter on third wave feminism, Lise Sanders (2007) argues for “the possibilities a newly

expanded conception of utopia might hold for the future of feminist theory and – and in – practice (sic)” (p.3). Ideas such as these are emerging in many different areas of contemporary feminism, and do not always fall under the same theoretical subcategory. The examples throughout this chapter explore different aspects of Firestone’s work and the way that it is being exemplified in a contemporary moment, and all contribute to a unique way to understanding how Firestone’s work can be useful now. The individual examples do not intend to be a direct example of Firestone’s 1970 manifesto played out in 2015, but rather, highlight the major themes and similarities between what was occurring in *The Dialectic of Sex* and what is occurring now.

### **New material feminisms**

An area to explore in future research is a developing moment in feminist theory, associated with ‘new materialist feminists’ or ‘new materialists’. This theory draws on similar ideas to Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* in its materialism, feminism and dialectical spirit, and thus, could be a space for a feminist dialectical utopianism to emerge and become ‘mainstream’ against the contemporary demise of utopia. The new material feminisms exemplify fundamental beliefs compatible with the theory of dialectical utopianism, and for this reason, provide a space to explore the application of the theory in a contemporary feminist moment. The edited collection *Further Adventures of The Dialectic of Sex* (2010) is largely a new material endeavour and reinforces Firestone’s contemporary relevance. The collection is part of the *Breaking Feminist Waves* series which intends to rethink models of contemporary feminism and “its past and future trajectories” (Merck and Sandford, 2010, p.vii). This series has become a cornerstone in the new material feminist

moment, and Alcoff and Howie describe their intentions in the series to “redefine feminism as a configuration of intersecting movements and concerns, with political commitment but, perhaps without a singular centre” (In Merck and Sandford, 2010, p.vii). The editors of the collection on Firestone, Mandy Merck and Stella Sandford engage with new materialist ideas, as do the chapter authors, including Caroline Basset and Howie, and the themes throughout the collection engage in the same process of disturbing dualist boundaries. While the collection is not self-described as a new materialist endeavour, the placement of it within the *Breaking Feminist Waves* series and its themes of materialism, trans-dualism and being interdisciplinary lead me to define it as located within the new materialist moment.

The compatibility of a new feminist moment with the method exemplified in *The Dialectic of Sex* reaffirms that what a re-examination of Firestone provides is relevant in a contemporary setting and has potential to make an impact on how utopia is understood. In some instances, the new material feminists have moved beyond Firestone’s work and take care to avoid similar critiques. The new material feminists revitalise Firestone’s dialectical utopianism by proposing a theory which is trans-dual and aims to blur boundaries in ways that specifically benefit feminism, but account for the short falls of a theory such as Firestone’s dialectical utopianism. For example, the new materialisms ensure that their work does not engage with essentialism or reductionism.

Nina Lykke (2010) summarises these theorists by writing that they typically emphasise the need for feminist tools that can engage with the agency of matter, particularly in sexed bodies and bodily differences, in a non-essentialising way (p.132). She argues that

the aim of these endeavours is to theorize bodily and transcorporeal materialities in ways that neither push feminist thought back into the traps of biological determinism or cultural essentialism, nor make feminist theorizing leave bodily matter and biologies “behind” in a critically under-theorized limbo. (Lykke, 2010, p.132)

Lykke frames the new material feminisms as a “kind of workable settlement between biological determinism and social essentialism” (Lam, 2015, p.2), highlighting the trans-dualist and, I argue, dialectical tendencies at the core of the new materialisms. The settlement between oppositional dualisms is visible in the work of Firestone, specifically in the negotiation of nature and culture by reading them together, rather than as entities able to be separated. In Firestone, one can see how the settlement is understood as an incorporation of two oppositional entities, and results in a progressive form of culture. In the same way, the new material feminisms produce a theory which transgresses a simple compromise between nature and culture.

