Post-Millennial Feminist Theory: Encounters with Humanism, Materialism, Critique, Nature, Biology and Darwin

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This article reflects on the emergence of a strikingly affirmative form of feminist theorising, despite widespread discussion of the early twenty-first century being a post-feminist era. The author begins by sketching the general features of this new orientation, contrasting it with second-wave feminist theorising and identifying a cluster of feminist theorists who, despite their different concerns and distinctive work, can be seen as affiliated in this reorientation in feminist theory. The second section offers a discussion of three key terms in post-millennial feminist theory: post-humanism, new materialism and the ontological turn. This section explores their deployment and significance in identifying new directions in feminist theory. In the third section, the author introduces a specific case study of this post-millennial reorientation of feminist theory: Elizabeth Grosz’s advocacy of Darwin’s ideas is proposed as exemplifying this new trend in feminist theory. There is a brief review of Grosz’s writings on Darwin and three key points in Grosz’s encounter with Darwinian theory are highlighted. These important features of Grosz’s approach to Darwin’s ideas are then reviewed: the rejection of critique, the revisiting of the nature–culture divide and the embrace of biology. The discussion of each of these foci includes consideration of the rationale for and strengths of Grosz’s positions. However, this commentary also highlights some worrying lacunae in her theories.

Introduction

Few would claim that the early twenty-first century has marked a high point for feminism. Indeed, since the late 1980s, there has been considerable commentary about the decline of feminist activism in Europe, North America and elsewhere. Indeed, the meanings and deployment of the term “post-feminism” have preoccupied a number of feminist analysts (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009; Tasker & Negra 2007). Nevertheless, the first decade of the twenty-first century has also witnessed something of a reorientation of feminist thinking and a strikingly
affirmative phase in feminist theory. So, for example, Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (2008a, p. 10) welcome what they designate as "a new paradigm for feminist thought". Feminist theory has been enlivened by a set of new strategies and positionings, which have been identified by terms such as "post-humanism", "new materialism" and/or "the ontological turn". In this article, I use the label "post-millennial" to designate a cluster of recent developments within feminist theory which have been associated with these terms. Although some of the ideas I consider here began to emerge in the late twentieth century, their orientation towards a new era in feminism justifies my label. While both the chronology and the affiliations amongst the cluster of ideas mentioned above are loose, there are detectable affinities between these developments that merit attention. There are diverse strands to this cluster of developments and distinctive features to each. Nevertheless, I would contend that they are loosely, yet clearly, affiliated.

For many feminists who were politicised in and through second-wave feminism, these developments constitute something of a sea change. Post-millennial feminist theorising presents itself as altogether more assertive, more confident than its second-wave equivalent. Second-wave feminism seemed to be constantly in contestation: identifying the patriarchal canons (for example, in literature [see Millett 1977]), or highlighting the absence of women (for example, in fine art [see Greer 2001]), or challenging the male-oriented assumptions of various fields of knowledge and research (for example, Gilligan’s [1982] work on the foundations of developmental psychology and moral philosophy). In contrast, post-millennial feminist analysts do not seem to need to cut their way through this underbrush. They operate more directly: offering their conceptualisations of the world without preambles which involve explications and expositions of the problems with masculinist or patriarchal theories.

In many respects, this may be experienced as a great relief, since post-millennial feminist theory seems altogether freer and more positive. This is evidenced particularly in its endorsing encounters with key figures from the natural sciences (for example, Charles Darwin [Grosz 2004, 2005] and Niels Bohr [Barad 2007]) and its capacity to comment on everything from high-level physics to the ontology of the universe. While these changes in feminist discourse have been widely dispersed and diffused, there are a few key figures who have articulated and exemplified its features. These include (and this list is by no means exhaustive): Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Claire Colebrook, Elizabeth Grosz, Donna Haraway, Myra J. Hird, Vicky Kirby and Elizabeth A. Wilson. Of course, each of these feminist theorists has had a somewhat different relationship to these developments and each has made her own distinctive contributions to the reappraisals and reorientations of feminism.

