

“Women are a Huge Natural Calamity”

The Roots of Western Gender Ideology

The Greek playwright Euripides satirized the essence of Western thinking about gender relations when he wrote in the fifth century B.C.E. that “women are a huge natural calamity, against which men must take strenuous measures.”¹ Those words, however comically meant, not only capture the curmudgeonliest version of gender ideology in ancient times but also contain seeds of racial distinctions and hierarchies that would blossom in the works of Western philosophers, scientists, theologians, and politicians many centuries later. Among other links between gender and racial ideologies across the ages were repeated measurements of “others” against a particular male standard that Greek elites and their intellectual descendants mistook for the epitome of humanness and that later Europeans considered Caucasian as well as male. Characterizations of women as deviants from the dominant male standard provided a model for considering men’s differences from that same standard as similarly deviant.

An obvious clue to gender’s foundational role in Western conceptualizations of biological race can be found in the relative historical timing of gender and racial ideologies in European cultures. Claims about women’s inherent biological and temperamental inferiority and permanent subordinate status to men appear in the earliest known texts and records.² The idea that differences among men were inherent, biological, permanent, and stratified, on the other hand, did not occupy Europeans’ imaginations until the late seventeenth century and did not support fully blown racial taxonomies until the late eighteenth century. The physiologies and cultural practices that once marked geography, climate, or family lineages gradually became markers of men’s fixed and biologically determined capacities. That biological interpretation

came into full flower in the nineteenth century, and throughout the process, racial definitions and judgments were frequently couched in gendered terms. Beginning in earnest in the late eighteenth century, gender and racial ideologies evolved together, in terms of one another. In fact, the Gender Contract supporting patriarchal rule in Western cultures inspired the Racial Contract that promoted the global dominance of European males, especially over black Africans.

“Necessarily Inferior”

As feminist theorists and activists have long noted, much of what was thought or claimed about women before the mid-nineteenth century was thought and claimed by men. Male commentators typically considered themselves the human model and solipsistically regarded women as unfortunate imitations of, appendages to, or even curses upon the male norm. At various junctures, philosophers and scientists even identified women as a separate human species from men. The narratives that disseminated such attitudes, which linger in troublesome ways into the present time, reveal the gender themes and principles that both fomented the construction of racial distinctions and hierarchies and justified invidious racial comparisons, projections, and rankings. Such “racialist” or pre-racist thinking, in turn, further divided and stratified the sexes.

It is difficult to know just how ancient misogynist ideas about women really are, but when Euripides wrote that women were a natural calamity, he was echoing even earlier Greek references to women’s inferiority and danger to men. Hesiod’s *Theogony* (or “origins of the gods”) was one such precursor. Dating from the last half of the eighth century to the first quarter of the seventh century B.C.E., the *Theogony* has important parallels to the biblical Book of Genesis, which dates from the fifteenth century B.C.E.³ The *Theogony* makes clear that Zeus created woman only to torment and punish man in retaliation for a trick played on him by Prometheus. To accomplish that goal, Zeus made woman’s external appearance so attractive that it would fool men into accepting “the wickedness that was inside her.” The *Theogony* also defines woman’s nature as inferior to man’s and ranks her weak, larcenous, and deceitful mind closer to that of an animal than of a man, let alone of a god. The *Theogony* also likens women to “drones that contribute . . . to malicious deeds” by the men who swarm around them like bees, and claims that Zeus granted a sense of justice to man but denied that ultimate virtue to woman.⁴

Texts by Plato and Aristotle, which reflected and reinforced Hesiod’s ideas about women, also preceded Euripides’ dramas. Plato’s fourth-century B.C.E. *Timaeus*, for example, defined the primordial human state as male and declared that women, who reside several steps below men from the gods, exist to punish men for their sensual desires. Although Plato is known for his proto-feminist views of extraordinary women (like those who serve as Guardians in Book V of the *Republic* alongside equally extraordinary men), his view of ordinary women in the *Timaeus* and the *Laws* was decidedly misogynistic. “Womanish” in such texts connotes a diminished intellect, as well as “obsessive appetites, and ungovernable emotions.”⁵

