

Quillette



TOP STORIES

Published on October 29, 2017 — comments 11

Why Feminists Must Understand Evolution

written by **Marta Iglesias**



I am a feminist but I am not here to offer opinions, nor to enter into an intra-feminist debate. For all their various ideological differences, all feminists basically advocate the same things: for women and men to have the same rights and duties as citizens, and for women and men to enjoy the same freedom to decide what to do or not to do with their lives. I am here to present empirical evidence which ought to interest feminists, and which can help to explain human behaviour.

It is my goal to explain why the causes of male and female difference are not merely cultural or the product of patriarchal indoctrination. Separate athletic competitions and distinct medical disciplines of gynaecology and urology testify to the most obvious biological differences between men and women. But the scientific method – a co-operative, critical, and self-correcting process which has midwived huge technological and medical advances – can also help us to understand more subtle differences between the sexes in interests and aspirations. And it is understanding what we really are that will make us free.

* * *

The study of other animals has produced significant advances in our understanding of human biology. We have been able to understand how our neurons function from the study of sea slugs and squid; we know how our embryos develop from the study of sea urchins, toads, and quails; we understand how the circulatory system works, and how to repair it when things go wrong, because we have studied the circulatory systems of pigs and dogs. Human physiology textbooks are full of data obtained by studying other animals, and the application of this knowledge has allowed us all to live longer and better lives. But the study of animal models also indicates that male and female differences are not only physical but also behavioural, and that they are a product of our common evolutionary history.

All human beings have something in common: we are offspring. We are the result of individuals being able to reproduce, who in turn were the progeny of other offspring who have managed to do the same. This chain is theoretically traceable along a lineage of individuals who reproduced successfully, all the way back to our origins. Those who did not reproduce did not leave a copy of themselves, and so no longer exist. (A more meticulous explanation of the functioning of evolution through natural selection and genetic drift, or what is known as synthetic theory, can be found on the [UC Berkeley website](#).¹⁾

Accordingly, each living being is potentially reproductively effective, because it is the offspring of reproductively effective parents. But sexual reproduction depends not only on the capacity to produce viable and fertile offspring, but also on finding a suitable reproductive mate. To qualify, this must be an individual of the opposite sex or, more precisely, someone



Sexual selection is an important driver of evolution.

who can provide gametes of the kind usually produced by the other sex. One of the sexes produces big, static gametes (eggs, which are relatively 'expensive' to produce) and the other produces small, rapidly moving gametes (sperm, which are somewhat 'cheaper'). In many species, the sex with the 'expensive' gametes (the female) takes care of many other costly facets related to reproduction. For instance, a female turtle will cross an ocean to lay her eggs on the beach, and a female spider will regurgitate her own innards so that her offspring can feed, literally eating her to death. (Compared to examples like these, waking up at 3am to breastfeed the baby does not sound too exacting.)

Of course, the onus of expenditure does not fall on the female in all species, but whichever sex bears the greater cost of, and makes the greater investment in, child-bearing and -rearing will always be more selective when choosing a mate. After all, it is they who will bear the heavier consequences of a mistake (for example, failing to leave descendants or leaving only a few in return for their investment). So the underlying mechanisms guiding mate selection are subject to great pressures to be effective, and these inevitably bear on behavioural differences between the sexes. These pressures have produced powerful discriminatory abilities which make us selective, even petty, and lead us to subject all possible reproductive partners to constant evaluation. Historically, this arrangement has been an effective and successful reproductive strategy, given that the descendants are alive to make copies of themselves today.

The reproductive cost is undeniably greater for the human female, and the morphological differences between the sexes imply differences in what has been selected for in each sex to make us more effective breeders. But it is also important to understand how the physiological and anatomical differences between male and female reproductive strategies impact our behaviour.



Female baboon nursing her offspring.

Among feminists, there exists a pervasive tendency to believe that animals and humans play different roles in the world, and are subject to different rules. Some ascribe this difference to ‘culture’ or ‘intelligence,’ while others ascribe it to ‘society.’ However, this alleged distinction between humans and other animals does not stand up well under scrutiny.