This article assembles a preliminary set of commentaries sparked by this stirring in and of feminist theorising in the early twenty-first century. It begins with a review of some general features of post-millennial feminist theorising and then homes in on one particular contribution to it. Hence, the next section offers brief introductory commentaries about what each of the key terms mentioned
above designates. This is followed by my nomination of Elizabeth Grosz’s encounter with Charles Darwin’s theory as an exemplar of a foray in post-millennial feminist theorising. In this section, I present the background to and parameters of this part of Grosz’s work and I explain why I have chosen to examine it in more detail. My review of the Grosz-Darwin encounter in the following section takes me into three key aspects of post-millennial theorising, pertaining to critique, nature/culture and biology. Having begun this piece by considering the confident and affirmative tone of post-millennial feminist theorising, my own case study strikes a less positive note as I express some reservations about Grosz’s and other related projects. The article ends with some concluding reflections on post-millennial feminist theorising.

Post-Millennial Feminism: Post-Humanism, New Materialism and the Ontological Turn

As I registered above, “post-millenial” is a rather vague and contentless signifier which tells us little about the distinctive preoccupations of early twentieth-century feminist theorists. Yet there are more substantive terms which have been used to register the reorientations espoused through their work. The terms “post-humanism”, “new materialism” and “the ontological turn” are three key conceptual markers which have been employed to characterise aspects of this phase of feminist theorising. So, it may be useful to consider each of these in turn in order to get some purchase on recent developments in feminist theory.

“Post-humanism” literally denotes a political and/or philosophical break with the Western tradition of liberal humanism, and it designates diverse efforts to question or abandon its presuppositions. Although the term is itself highly contested and extensively debated (Halberstam & Livingston 1995; Hayles 1999), in a general sense, post-humanism expresses dissatisfactions with modes of philosophical, social and political thought and consequent action which have derived from Enlightenment presumptions about human sovereignty and primacy within the world order. Hence, post-humanism entails some stepping back from assumptions regarding human exceptionalism (the notion that humans are unique and dominant creatures in the universe)¹ and human instrumentalism (the idea that humans should dominate and control the natural world) which have influenced the Western world since the Enlightenment. By insisting that humans are part of the animal and natural worlds, and by elaborating on the consequences of this framing, post-humanism disturbs anthropocentric thought and practice. It is characterised by greater concern to take human relationships within the natural world seriously. This has been manifested in increased attention to the significance of humans living with other animals, including underscoring human dependence on other species and more interest in other inhabitants of the earth,

¹. Haraway (2008, p. 11) refers to ‘the culturally normal fantasy of human exceptionalism’ as ‘the premise that humanity alone is not a spatial and temporal web of interspecies dependencies’.
in other forms of life (Hird 2005). Calls for both modesty and responsibility in configuring the human role in planetary life have been a feature of post-humanism.

The second, related strand of post-millennial feminist theory might be labelled "new materialism" (Hird 2004). As Alaimo and Hekman (2008a) have noted, this form of materialism is quite different from the materialist feminism which was forged around Marxist analysis of economic relations in second-wave feminism (see Barrett 1980). It replaces economic analysis with a broader version of materialism which is attentive to the physical substance of bodies and of the world more generally. Indeed, explorations of corporeality emerged as an important thread of late twentieth-century feminism (see, for example, Diprose 1994; Gatens 1996; Grosz 1994). This orientation has been extended and developed in the twenty-first century as feminists have pursued not only further investigations of female corporeality, but also the study of material aspects of human life more generally. The proliferation of interest in “affect” is perhaps the most obvious recent manifestation of this feminist focus (Ahmed 2004; Sedgwick 2003; Sedgwick & Frank 1995).

However, this new materialist orientation reaches beyond the human body, informing and sustaining a wider feminist curiosity about the materials of daily life and of the universe. In the introduction to a collection of writings on this theme, Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (2008a, p. 1) explain both the “purpose” of their anthology and the orientation of this strain of feminist theorising as bringing “the material, specifically the materiality of the human body and the natural world, into the forefront of feminist theory and practice”.