Aristotle’s views about women, honed in the same century, were influenced by both Hesiod and Plato, although Aristotle dismissed the Socratic idea that men and women who shared the same circumstances and education could achieve the same level of virtue.⁶ Aristotle saw women’s defects of character and behavior as intrinsic, resulting from their lack of heat. He claimed that women’s coldness transformed male embryos into females, thereby thwarting their development into the pure human type. To Aristotle, women were essentially misbegotten males, cursed by nature with lamentable physical and emotional deficiencies, and useful only for reproduction (femaleness as a curse became a recurrent theme in gender ideology). Aristotle’s infusion of conventional gender ideology into his scientific axioms also prefigures the complicity of scientific thought with cultural beliefs and preconceptions about gender—and, eventually, race—in virtually all subsequent eras, including our own.⁷

Ancient Greek ideas about maleness as the human norm and femaleness as a deviation from that norm parallel the influential “one-sex” view of Genesis 2 (2:18, 21–23): man came first, woman came from man’s rib, and woman’s differences were not an improvement on the original model. Genesis 1(1:26–27) offers a different version of creation—“male and female created he them”—in which man and woman are created separately, both in God’s image. But few Christian sects have emphasized that version, although it was understandably favored by such nineteenth-century American feminists as Angelina Grimké and Elizabeth Cady Stanton as evidence of men’s and women’s equally divine origins and of God’s plan for sexual equality. Fewer still have gone as far as Christian Science and Shakerism to consider Genesis 1 as evidence of both human equality and God’s dual gender. Rather, most mainstream sects have emphasized the “rib” and “helpmeet” aspects of Genesis 2 to demonstrate woman’s inferiority. In that interpretation, Eve’s gendered inadequacies are exacerbated

by her vulnerability to the serpent—which marks her as a danger to (hu)mankind—and are reinforced by God’s curse that she give birth in pain and be ruled by her husband. That Adam was also cursed typically escapes those who embrace the biblical origins of woman’s inferior nature and subordinate role.

These Judeo-Christian and Greek roots have exerted a powerful influence on the Western idea that women lack reason and are mired in passion. Starting in the first century C.E., Philo, the Jewish philosopher and Platonist, noted that woman’s sensual nature situates her well below man, who represents the mind; and even below the animals, since God created them before her in the second creation story. To Philo, the order of creation proves that woman’s inferiority, not her equality, was divinely ordained.⁸

By the Middle Ages, alchemists interwove Aristotelian gender principles and Genesis 2 to establish woman’s inherent imperfection as an axiom of emerging sciences. Indeed, alchemy was dedicated to overcoming the female principle of cold through the superior male principle of heat by transforming cold female elements, such as lead, into warm male elements, such as gold. According to alchemists, even a hermaphrodite could be converted into a “powerful male nature” through the addition of warmth. Through such views, Aristotle’s judgment of women as a “monstrous error of nature”—worthy of study only in unflattering comparison to a male standard—would be inscribed in the natural sciences for centuries.⁹

Medieval theologians and physicians used the same linkage to explain women’s imperfections. Aquinas, for example, explained in the thirteenth century that the defects in women’s active force were as important to their inferiority as their secondary role in creation. The female body was “not against the purpose of universal nature,” he explained, just beyond the *immediate* “purpose of nature.” The Greek physician Galen similarly invoked Aristotelian views in his pronouncement that female genitals were the inversion—which is to say the perversion—of the masculine form.¹⁰ Woman’s deficiencies of mind were evident in her original sin. Galen concluded from such evidence that females must be strictly controlled by superior males for the good of society. As we shall see, versions of that view endured throughout Europe and North America for centuries.

There were counter-narratives about gender, to be sure. Plucky women clearly existed in myth and history. The politically wily Lysistrata is legendary, although no more so than the vengeful murderer, Medea. And the Gnostic gospels brought women to the fore. Mary Magdalene, for example, registered an early complaint against