## **Matter**

A major theme in new materialist work is understanding matter as dynamic, articulate and self-organising (Van der Tuin and Hinton, 2014), which emerges in opposition to traditional understandings of matter in a social constructionist world as inactive and irrelevant to wider societal issues, including feminism. The importance of the material or biological in new materialisms is discussed by Iris van der Tuin and Peta Hinton in *Women: A Cultural Review* (2014), in which they argue that “culture is manifestly biological at the most intricate, molecular, level” (p.5). Rather than seeing all cultural occurrences as

socially constructed, they argue that materialism highlights the way that matter is able to influence cultural practices as a force of their own (Van der Tuin and Hinton, 2014). This materialist element echoes Firestone's work, especially her belief that the lived experiences of women are crucial when developing feminist theory and activism. Further, Firestone draws on the biological experiences of women in particular in regards to reproduction and pregnancy. Although a postmodernist may dismiss these biological experiences when discussing culture and society, both Firestone and the new material feminisms draw on it as active and important to acknowledge when attempting to create feminist theory.

In *Generational Feminism*, Van der Tuin (2015) argues that the new materialist feminisms "feel the need to free feminism from dualist interpretive categories because these structuring devices have reductive effects and do not allow for materials (textual, visual, otherwise tangible) to also 'speak'" (p.42). *The Dialectic of Sex* is one example of how incorporating the influence of matter (i.e. the biological differences that Firestone argues are at the core of women's oppression) and letting it 'speak' alters the utopian vision (i.e. the biological differences are materially addressed, for example, the artificial womb idea). Firestone argues that technology is the expression of the incorporation of matter into utopian idealism. By emphasising the active role that matter has on social and political occurrences, dialectical utopianism does not overlook a crucial element to utopian theorising or doing that earlier utopias have. For this reason, the new material feminisms provide the best framework through which to consider dialectical utopianism.

As Firestone did throughout her manifesto and activism, the new material feminisms value the embodied, material experiences which shape personal and political feminisms (Sroda, Rogowska-Stangret, Cielemecka, 2014). What the new materialisms provide is a more contemporary interpretation of 'the personal is political'. A major theorist in this field, Hinton (2014), argues that

Knowledge production has always been bodily production, so how we understand feminism's subjects and how we might conceive of the identities of what we engage, including our own identities as subjugated, is cogently, and substantially, political (p.110).

This quote highlights the dialectical link between bodily, or personal, experience and our political lives; our subjugated bodies and identities, both material and personal, are inherently political because of the oppressive category that they place us in. The outcome of the approach of the new material feminisms is an understanding of politics which affects what utopia is and how it can be achieved. A politics which values the materialisation of experience and time, amongst other things, in the body will be more sympathetic to a utopia which is simultaneously fractured, temporary and material. Writing on materialism and biology, Noela Davis (2014) argues "both feminism and politics are material engagements with the world, and both are materializations of their constitutive physical and social contexts" (p.73), the dialectical utopianism that we create must acknowledge its unavoidable embeddedness in the physical and ideal worlds which are continuously changing (Harvey, 2000, p.230).

Our material contexts affect our bodies and our politics, but more than this, they shape how we engage with politics and what we understand politics to be. In a dialectical utopian context, this allows for utopia where the material and the ideal are synthesised in such a

way to produce a utopia which progresses beyond dualist utopias such as those criticised by Harvey for prioritising, for example, time over space or vice versa. Rather than only understanding utopia through a neoliberal progress narrative, understanding time in a new materialist way would mean that utopia is not only a future project, it is now. The need to progress to a utopia is replaced with the ability to inhabit utopia in the present, and achieving utopia can be reconceptualised as a personal, and temporary activity, reflected in the blurring of the divides between the personal and the political (in this case, feminist and utopian politics), and the past, present and future.

## **Time**

Another aspect of the new material feminisms that could be useful for the promotion of a feminist dialectical utopianism inspired by Firestone is the new understanding of time. Rick Dolphijn and van der Tuin (2012) describe the new materialist turn as the production of a 'new metaphysics' which emerge between old and new readings of similar ideas. They go on to write that "a new metaphysics is not restricted to a here and now, nor does it merely project an image of the future for us. It announces what we may call a "new tradition, which simultaneously gives us a past, a present, and a future" (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012, n.p). This connected understanding of time echoes Harvey's notion of dialectical utopianism as rooted in the present, and pointed at the future, and again highlights that a dialectical method allows for a deeper understanding of these connections than a theory which views them as separate entities.