Certainly, our cultural dimension affects the way we reproduce, but we cannot modify it much. This is because the mechanisms we have evolved to choose a mate and to reproduce are a product of our biology, passed down a long lineage of successful breeders. It is therefore reasonable to expect humans to be a typical species in this respect, just as we are in the examples offered earlier (neuron and heart function, embryonic development, and so on). Evolutionary biology predicts that each individual will try to pursue the best strategy to contribute genetically to future generations, and to produce offspring who will, in turn, produce offspring of their own.

But this strategy will be different for men and women, due to their distinct reproductive functions. The efficacy of the strategies pursued by our ancestors has determined something as simple and fundamental as the very fact that we exist at all. These strategies, then, are a fundamental part of us, even if social and cultural relations modulate them. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that from the moment we awake until the moment we go to bed, most of our actions have the ultimate purpose of leaving a progeny (or keeping that progeny alive, at least until it is old enough to produce descendants of its own).

This process manifests itself differently in males and females, and produces different behaviours. Women, by virtue of our greater reproductive investment, are generally very selective. Men, then, are only truly selective if they consider they will have to make a strong investment of time and resources in a relationship.² As a consequence, men and women all over the world, across cultures, tend to look consistently for different things in the opposite sex (though, logically, they have common preferences as well). Furthermore, each sex emphasizes very different aspects of their own personality and physique in the attempt to attract a mate.^{3 4 5 6 7} This, in turn, makes competition among men very different to competition among women; the former is generally more obvious⁸ and the latter is more subtle (and more pernicious, in my opinion).^{9 10 11 12 13 14 15}

These differences manifest as the differences we observe in our daily lives: from the toys we prefer when we are small to the products we consume when we are adults; from the tendency to be the object of bullying or its perpetrator to the likelihood of causing a traffic accident; from the posture we adopt when we sit in the underground to the importance we attach to career status.

These behaviours occur without us being too conscious of why we do what we do (other than the fact we feel like doing one thing or another). But we do not need to know that we are implementing a reproductive strategy in order to carry it out.^{16 17} We simply feel like behaving in a certain way, without interrogating the true cause of our predispositions. (For example, when we crave a hamburger, it is seldom with the conscious awareness that the



Intrasexual competition among women can manifest as disapproval of clothing or behaviour that signals sexual availability.

consumption of many fats and carbohydrates in a few grams of food is an efficient strategy for obtaining energy.)

The fact that men and women are different in these respects does not preclude feminists from striving for completely equal rights between the sexes. However, it is important to understand how things really are if we are to try to modify them, and history provides us with examples of the hazards associated with pursuing an insufficiently tested theory. Convinced that the differences between male and female brains were social, a medical researcher and his team persuaded the parents of a baby boy who had lost his penis in a botched circumcision to raise him as a girl.¹⁸ In spite of a course of hormone injections and the parents' best efforts to deceive their child, in the end they had no choice but to concede defeat (with terrible consequences for all involved).

But some feminists would prefer to doubt the applicability of evolutionary biology to the human species. They believe that equality of behaviour in the sexes would exist in nature, but culture generates our inter-sexual differences (for examples see Chapter 1 in *A Mind of Her Own*).¹⁹²⁰ Apparently, contradicting this line of thought means that one is adopting a 'biological determinist' position, undesirable because it provides a justification for systemic