Indeed, the ambition and scope of recent materialist theory is signalled by those advocating an “ontological turn” within feminist theorising (Hekman 2008). One indication of this may be detected in the adoption of the label “material feminisms” (Alaimo & Hekman 2008b; my emphasis). Although the term “new materialism” is sometimes employed and is regarded as coterminous with the former designation (Alaimo & Hekman 2008a, pp. 17-18, n. 3), this specific coinage is significant. It distinguishes these forms of feminism from the earlier Marxist feminism version discussed above. Perhaps more significantly, the term “material” is both a descriptor (an adjective) and a designator (as a noun) of that which exists — it precisely signals the shift to the ontological register which is at the heart of much of the new feminist theorising.

In fact, while the materialist orientation of this cluster of recent feminist work could be seen as generally amenable to ontological concerns, some theorists have explicitly brought ontology centre-stage, in calling for a specific reorientation in conceptualising practices within feminism. Early in the twenty-first century, Elizabeth Grosz (2004, p. 17) reflected that “[o]ntology seems to be the forgotten or elided element of contemporary philosophy”. She and some other feminist scholars have been actively remembering ontology — the study of what is (in Grosz’s [2004, p. 3] terms “about the reality of matter, space, and time”) — and rehabilitating this neglected field of intellectual enquiry. Grosz (2005, p. 5) sets out to restore ontology to what she and others see as “its rightful place
at the center of knowledges and social practices”. In so doing, they have turned away from some second-wave feminist preoccupations, including, in particular, epistemology, representations, culture and the politics of identity. Hence, for example, those advocating an ontological turn for feminism have become much more interested in discussing what is, than in considering how knowledge is generated.

When Elizabeth Grosz Met Charles Darwin

I now move on to consider aspects of Elizabeth Grosz’s specific contribution to post-millennial feminist thinking in order to tease out both some features of this new orientation within feminist theorising and some of my concerns about it. I take Grosz’s engagement with and endorsement of Charles Darwin’s theories, her recommendation of these as providing a way forward for feminism, as a sort of case study of this post-millennial reorientation.

Grosz’s encounter with the theories of Charles Darwin has been presented in two key publications: *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (2004) and *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (2005). In the first volume, Grosz presents a study of the three Western thinkers whose theories she finds most insightful for grappling with political perspectives on time. This book assembles a set of essays on the ideas of time and evolution in the work of Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche and Henri Bergson. Grosz (2004, p. 14) explains in her introduction to this project that she has “attempted to run Deleuze’s and Irigaray’s concepts underneath” her reading of these three theorists of time and evolution.

Grosz followed this up with a second volume, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*, which addresses similar themes, broadening the range of issues and theorists she considers. Here, she reflects on how time – particularly concerns about the future – pervades key philosophical debates about justice and knowledge. The work of Jacques Derrida, Drucilla Cornell, Gilles Deleuze and Henri Bergson comes under her scrutiny. However, Grosz also returns to Darwin, as she offers a more elaborate assessment of the significance and promise of his theories for feminism in the first three chapters of this book. The first chapter, entitled “Darwin and Feminism: Preliminary Investigations for a Possible Alliance”, lays out Grosz’s appraisal of how feminism could be enriched through greater engagement with Darwin’s ideas. This chapter (Grosz 2008) was subsequently reprinted in the collection edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (2008b), *Material Feminisms*.