Peter by claiming that, unlike Jesus, he “hates our race,” meaning women.¹¹ Her views were quickly suppressed: the dominance of misogyny was hard to overcome. Even as Protestant Reformationists in the sixteenth century tried to elevate woman’s status in order to render them eligible for salvation, for example, they succumbed to the “one-sex” theory of Genesis 2. Martin Luther expressed a preference for Genesis 1, but he simultaneously emphasized woman’s inferiority to man—as the moon is inferior to the sun—because she, not man, succumbed to the serpent’s enticements. Likewise, John Calvin, who complimented women by promoting the value of marriage, still considered woman a lesser kind of man, worthy of male affection but still a “second degree” creation and, therefore, a second-rate image of God. Paracelsus (Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim) declared in the early sixteenth century that woman was merely an image of an image of the universe, a “Littlest World,” while men were a “Little World.”¹² Throughout history, as women agitated for political and civil rights, detractors hauled out such adages and images and ridiculed the idea that women could be men’s equals—serious and responsible about money, property, or politics. Even positive ideas about women’s delicacy, sweetness, and nurturing qualities were typically turned against their efforts to achieve fully human status.

Five Principles of Gendered Racial Formation

The scientific and religious roots of misogynistic gender ideology established several principles in Western culture that would contribute both directly and indirectly to the construction of racial ideology, starting in the seventeenth century. The first principle is the use of a singular human standard to measure other groups, with predictably poor results. European men were confident that their gender aligned them with divine will and/or Nature’s plan and guaranteed them a choice social role and high cultural value. They felt entitled to take their self-definitions as fact. That gender entitlement inspired similar ground rules for establishing Caucasian racial domination and superiority. In both cases, only the powerful had the right to establish the facts about human value and to interpret the heavenly or natural signs of their superiority. Anyone that dominant group deemed inferior to itself immediately became *ipso facto* evidence of the group’s own superiority—a nasty syllogism if ever there was one.

A second principle carried forward from gender ideology into racial ideology is the interpretation of human difference as evidence

of unequal value. Based on European men's historical interpretations of sex difference, it seems that the human mind—or, rather, the European male mind—has historically had difficulty holding within itself two categories or characteristics, let alone many, without ranking them. Derrida was right: binaries are rarely equivalents; one is typically more powerful than the other and defines that “other” in terms of its own plenitude and the other's lack.¹³ Gender ideology helped to establish the axiom that difference entails inequality and to model the notion that even multiple differences devolve to two: dominant and subordinate.

A third principle inherent in Western gender ideology that promoted racial ideology is the idea that dependency proves inadequacy. Few philosophers or scientists before the fifteenth century questioned whether socially constructed gender stratification itself caused the economic and intellectual dependency men disparaged in women. Even then, the only thinkers and writers to observe the phenomenon were educated European women fighting for their own sex. Male social commentators, who were otherwise astute in the effects of social and political structures, typically considered women subordinate because of their inherent—not imposed—characters, behaviors, and qualities. Similarly, those benefiting from the subjugation of “inferior” races, including white women, seldom considered the effects of that same subjugation on the capacities or talents of their so-called inferiors. Their deficiencies, too, were deemed inherent.

A fourth principle established by traditional gender ideology that supported racial ideology is the connection between “scientific” theories about gender difference and capacities and cultural messages about gender. Although science has a reputation for objectivity, scientists typically observe only what they have been prepared to see both by normal science and by prevailing idea systems and cultural practices (especially observations that reinforce the scientists' own beliefs). This tendency stifles scientific innovation, according to sociobiologist David Barash: “Sensory evidence—seeing, smelling, hearing, touching—generally confirms our [existing] knowledge . . . remarkably often we only ‘see’ things when we are prepared to find them. . . . As frequent as this experience may be in daily life, it seems even more common among scientists.”¹⁴

In addition, as contemporary sociobiology itself demonstrates, anthropomorphic gender differences and expectations constitute a primary metaphor in scientific investigations, even of the non-human and inanimate universe. Biologists in particular have often interpreted their findings in terms of stereotyped preconceptions about male and

female desires, behaviors, capacities, and ostensible purposes in life. Because of that bias, female mammals’ role in selecting their mates was hidden from scientific view for centuries, as was the “unmotherly” behavior of primates like female pandas, who typically abandon one cub from a set of twins. Thus, any scientific lens focused on gender difference risks becoming a mirror for observers’ assumptions about “normal” behaviors and characteristics. Scientific inquiry into racial differences entails the same risk, in part because those differences so often involve gendered judgments.