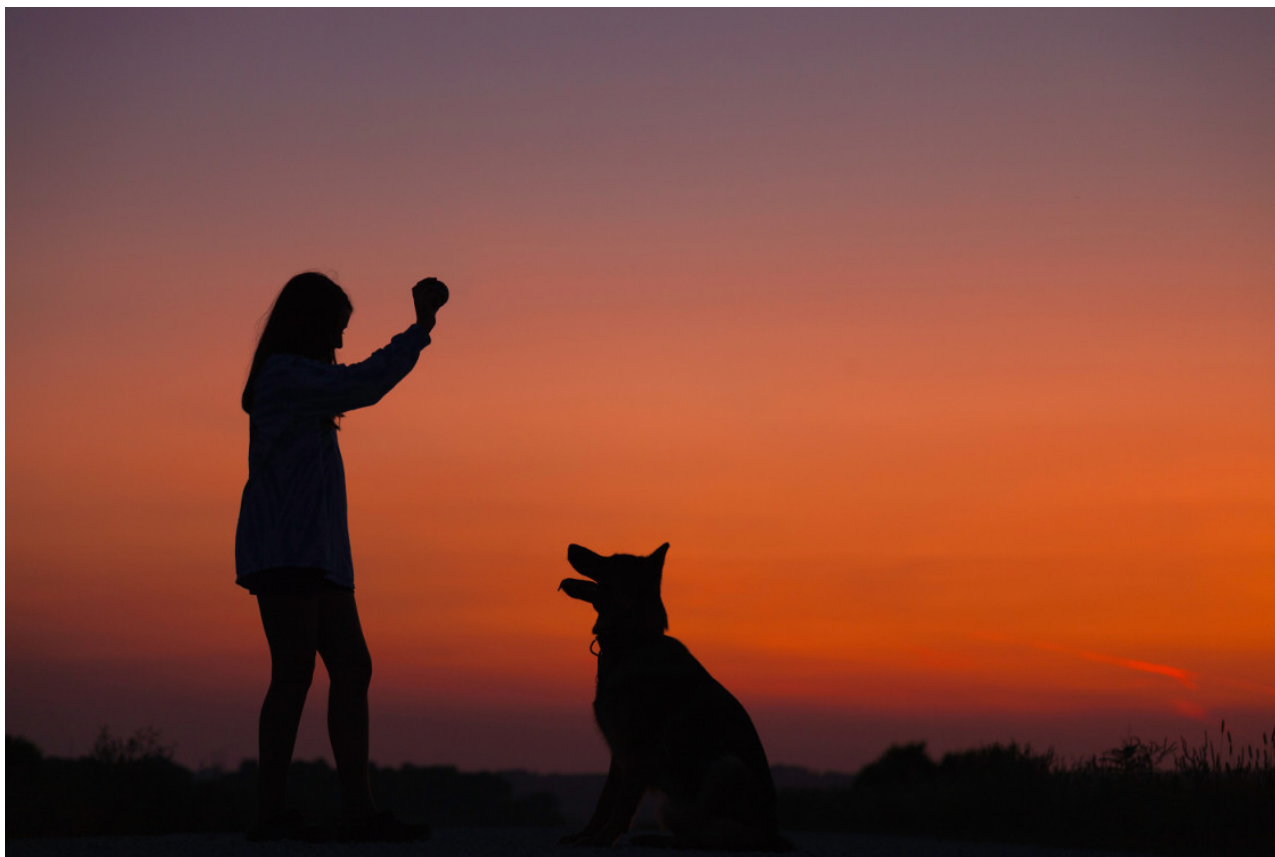
inequality and gendered violence. However, coming to this conclusion requires a significant degree of scientific and historical blindness.

Resistance to acknowledging biological differences in behaviour arises from a fear of the consequences of tying these differences to three clearly erroneous assumptions: 1), that what is natural is good, 2) that what is natural is correct, and 3), that what is biologically-based is impossible to modify.

If all natural things were good, then companies making orthodontic braces would have gone bankrupt long ago, we might die of an intestinal infection at the age of 19, and we would have as many children (or almost as many) as we have orgasms. The same naturalistic fallacy pertains to the justification of behaviours based on a natural tendency to carry them out. It might be natural to have sex with 13-year-olds who are already sexually mature, or to simply take what we find along our way as we see fit, or to use other species cruelly for our personal benefit. And yet, most of us do not do these things, nor do we excuse those who might. That a form of behaviour has its basis in biology does nothing to recommend it. Cultural norms are agreements about conduct and ethics, and they need not be justified with reference to what is and is not natural. Finally, with regard to whether all phenomena with a basis in biology are immutable, we can refute such a statement with reference to the improper and infrequent behaviours itemised above, or by observing that guide dogs refrain from marking their territory at every corner.

If our common goal is to encourage reciprocal respect for other individuals, in spite of average differences in group proclivities, then that goal cannot be well served by ignoring the basis for such differences. The imposition of respect may work in certain cases, but it does not seem to have made much impact on the number of deaths women face at the hands of men, which has remained remarkably stable year-on-year. We can more productively fight gender problems if we acknowledge naturally occurring differences upon which we can work, instead of imposing rules that only increase misunderstanding, allow fallacies to proliferate, and instrumentalise fear as a motor for change.

Some feminist authors insist that it is injurious to consider sex-based differences in the fight against gender inequality.²¹ But asking people to ignore the existence of biologically grounded sex-based differences only makes the disparities produced by those differences more difficult to understand and address. Other feminists argue that the very fact of being female authorises them to opine on the motivations of women with absolute certainty. But this is simply to generalise on the basis of one's own particular example without the benefit of systematic evaluation.