In the following sections, I offer a commentary on three key features of Grosz’s encounter with Darwin’s theories: abandoning critique, reappraising nature-culture and embracing biology. I feel that these merit attention, not only because they are crucial to Grosz’s approach to Darwin’s theory, but because they are more generally characteristic of the recent turn in feminist theorising discussed above.
Abandoning Critique: Towards Affirmative Encounters

One striking feature of the new post-millennial feminism is its affirmative orientation towards the theories of selected key Western male philosophers and scientists. Grosz’s recommendation that feminists should engage with Darwin’s theory is a case in point. She presents her strategy of positive engagement as quite distinct from the usual modes of critical feminist encounter:

Rather than undertake the expected path of political and philosophical analysis, in which a thinker’s position is subjected to rigorous criticism and its errors, contradictions and points of weakness are singled out or overcome, I am more concerned with seeking out positivities, crucial concepts, insights on what is of value in the texts and positions being investigated. (Grosz 2005, p. 2)

She continues her presentation of this affirmative mode by articulating why she finds critique unsatisfactory, contending that “[c]ritique tends to generate defensive self-representations or gestures of counter-critique … I have tried to develop an affirmative method, a mode of assenting to rather than dissenting from those ‘primary’ texts” (Grosz 2005, pp. 2–3). She proposes the abandonment of the modes of “feminist critique”, with its preoccupation with “inspection for errors and points of contention”, advocating instead, “more passively and thus dangerously, a preparedness to provisionally accept the framework and guiding principles of particular discourses or positions” (Grosz 2005, pp. 27–28).

It is important to acknowledge what is at stake here, and there can be no doubt that this move away from critique marks a number of important breaks in feminist theorising. It is a clear turn away from Marxist (Hegelian) theorising and from the forms of left culture which heavily influenced second-wave feminism. Moreover, it also marks a break with the modes of second-wave feminist theorising themselves. From Simone de Beauvoir to Kate Millet, through to Carol Gilligan and many other key feminist theorists surveying intellectual traditions, academic disciplines and established bodies of research, and identifying masculinist bias, the neglect of women, or patriarchal norms, provided the foundations and ballast for second-wave feminism. Critique was their intellectual weapon and they brandished it effectively.

Grosz and others have found the mode of critique excessively negative. As Kylie Valentine (2008) notes, these commentators have recoiled from what they regard as its “rejectionist” mode. Grosz’s strategy has some affinity with that of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who appealed for feminists and other progressive scholars to disavow a “hermeneutics of suspicion” in favour of what she calls, drawing on Melanie Klein, “reparative reading” (Sedgwick 2003, esp. ch. 4). Sedgwick proposes an approach to reading and intellectual encounter which is open, emotional and positive, a mode which contrasts markedly with that of critique, which has been characterised as distancing, rationalist and critical. Sedgwick’s arguments are complex and nuanced, and a full explication of them is beyond my remit in this article. However, Grosz’s arguments resonate with Sedgwick’s...
suggestions that much can be gained by entering into the reading of a text — or, in Grosz’s case, a theory (such as Darwin’s) — positively.

Of course, Sedgwick and Grosz are not the only feminists who have expressed dissatisfaction with some modes of critique. The positioning of the critic as the dispassionate outsider, who stands above and outside the epistemological or philosophical fray, has come under the scrutiny of other feminist commentators (Haraway 1997, esp. pp. 23–39; McNeil 2000). It would seem that, by the early twenty-first century, Grosz and others are tapping into widespread frustration with critique as a limited strategy, one which has been disappointing because it has generally not yielded social and political change.

While the limitations of critique have become apparent, the question remains of whether or not feminists can or should completely abandon it. Part of my response to this question is to insist that we can never fully suspend our critical modes. We are constantly critically assessing theories and ideas — and rejecting some of them or parts of them. Hence, it may be dangerous, and even somewhat disingenuous, for feminists to disavow criticism. I would suggest that this is particularly the case because we are still living in a world which is far from ideal, a world in which masculinist norms still hold sway. Identifying the ways in which texts and theories are implicated in gendered power relations thus continues to be important. The literary scholar Gillian Beer, who is an acclaimed and respectful commentator on Charles Darwin’s theories, is rather more cautious than Grosz in her advice on how the theories of this scientific figure should be approached. Beer (2009) reminds us that “it is important to acknowledge the degree to which he [Darwin] worked within and struggled against the assumptions of his age, especially when they are not our assumptions”.