A fifth principle linking gender ideology and racial ideology is the idea that a self-defined superior group is entitled to control both their alleged inferiors and society at large. Aristotle modeled that reasoning when he declared that “the male is by nature superior and the female inferior,” and concluded that women should be confined to the domestic sphere (but controlled by men even there) and excluded from political and social life.¹⁵ For good measure, he also proclaimed that slaves and females had equally deficient souls, which justified their equally abject status.¹⁶ Although Greek slaves were of no particular “race,” Aristotle’s analogy helped to establish the gendered grounds on which white Europeans would later claim the right to exclude their racial “inferiors.”

“The One Rules, and the Other is Ruled”

The fifth principle, which concerns political capacity, probably had the most devastating effect on all women and those men deemed racially inferior, so it is worth delving further into the transition in thought from gender to racial ideology in that regard. According to historical gender ideology, marriage is the proper mechanism for institutionalizing male control over women for the good of society. Aristotle and his legions of followers defined marriage as Nature’s way to “civilize” women by containing their inherently promiscuous natures and channeling their naturally passionate attachments to their children.¹⁷ The Roman statesman Cato reflected this view in the early second century B.C.E., when he reminded husbands that they had an obligation to control their wives’ behavior in order to preserve the social order. Limiting woman to the domestic sphere through marriage and excluding her from public life also occupied Philo, St. Paul, and St. John Chrysostom, who concluded in the early centuries of the Common Era (C.E.) that woman’s defective reasoning capacity (demonstrated by her susceptibility to the wily serpent), and her

inferiority to man (evident in her “secondary” creation and God’s curse), meant that she should stay at home.¹⁸

By the seventeenth century, European political philosophers naturalized women’s exclusion from the public sphere on the grounds that Genesis 2 and the curse of Eden not only proved women’s weakness and inferiority but also represented the natural social order. John Locke (1632–1704) claimed, for example, that woman’s biblically mandated subordination to and dependency on man was Nature’s plan, not a social convention. After all, women’s suffering in childbirth was not a social artifact. Writing before the concept of biological race was widely accepted, Locke claimed that Nature had made all men independent and free, regardless of their many differences. But that same Nature had made women dependent and weak. Suggesting that women had a right to masculine freedom or to equal public roles with men was pure foolishness.¹⁹ Men and women were simply not the same beast.²⁰

By the eighteenth century, such views about women’s political incapacity began seeping into European philosophers’ developing views about race. Arguing that Eve’s daughters posed a threat to men, for example, Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), insisted that young girls be trained to please rather than arouse men and to subordinate themselves to men in order to prevent familial—and, by extension, social—chaos. Adult women should also renounce the freedom that makes a person fully human (i.e., male), submit cheerfully to the will of others, and forfeit all desire for independence. “Never has a people perished from an excess of wine,” Rousseau (erroneously) declared, but “all perish from the disorder of women.” All of the evidence he needed for women’s inherent untrustworthiness could be found in the female body’s natural cycles.²¹

That same view of Nature’s sexual hierarchy and female incapacities emerged in Rousseau’s ideas about a natural racial hierarchy. Although he also romanticized non-white “natural savages,” Rousseau regarded them as inherently uncivilized and disordered, like women.²² His assertion that women could be trained to like their subordination and submit cheerfully to men presaged the myth that racial inferiors would enjoy serving their betters.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) also predicated woman’s political subordination to man on Genesis 2 as a plan for the “natural” social order. Kant sweetened his mandate for gender inequality by suggesting that the sexes had equivalent and complementary rights: man had the “right” and duty to protect the “weaker sex,” and woman had the “right” to man’s protection. He granted woman control of the household, but he spared her the weighty judgments for which she

was ill-equipped by declaring man in charge of the rest of the world. Like Rousseau, Kant believed that man had the right and duty to tell woman “what her will consists of.”²³

Kant’s racial theory, which mirrored his gender ideology, did much to circulate the concept of race among Euro-American intellectuals.²⁴ Kant regarded race as a class distinction within species of animals, including humans, which was transmitted by inheritance. He projected onto “inferior” races, such as Africans and American Indians, the same deficient “unchanging and unchangeable inferior moral quality” that he postulated for women.²⁵ According to Kant, only white men had the intellectual and moral capacity for political and other leadership roles.