Harvey and Firestone emphasise that a major part of a new dialectical utopianism is based in the present, and in the undertaking of political action, yet aimed at creating something better in the future, and also informed by the knowledge of the past. Harvey in particular highlights the necessity of looking to the past in order to overcome the earlier criticisms of utopias by acknowledging that while earlier dualist versions of utopia are not favourable, they provide knowledge of what does not work for utopianism. Dialectical utopias incorporate the past, present and future hence are less likely to fall into the trap of prioritising either the temporal or geographical elements in Harvey's analysis. Firestone's focus on the material element of feminism also means that she acknowledges the past and its impact on the present, in particular, the history of female oppression, and the particular knowledges that earlier feminisms generated. For example, sharing this more cyclical view of time, feminists in the new material tradition often argue that experiences in the past (be it happiness or harmful experiences) materialise in our bodies and therefore are always affecting the present and shape our views of the future (Sroda, Rogowska-Stangret, Cielemecka, 2014).

Neoliberal rhetoric often promotes a linear and progressive notion of time, where we are always improving as we move into the future. As feminist theorist Rebecca Coleman (2014) explains, in the new materialisms, time is seen as multidirectional rather than unidirectional and linear, therefore conceptualises the utopian futures to be "not so much *the effect* of present actions, but *is* the present" (original emphasis, p.40). The potential of the future affects the way we inhabit the present and causes us to want to transform it, materialising the future in the present through feminist practices which we live out

(Coleman, 2014). The present and the future, while traditionally mutually exclusive entities are incorporated into one, blurring the traditional dualism between them and producing a theory which emphasises the links which are always present between major parts of our environment. This approach could be described as dialectical, and finds a practical example in the work of environmental politics scholar Giorel Curran, who applies this multidirectional and blurred understanding of time to forms of utopia in her 'Temporary Utopian Spaces'. Curran's temporary utopian spaces are an expression of dialectical utopianism as they are concerned with creating a utopia which is simultaneously possible to inhabit now, and affects future change. For Curran and activists who employ the theory of temporary utopian space, this encourages a more active citizenry, and for Firestone and Harvey, the utopia is realisable but still driven by the dream to be better.

### **(Con)Temporary Utopian Spaces**

The temporary utopian spaces concept encourages the multiplicity of utopian worlds which are able to be more immediately materialised due to their fleeting and partial characteristics. Reconceptualising utopia in this way overcomes earlier utopian criticisms of authoritarianism and totalitarianism associated with the blue-print utopia. While 'the Firestone fallacy' characterises *The Dialectic of Sex* as a singular blue print of feminist utopia to be followed to the letter, the closer reading of her work exhibits her belief that there should be multiple co-existing and changeable utopian ideals. The impulse at the heart of Firestone's proposal for a flexible, partial utopia echoes that of Harvey and Curran, who employ a dialectical approach to ideas of space/time and produce a utopia more inclusive, and less determinist, by embracing the contradictions between traditional

dualisms, rather than separating them. As discussed in the previous chapter, *The Dialectic of Sex* does, albeit somewhat briefly, outline the need for utopian visions which are temporary and can be taken up by people at different parts of their lives, depending on circumstance (Firestone, 1970, p.204). The dialectical aspect of Firestone's work ensures that these utopian visions are constantly in flux and changing, and in "Ultimate Revolution" Firestone (1970) necessitates that they also be flexible and multiple to successfully aid in any programme of revolution (p.203).

The impulse at the core of dialectical utopianism itself calls for the discussion of how this theory integrates with practical applications. In a chapter on future feminisms and utopia, Sanders (2007) writes that "utopia is only viable if it is left permanently open, contested, in contradiction with itself, if it is never put into practice as a static, codified entity, but remains a shifting landscape of possibility" (p. 4.). It is this idea that is exemplified by Curran's temporary utopian spaces. The work of Curran explores the more practical outcome of using a dialectical utopian theory such as Firestone's. Curran's (2009) goal in the chapter "(Con)Temporary Utopian Spaces", is to consider, and re-cover, alternative understandings of utopia and to "re-articulate the kind of 'transcendence' attributed to it" (p.190) just as Firestone does in *The Dialectic of Sex*. Curran (2009) emphasises her desire to free utopia from the grandiose reputation that often accompanies it and the chapter reconceptualises utopia as having a smaller, less permanent but still crucial role in social and political change (p.191). While this is not explicitly outlined in *The Dialectic of Sex*, many of Firestone's comments imply a similar desire, specifically her prioritisation of achieving progress and generating ideas rather than any particular utopian goals. The

materialisation of utopian ideas into practical politics and social transformation is what Curran understands as a contemporary dialectical utopia and what Firestone attempts to do by centring the dialectical method in *The Dialectic of Sex*. These temporary utopias are fleeting, small-scale revolutions which are easily created and as equally easily destroyed. The conceptualisation of utopia which Curran (2009) provides, and which has elements of Firestone's manifesto, is able to "activate a different kind of political psychology through the breaking down of 'social distance' and the 'construction of new forms of interpersonal relations'" (p.191).