A commonly held and erroneous assumption is that what is biologically based is impossible to modify.

It is better to generate our opinions and judgements based on observations that conform as closely as possible to objective reality, because our goals are political and we want them to affect each and every one of us. It is therefore imperative that we understand the nature of the reality we are trying to change, and the reasons why attempts to encourage complete parity of the sexes in all walks of life through social policy have not yet been successful and have, in some cases, led to the widening of disparities. Political action cannot be founded on opinions about how we would like the world to be (of which there is one for every person). It must instead be built on the foundation of our best understanding of natural reality as it is.

The good news is that information has never been more freely available. If we make the effort to learn a little English and master basic statistics, each one of us can draw her own conclusions based on the work others have already completed. What's more, those who are not persuaded by this work can try to disprove it using the very same tools of investigation and analysis. Others may simply choose to discard measurement and reason, electing instead to behave much like those who reject the efficacy of vaccines, or insist that humans never went to the moon. But such behaviour does not allow us to build anything; it is only good for yelling into the wind and promoting norms which have nothing to do with reality, and which therefore can contribute nothing to the process of effecting meaningful change.

We may prefer to believe that the differences leading us to behave in sexist ways stem from culture, and not from a lack of it. But, by so doing, we will continue to try to impose norms not commonly shared, which will only aggravate the differences between us, making the society we co-inhabit increasingly hostile and founded upon ever more artificial human relations. Ideological ideas accepted *a priori* by many feminists, such as “language is sexist and changing it will reduce differences”, have not been properly evaluated as instruments for achieving equality. This matters because, in order to change the world, we must first study what we are, and why we behave as we do.

If the goal is not the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, but the promotion of dogma which insists that only socialisation generates sexism, I am afraid the glass ceiling will remain above women, the number of femicides will remain unchanged, and our efforts to improve society will be a perpetual source of disappointment and frustration. We must strive for a synthesis of the scientific knowledge of human behaviour and the political objectives of feminism. It is up to us to keep an open mind so we can better understand one another, the societies we have built, and the world we share. By these means alone, can we create the conditions necessary for real equality.

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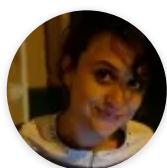
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Marta Iglesias

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Marta Iglesias is a predoctoral researcher in the Champalimaud Neuroscience Programme, Lisbon. Her research is focused on how evolution shapes brains and behavior in competitive contexts such as mate selection and aggression.

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11 Comments

defmn

October 29, 2017

//all feminists basically advocate the same things: for women and men to have the same rights and duties as citizens, and for women and men to enjoy the same freedom to decide what to do or not to do with their lives.//

Actually that is what humanism advocates. Feminism just stole the idea and pretended it was something new or different.

Feminism is sexist by virtue of philology. Pretty much the same way masculism would be sexist by virtue of how etymology works.

I'll pass on critiquing the rest of the article.

Reply

tom merle

October 29, 2017

Yet biological differences are the cause of social conflict and inequality. Male traits and female traits support varying outcomes. The best recent example is the infamous Google memo by James Demore. Though he glosses over the negative implications of gender preferences, it seems certain that females are less skilled as coders, though there will be some that cluster at one end of the bell curve. And there will be need for those, i.e. females, who excel at marketing PR and HR. Yet this will put them down the ladder of acclaim in the tech sector.

The author also glosses over the impact of evolution based biological hardwiring. "We must strive for a synthesis of the scientific knowledge of human behavior and the political objectives of feminism...." Only then "can we create the conditions necessary for real equality." This makes no sense to me except as wishful thinking.

Reply

iandol

October 29, 2017

"it seems certain that females are less skilled as coders..." — seems certain to who? Social conditioning of treating XX babies "daintily", buying them dolls not mecano, talking to them more etc. seems like a pretty good differentiator. Give a 6 month old baby to a stranger, dress it in pink and record their interaction: more comments about attractiveness, gentler physical handling etc than the same identical baby dressed in blue. I have a 2 year old son, but we don't cut his hair and you immediately notice this when people assume he is a girl, then rapidly change their behaviour when we say otherwise. Year of systemic, unconscious bias build up, and this has been demonstrated by psychologists on self reporting of "technical ability" for girls.