In fact, it is striking that Grosz herself does not always seek out “positivities” or the “insights on what is of value in the texts and positions being investigated”. She is dismissive of feminist work which has been critical of Darwin’s theories or suggested his imbrication in the conservative perspectives on gender relations that held sway in his day. Such work is labelled as “knee jerk” (Grosz 2005, p. 71), despite her own acknowledgement that these strains of thought pervade some of Darwin’s theorising.

**Reappraising Nature-Culture: Nature Trumps Culture**

Grosz not only advocates that feminists should draw back from critique, but she is also adamant that they have been excessively preoccupied with culture, thereby failing to give adequate attention to nature. Hence, she deprecates what she sees as an “exclusive focus on cultural construction at the expense of natural production” (Grosz 2005, p. 44). The concern with “cultural construction” is seen by Grosz as preoccupying not only feminists, but humanities and social sciences analysts more generally. She characterises this trend as resulting in “the repression of materiality in its most complex forms” (Grosz 2005, p. 44).
Grosz is grappling with the nature-culture binary and she seizes on what she sees as an impoverished tradition of feminist conceptualisation of this divide, which can be traced back to Simone de Beauvoir’s (1953) existentialism and preoccupation with human transcendence over nature in The Second Sex. Grosz rightly insists that nature is dynamic, rather than fixed or static. Nature should be viewed more positively, she suggests, not as that which is to be overcome in the generation of human culture. Rather, for her, it is best viewed as that from which culture emerges, which enables or provides the provocation for culture. In Grosz’s framing, culture is an outgrowth of nature, not the outcome of its repression or of its transcendence.

Grosz pinpoints what has prompted her recoil from the “cultural turn” in the humanities and social sciences. She notes that “[c]onstructionism, flourishing in the period following 1968”, emerged “largely as a reaction to prevailing naturalisms that regarded the division of labor, or the division of sexes or races, as somehow justified through some natural order or givenness” (Grosz 2005, p. 44). She writes from the epicentre of the cultural turn and, from her vantage point (within the critical humanities scholarship community in the USA), concern with culture may well seem ubiquitous and unquestionable. However, moving outside of this setting, “constructionism” seems far from hegemonic. In fact, I would suggest that Grosz exaggerates the power of the cultural turn, overestimating its significance and hold.

Although I think it is important to question Grosz’s claims about culturalist interpretations holding sway, I am less concerned with how her perspective may have been shaped by her specific location and more interested in wider patterns. Perhaps more important than recognising that Grosz’s sense of the cultural swing derives from a very particular, localised reading, is to ask about whether patterns of naturalisation have ceased. To offer a reasonable response to this question, we might note that the forms of naturalisation are continually changing, but that naturalisation, as a key cultural pattern of projection, has not stopped. There are fresh and powerful new forms of naturalisation to be found in some recent deployments of genomics, neurobiology and evolutionary psychology, which we ignore at our peril. These are offering new perspectives on “the division of sexes” and “races”, and laying down new visions of “the natural order” which are immensely powerful and often highly problematic.

The background to and framing of Grosz’s approach to the nature–culture debates is important. She is not alone in decrying what Alaimo and Hekman (2008a, p. 1) characterise as feminists (and other critical scholars) ”taking refuge within culture, discourse, and language”. There are good reasons for her bristling at the obsession with culture in some quarters and with the superficial analyses this may sometimes yield. Moreover, her challenging perspectives on the enabling aspects of nature are important correctives to the negativist emphasis on nature as limiting. Grosz’s calling to account of the negative evaluation of the natural, both as a feminist intellectual tradition and as a problematic sensibility in the current conjuncture of climate change and other environmental problems, is to be (and has been) welcomed. Nevertheless, the nature–culture divide
remains a complex repository through which power relations have been negotiated in Western culture. In short, while the Western world may relish its capacity to transcend nature in some spheres, in others, nature clearly does trump culture. Feminists cannot afford to ignore this: much effort is still required to disentangle the choreographies of power of nature-culture in their diverse and specific manifestations.