Curran's chapter in *Globalization and Utopia* (2009) is where she introduces her idea of Temporary Utopian Spaces. A temporary utopian space is dialectical in nature, merging geography and time to generate "democratic outbreaks" where the individual can temporarily escape hierarchical forms of socialisation and "escape to freedom" of their own utopia (Curran, 2009, p.199). The temporary spaces are materially grounded, they are often places or times that a person or community physically inhabit, such as protests or occupations. They are temporal by nature, and therefore not plagued with having to commit to one utopian vision for all time. Curran's temporary utopian spaces are, I argue, a practical, contemporary example of Firestone's underlying message in *The Dialectic of Sex*, and although not as theoretically robust, reinforce the argument that what utopia needs in order to counteract its continuing demise is Firestone's form of dialectical interpretation.

Curran's major example of a temporary utopian space is that of 'Reclaim the Streets'. Which is a form of protest she argues exemplifies "radical utopian politics" and describes

as “a movement, a tactic and an experience” (Curran, 2009, p.200). Reclaim the Streets (RTS) uses space, particularly the occupation of space, to create a temporary utopian space moulded by specific political ideals and aimed at the transcendence of the current political situation where it takes place (Curran, 2009, p.200). Curran (2009) outlines that RTS began as an ecological movement, aimed at protecting nature from the impact of cars and grew into a movement, in order to “take back what rightfully belongs to the individual and the community” (p.200).

The example of RTS has many of the same characteristics of Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* and what Curran’s use of it outlines is the way that a dialectical approach to utopia is crucial in reigniting utopianism as a theory that is useful in a contemporary western moment. Curran highlights the dialectical incorporation of individual action with community change, temporariness with the use of real space, as well as material action with idealised theoretical frameworks. The dialectical approach to these relationships, all present in Firestone’s examples (although dated and, for a long time, disregarded for the previously identified reasons), are what makes RTS, and Curran’s larger theory of temporary utopian spaces, useful to reconceptualising utopia for a contemporary moment.

Inspired by Hakim Bey’s Temporary Autonomous Zones, the aim of the temporary utopian space is to create a ‘pop up’, small scale utopia which incorporates the dualisms of time and space. The temporary space is personal and political, inhabitable both in the present and the past, and uninterested in perfectibility or permanency. Unburdened by a singular blue-prints of the ideal future, it prioritises the engagement with utopia, however fleeting,

over its ability to be materialised in the long term. The temporary utopian space becomes an ongoing, dialectical engagement with utopian ideas rather than a permanent condition located in a particular time or space.

By placing the space outside of socio-economic frames such as neoliberalism and capitalism, even if only temporary and in acts of resistance, Curran (2009) offers activists “escapes from this socialised closure” that inhibited earlier utopianism and places control of the utopian space with the creator (p.191). These temporary autonomous zones are a space for people to experience what a utopian world could be like, as well as giving them a space to apply their own utopian vision on a reality free from political frameworks such as capitalism and globalisation. This is made possible by temporarily redefining the space as free from ties to corporatisation and capitalist productive rhetoric, hence outside typical society for example, by occupying streets or other public spaces. In other words, RTS enacted temporary social alternatives, utopian in nature, by ‘dissolving’ the existing structure and the more common use of the street, replacing it with a community oriented utopian space. The autonomous aspect of a temporary utopian space encourages a level of participation often unattainable in larger political activism. Curran (2009) explains it as a “different kind of political experience” (p.191) and one which would lead to individual and societal revolution.

Curran (2009) describes the process of creating or inhabiting a temporary utopian space as ‘utopianising’, explained as combining “the envisional and the experiential” (p.191) in present space-time, as a way of materialising utopia in a way which is relevant to activists

and would engage them in the process of social transformation. The incorporation of dualisms, in Curran's (2009) case the material with the ideological, causes people to engage on a personal level with utopia, encouraging further political action "in a way that activates and coheres the desire for social change" (p.191). Seemingly as a direct response to Jameson's (2014) call for a direct confrontation with utopian anxieties, Curran's (2009) temporary utopian spaces encourages activists to engage with conflict and plurality while they undertake this political action (p.191). The major aspect that Curran (2009) outlines in regards to this point and how it is exemplified by RTS is the "experience of dissent" (p.199) that the people engaging with the protests would have. Built on the participation of those involved, the protest was proactively political and not just something to passively observe. The individual protests, while temporary and not immediately altering the social and political frameworks of that society, still have a large and important impact in that they create a desire for political change due to this participation. This counteracts some of the framing around the demise of utopia, reigniting the belief of citizens through experience (ideas and material practice) that society can be changed for the better.