Trying to come up with overstretched evolutionary hypotheses that have to do with primal sexual selection to explain fluency with object orientation in Python is just laughable just-so storytelling. This is the problem with Marta's article. All citizens, not just feminists should study the mechanisms and theory of evolution. But when you push evolutionary explanations too far, you end up with garbage, especially when the researchers have decades of social stereotyping that can drive their unconscious inference. She makes an enlightenment case for pushing our knowledge of evolutionary selection toward the very politicised space of gender politics, but without any mechanism to think about how to remove the bias inherent in researchers interpreting their data through their socially conditioned world view. I am a working scientist and very much respect the scientific method, but it does not solve this problem by itself.

Reply

Pete Kriens

October 29, 2017

There are a lot of examples that parenting is not very influential, most clearly the 2.5 million twin study that showed how much is innate, what serious scientific study exists that shows your point? I've looked hard for it but have not found any that even remotely explains why the different treatment of babies would have such a huge impact on their adulthood. You make a claim that is extremely unlikely to any parent of multiple children, you therefore need some outstanding proof and not just wishful thinking. And you clearly did not understand one iota of the point the author tried to make.

Reply

Gomez Empirees

October 29, 2017

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8m098Opkae8&t=1s>

Reply

John A

October 29, 2017

Hear hear.

The other commenters, so far, are below the high standard typically found on Quillette. Definn wants to have some movements own intellectual property rights on ideas. Tom Merle seems not to have understood that the article is an argument for accepting biological realities, as well as an argument against the assumption that “what is biologically-based is impossible to modify.” Iandol, a scientist, uses an anecdote about her subjective observations (that her son is treated differently when thought to be a girl – no kidding!) to infer from one conclusion (that we treat boys and girls differently) a causal effect on another observation (the self reporting of “technical ability” for girls). Thus demonstrating the “bias inherent in researchers interpreting their data through their socially conditioned world view” that is rightfully one of the targets of properly constructed research. By definition science is the acquisition of objective knowledge, which includes the systematic removal of bias. If there's a dominant bias within psychology and social science it is the denial of the biological basis of personality tendencies differing between the sexes, not that there is biological basis. To be sure, we don't need science to tell us that if you encourage or discourage people in particular ways you affect their interest. But we do need science to tell us how much of a biological basis there might be in the differences between the proclivities of the sexes.

Reply

iandol*October 29, 2017*

John, proving the causal origins of strong social conditioning against/with biological determinants is fraught with difficulty. “Science is the acquisition of objective knowledge”: I am no post-modernist (nor do anecdotes drive my beliefs), but surely you cannot be so naive to expect published scientific research to be naturally free of bias and giving a clear answer? If you want a more detailed description of the bias inherent in modern “scientific” research in gender, then you could do well to read books by neuroscientists Lise Eliot (Pink brain, blue brain) Cordelia Fine (Delusions of Gender & Testosterone Rex), journalist Rebecca Jordan-Young (Brain Storms) or more scholarly articles by psychologists Diane Halpern or Janet Hyde. You glibly state “If there’s a dominant bias ... it is the denial of the biological basis”, which is certainly contested in the above publications, and in my field of neuroscience where we have an endless stream of male vs. female brain “difference” studies[1] which are rife with correlation chasing and p-hacking.

I agree we need science to engage with this issue, this was the point of Marta’s piece, and that feminists can benefit greatly from engaging with the plausibility of biological determination. But lets take this paper:

<http://science.sciencemag.org/content/355/6323/389>

Published in 2017, appears to show young girls progressively develop self-beliefs which limit their aspirations (i.e. social determination). But how can we “prove” this, how can we discount the idea that girls develop less confidence over time because their genes say so? In science the way we do this is causal perturbation, test the hypothesis by manipulating the situation. But to do this rigorously with children is obviously highly unethical, so instead we add more correlational observation together, and the more we interpret correlation, the more we may build bias into the base of this evidence (which Delusions of Gender successfully takes apart). Non-scientists seem to either discredit science or give it too much credit. Marta rightly suggests feminists should engage with the science, but it provides no silver bullet to an easy answer. The good news is we are having the debate with “scientific” representation from both sides — for lay people see for example September’s edition of Scientific American. It is hopefully harder to publish studies now that reproduce stereotypes[2] without at least a critical appraisal.