Embracing Biology

The third strand in Grosz’s affirmative philosophy is her call for a more positive feminist engagement with biology. Grosz is one of a cluster of feminists who have taken body politics in a new direction by insisting that corporeality should inform all feminist politics. Moira Gatens, Rosalind Diprose and Elizabeth A. Wilson have accompanied her in articulating fresh perspectives on corporeality. These philosophically-oriented feminists emerging mainly in Australia in the late twentieth century, influenced by French psychoanalytic feminism and phenomenology, as well as the work of Deleuze and Guattari, have greatly enriched feminist body politics.

Grosz is mindful that biology poses many problems for feminists, not least because, as she explains: “‘Biology’ designates not only the study of life but also refers to the body, to organic processes or activities that are the objects of that study”. She recognises that “[f]eminists may have good reasons to object to the ways in which the study, the representations and techniques used to understand bodies and their processes and activities, have been undertaken” since, as she notes:

there is clearly much that is problematic about many of the assumptions, methods, and criteria used in some cases of biological analysis, which have been actively if unconsciously used by those with various paternalistic, patriarchal, racist, and class commitments to rationalize their various positions. (Grosz 2005, p. 13)

Despite her awareness of these problems, Grosz (2005, p. 13) remains adamant that “there is a certain absurdity in objecting to the notion of nature or biology itself if this is (at least in part) what we are and will always be. If we are our biologies”.

Grosz’s awareness of the double valence of the term “biology” and her hints that this has fuelled feminist scepticism and criticism does not temper her evaluation of the field. Indeed, she insists that “[b]iological discourses are no more 'dangerous', 'ideological,' 'biased,' or 'misleading' than any other discourses or models” (Grosz 2005, p. 28). This latter appraisal seems to be offered without reference to the peculiarity in the designation of biology noted above. While sociology cannot be confused with that which it studies — society — there is no such critical distance between biology and that which it investigates. The term “biology” designates both the operations and features of the human body itself,
and the study of its functioning. Biological discourse is, in Grosz’s own terms, "more 'dangerous'" and more "'ideological'" than other discourses precisely because of this double register.

In framing her own projects, Grosz does not acknowledge the slippery double valence of biology. Her opening of The Nick of Time declares that "'[t]his book is an exploration of how the biological prefigures and makes possible the various permutations of life that constitute natural, social, and cultural existence" (Grosz 2004, p. 1). Here, and in other parts of her work, she seems to posit a "pure" biology which makes all else possible. The entanglements of discourse and the social practices and structures of biological science do not get a look in.

Alaimo and Hekman (2008a, p. 10) introduce Grosz’s recommendation of Darwin’s theories to feminists in terms of her arguing "that feminists need a complex and subtle account of what biology is". Few feminists would question this assessment. Nevertheless, I for one doubt we can arrive at such an account without negotiating the cultural constructs in and around biology. It is as if, having noted a crucial sign of this in the double register of the term "biology", Grosz nevertheless leaps into what she frames as an unmediated realm of ontology. She and others may be fed up with what they consider to be an excessive concern with language, but, in this instance at least, they need to pay more attention to it.

Conclusion

The post-millennial feminist theory which this article begins to explore is bold and exciting. In many ways, it has rejuvenated feminist thinking and offered new political challenges to feminists and others. This article has highlighted some of the features of this new trajectory in feminist theory, considering some of its indicative labels: post-humanist, new materialist, as well as "the ontological turn" with which it is identified. In examining aspects of Grosz’s encounter with Darwin as an exemplary case study, I have sought to introduce a note of caution that may temper, but not dispel, feminist hopes for the twenty-first century. There is much that is attractive in Grosz’s particular version of post-millennial feminism. Nevertheless, abandoning critique, turning our backs on recurring patterns of naturalism and embracing biology may be a dangerous hopeful strategy.

References