This personal engagement with utopianising and instigating a desire for change is at the root of Curran framing the temporary utopian space as having the ability to create productive utopian activism. The synthesis of personal participation and political goals generates a utopian activism which is accessible to and alterable by all, and allows for material and temporal ways of inhabiting utopia. As in Firestone's method, it is the incorporation of the two that produce something transcendent. Curran's 'transcendence' however is not understood as a societal revolutionary change, but as small political actions

equally valuable to achieving utopia. For instance, Curran (2009) uses the examples of autonomous political spaces such as World Social Forums, 'guerrilla gardening', the temporary creation of a community garden in a city space, or participating in protests or occupations (p.198).

Curran's synthesis of imagination and already existing realities frame her dialectical utopianism. Her theory renders both physical and imaginary occupation of the space as of equal significance. The individual imagination is equally important to the collective imagination, calling again for a dialectical approach to 'doing' praxis through imagination. Both acts, the individual and the community, affect the other, as discussed earlier in regards to Firestone's feminism and individual revolutions, and thus, to discuss the individual imaginary conception of utopia without considering its influence on the communal conception of utopia. What the example of temporary utopian spaces allows for is the conceptualisation of what Firestone's methodology might look like. Firestone's insistence that a dialectical approach would ensure the simultaneous uptake of the idealist fantasy realm and the realm of material reality, including political activism, for example, may seem overly complicated and unrealistic. Curran's use of RTS is an example of how one can realistically draw on both simultaneously.



## Conclusion

### The demise of utopia

*The Dialectic of Sex* is typically disregarded and caricatured through the Firestone fallacy and the theory of utopianism has been similarly dismissed. The belief that utopianism can contribute to the achievement of progressive politics is, I argued, no longer a major part of the political framework of western countries in the 21st century. The rhetoric suggests that there is no alternative to the current overarching systems of these societies, such as patriarchy, capitalism and globalisation, and that, instead, it is within these systems that any political change must occur. Firestone's engagement with themes such as radical feminism, Marxism and utopia places her in opposition to this rhetoric, and similarly outside of mainstream feminist theory. This thesis has argued, however, that Firestone has more to offer than what the fallacy promotes. The thesis suggested Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* as a place to look towards when attempting to revitalise the theory of utopia as it was aimed at generating transcendent utopian results by confronting conflict. Firestone used what I called a feminist dialectical utopian methodology, a term inspired by Harvey's *Spaces of Hope*.

The demise of utopianism has many causes, but the most relevant to this thesis was the lack of dialectical thinking, and tendency to think in a dualist way instead. For utopianism, this meant a single-sided construction which prioritised one aspect of the utopia, for example space over time, the individual over the community, or ideas over material reality. The understanding of utopianism as a theory rooted in dualism contributes to the demise of the utopia. Non-dialectical utopias result in a loss of the potential that utopianism can

have for politics. The reliance on dualisms in many instances of utopianism generated popular critique which contributed to the theory's fall from favour, and positioned it as typically either a 'castles in the sky' theory, or one linked with authoritarian regimes. Dialectical utopianism was suggested throughout the thesis as a theory which can confront the problems of the demise of utopia and reframe utopianism as a theory which is at once theoretical *and* practical, generating political engagement with utopianism by drawing on conflict rather than avoiding it. The point of this utopianism, Firestone argues, is not only the outline of what a perfect feminist society would look like, or the generation of social and political activism but the ability to achieve both simultaneously, the conflict between the two spurring the ability to achieve progressive, utopian goals.

The major dualism used to outline Firestone's dialectical method is that of the Technological perspective and the Aesthetic one, which was paralleled with a larger dialectic of sex and dialectic between the ideological and material reality. In Firestone's example, the incorporation of the Technological perspective and the Aesthetic one was an androgynous culture maintained through an increase in use and development of technology. Firestone uses technology as an example of the bridge between what she understands as the achievable (the current abilities of science) and the possible (the idealist dreams of art), and therefore the increase and uptake of these dialectical technologies are how Firestone achieves her utopian goals. Paralleled with this dualism was the separation of the individual and the community. According to the radical feminist mantra throughout *The Dialectic of Sex*, the personal is political, and therefore we must conceive of the

individual and the community as inherently intertwined in order to resolve the ongoing oppression of women.

Using a feminist dialectical utopianism, as I have argued Firestone does in *The Dialectic of Sex*, oppositional dualisms *must* be incorporated into understandings of theorising and doing politics to achieve the good life. The theory challenges separation and is inherently trans-dual. Applying a dialectical methodology to utopianism therefore results in a reconceptualisation of the theory as flexible and responsive to particular situations, able to draw on both sides of an issue and produce something better than what is currently possible. I argued that what Firestone is writing about, and what the most important theme to take from her work, is the ability for us to have both sides of the dualism at once. *The Dialectic of Sex* is adamant that the fantasy of a better life and the political action taken to realise it are both crucial to the achievement of a feminist revolution. If Firestone's dialectical utopian methodology is successful, there is no need to prioritise one side of any dualism, as the conflict of oppositional poles generates specific revolutionary activity.

### **The future of dialectical utopianism**

One of the key elements of feminist dialectical utopianism, as exemplified by Firestone, is the multiplicity and generation of co-existing and constantly changing feminist possibilities. Firestone's (1970) insistence that "the most important characteristic to be maintained in any revolution is flexibility" (p.203) is important to keep in mind when considering the value of the theories discussed in this thesis. The final chapter of the thesis, in particular, explored what I argued were examples of feminist moments where a

dialectical utopian theory is emerging. These feminist examples of dialectical utopian features are crucial when identifying how what Firestone discussed in *The Dialectic of Sex* in 1970 can be applied to a contemporary utopianism in demise, and although I argue these are the best way forward for utopianism as a theory, it would be against the ethos of Firestone to dismiss other utopian actions. Other examples of utopia are useful to consider in a wider discussion of overcoming the demise of utopia, and it is necessary to acknowledge that all utopias have limits and must work within the confines of the current social and political moment where they are located. Regardless of these limits, all revolutionary activity is necessary to incorporate into what we understand as a contemporary theory of utopianism. The messiness that results from Firestone's theoretical approach reflects a similarly messy feminist moment. The final part of this conclusion identifies other instances of dialectical utopianism being expressed. While these may seem frivolous in comparison of the larger, revolutionary theme of this thesis, these small acts have equal importance in a dialectical utopian situation. They create political engagements aimed at bettering the social and political experiences of a society and while not always explicitly feminist, contribute to what R. W. Connell (2008) describes as "an archipelago of resistances rather than a coherent social movement" (p. xiv). In a way most honest to Firestone, the multiplicity and conflict of these utopian endeavours ultimately contribute to the wider revolution, regardless of which part they play in that productive antagonism.

The example of Reclaim the Streets was used by Curran to describe how a utopian space can be temporarily created and inhabited, outside of existing political frameworks. These protests focused on occupying space and altering it to better fit the utopian visions of the

activists. These utopian ‘outbursts’ are visible in other, more local and contemporary actions in the city of Dunedin, where the University of Otago is located. The increase of council focused street art could be understood as a similar type of space taking and making, by reclaiming untidy or uninspiring walls for the public and replacing them with art that the community can enjoy. The trend towards reclaiming space in this way is a utopian endeavour by artists and the city council. A similar instance in Dunedin is what is known as ‘yarn bombing’. Yarn bombing is a different type of street art that uses knitted or crocheted materials and sews them on to trees, telephone or light poles, or other inanimate objects. It is described as a “subversive DIY movement” engaged in a “quiet revolution” (Prain, 2007) to redefine public spaces as a place to make art and engage with community, rather than an individualised or corporate area.

Another example of contemporary feminist utopianism is the collection by *feministing.com* (2015) titled ‘The Feminist Utopia Project’ which asked contributors to imagine what their feminist utopia would look like. The project engages the political imagination of their artists and their readers which is necessary for utopia. The collect is a combination of essays, interviews, poetry, illustrations and short stories, and “challenges the status quo that accepts inequality and violence as a given—and inspires us to demand a radically better future” (The Feminist Press, 2015). Sample contributions on the website show the book to cover issues such as abortion, language and law, and envision how things would be in their mind’s eye feminist utopia. The submissions echo the work of Firestone and Curran, incorporating the dialectic between ideal and material, often mediated through technology, envisioning advances in this area which aid in the realisation of the feminist utopia and often outlining practical steps to take today to affect the potential future.

What the *Feminist Utopia Project* exemplifies is the way that multiple feminist utopias can exist simultaneously, while still working towards a wider goal of equality between the sexes, just as *The Dialectic of Sex* did. Although the collection has limits, such as engaging with many of the problems associated with abstract, literature-only based feminist utopianism outlined in Harvey's analysis, the surrounding work around the collection's release has radical potential. In the same way that Firestone (1970) argued that her discussion of her own feminist utopia was "meant to stimulate thinking in fresh areas rather than to dictate the action" (p.203), the multiple utopian visions in the collection have potential to revitalise utopianism and instigate progressive change, regardless of an explicit dialectical element or not.

Unlike *Reclaim the Streets*, the *Feminist Utopia Project* collection is not a materially expressed utopian moment as *The Dialectic of Sex* encouraged through activism or the uptake of specific technologies however it is still an attempt to think of utopia in a more dialectically influenced way. Reviewer comments on early releases of the collection echo a feminist moment which shares the dialectical utopian spirit of *The Dialectic of Sex*. Some comments touch on the materialist element of the utopias in the collection including; "Here you can taste, touch, speak, hear, see, and feel liberation" and "drawn from dozens of feminisms, this book shows new ways to dream and to do" (The Feminist Press, 2015). Further, the comments reflect a revitalisation of feminism achieved through a synthesis of politics and lived experiences, with Jamia Wilson writing "The new frontiers these visionaries imagine embolden us with thoughts of possibility and transformation" (The Feminist Press, 2015). The links to Firestone's work are clear, bringing her work into a contemporary feminist situation and reaffirming its relevance.

## **Contemporary feminisms**

Not all of the elements of Firestone's work will sit comfortably with contemporary feminisms, particularly the way she draws on essential biological categories to make her larger argument of the dialectic of sexes and corresponding revolution. However, there are elements of dialectical utopianism evident in some contemporary feminism, such as third wave and the new material feminisms, as well as other, non-feminist activist examples. These more favourable aspects of Firestone's work include her framing of a revolutionary utopianism are multiple, flexible and temporary, and embracing of the conflict and change which result from these characteristics. The dialectical aspect of utopian methodology creates a concept of utopia which disturbs typical linear chronology present in other utopias, and instead focuses on the more complex relationship between the past, present and future as many contemporary feminisms do too.

This thesis suggested that the new material feminisms were the contemporary feminist moment most suited to a renewal of Firestone's theory of feminist dialectical utopianism. The new material feminisms aim towards their own version of the good life, attempting to achieve this with a similarly dialectical approach as outlined in Firestone's work. Therefore, I argue that the framework of contemporary feminism, in some spaces, is changing, and becoming more sympathetic to the approach of dialectical utopianism and therefore a potentially radically different way of conceptualising utopia than those theories outlined by Harvey. The 2010 collection on Firestone is a clear example of the willingness to look back on her work in a more generous way, unburdened by the Firestone fallacy.

The Firestone fallacy means that the contemporary relevance of *The Dialectic of Sex* is often overlooked and it is this relevance that I argued is important when reconceptualising utopia in a way that can counteract the current demise that it is facing. Firestone's feminist dialectical utopian methodology allows for the exploration of questions of why the demise is occurring, but also how we can reconceptualise what is utopia in order to overcome this demise.

Focusing on a small-scale example of *The Dialectic of Sex* allows for wider ideas about contemporary utopianism to emerge and while *The Dialectic of Sex* may seem dated, the method and insight that the book provides can be applied to a contemporary setting, and is well equipped to confront the issues that cause the demise of utopia. The new materialist feminisms, as well as the new and exciting utopian moments discussed in this conclusion, contribute to a revitalisation of Firestone and, by extension, her theory of feminist dialectical utopianism. This theory provides significant cues to why utopianism is in demise, how we can overcome this demise, and how we can express utopianism in a contemporary moment. Although the ideas of radical feminism, dialectics and utopia seem outdated and rusty, they are becoming increasingly relevant and important in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century and are worthy of reconsideration.



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