—

[1] one place where we ignore biological differences, to obvious detrimental effect, is in medicine and pharmacology. See “Gender Medicine” by Marek Glezerman for example...

[2] not all stereotypes are inherently bad, they are practical cognitive shortcuts in a complex world, but are strongly influenced by social pressure and are cognitively impenetrable when used, which is why i.e. racists may genuinely believe “I’m not racist, but...”

Reply

John Aylwin*October 29, 2017*

Iandol, Yes, of course science is difficult, not naturally free of bias, doesn’t necessarily provide clear answers, and can result in wrong answers being accepted as correct and being mightily resistant to correction. But science really is about acquisition of objective knowledge. When bias is not eliminated, p-hacking occurs, null results are not published etc, then it’s bad science. There’s no contention here.

There's an interesting review of Cordelia Fine's book on this very site. Perhaps if you've not read it you might like to read it.

Reply

defmn

October 29, 2017

//The other commenters, so far, are below the high standard typically found on Quillette. Defmn wants to have some movements own intellectual property rights on ideas.//

Ah, the typical drive by slander of the naturally mediocre mind.

If I were to start calling myself a 'defmnite' and claim that the central tenet of that movement was, for example, dialectic materialism would you not find it strange that I absconded an intellectual property of the Marxists without giving credit to the originator of the idea?

Is it easier for you to understand if I say that I have re-written Einstein's most famous formula as 'W=qt squared' where the letters stand for exactly the same thing as 'E=mc squared' but I want the credit for myself so I changed the colour of the paint in order to fool the slow of wit into thinking it is a different structure.

You see how easy it is to sarcastically dismiss rather than enquire out of curiosity? Not that difficult at all, is it.

I commented on this particular aspect of the essay because the author felt it necessary to identify as a feminist and use the word feminist so often I lost count. The only possible reason for doing this is in order to imply that her conclusions regarding sexual differences does not deviate from feminist orthodoxy.

Not that that is possible since feminism lacks ideological definition – as she herself admits in her first paragraph.

The idea that discussion of a subject – nature versus nurture – that stretches back at least 2,400 years to Plato requires the stamp of approval from a 'movement' lacking any core of its own – but willing to assume as their own whatever ideas suit their political agenda of the day and claim them as their own – deserves to have that kind of sloppy argument revealed for what it is.

An attempt to elevate the conclusion of a weak argument using an authority based upon the contemporary biases of our time and place. The cave of modern North America to use the Platonic image.

I hope this response doesn't do too much to drag down the tenor of this site in your opinion.

//By definition science is the acquisition of objective knowledge//

Just as an aside this is not true. By definition science is the acquisition of knowledge using the methodology first formulated by Sir Francis Bacon in his book 'The New Organon' or 'Novum Organum' to be more precise. The distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective' is a little bit more complicated than I am prepared to get into here but it is a modern bias.

//But we do need science to tell us how much of a biological basis there might be in the differences between the proclivities of the sexes.//

Not really. This ‘burning issue’ of our time is really of very little importance other than as it affects the political posturing of the contemporary ideological tug of war. It’s importance in the grand scheme is really just a little south of trivial.

Reply

John Aylwin

October 29, 2017

The title of the article is “Why feminists Must Understand Evolution”. I don’t think a high count of the word “feminism” is indicative of anything but staying on point.

But I accept the criticism of my crass “below the high standard” comment on the comments. Sorry. I should have just made reply directly to your comment and stuck to my point. I do think that the site gets good comments. It’s just that I was commenting on three at once and used that as some kind of tie-in. I still stand by my actual point, though regret needling you to escalate with stuff such as “drive by slander of the mediocre mind” and accusations of sarcasm (though there wasn’t any). So yes, I do regret prompting you to drag down the tenor.

Reply

Matze

October 29, 2017

“all feminists basically advocate the same things: for women and men to have the same rights and duties as citizens, and for women and men to enjoy the same freedom to decide what to do or not to do with their lives.”

No, ALL feminist do not advocate this. Many feminists in the media, the academia and politics simply hate men and want to deprive men of their basic rights.

http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2017/10/27/let_s_ban_men_from_workplaces.html

You can’t deny that.

Even if you repeat this for many times, it will not become true. It’s the same with the Gender Pay Gap but I know, feminist don’t care

Reply

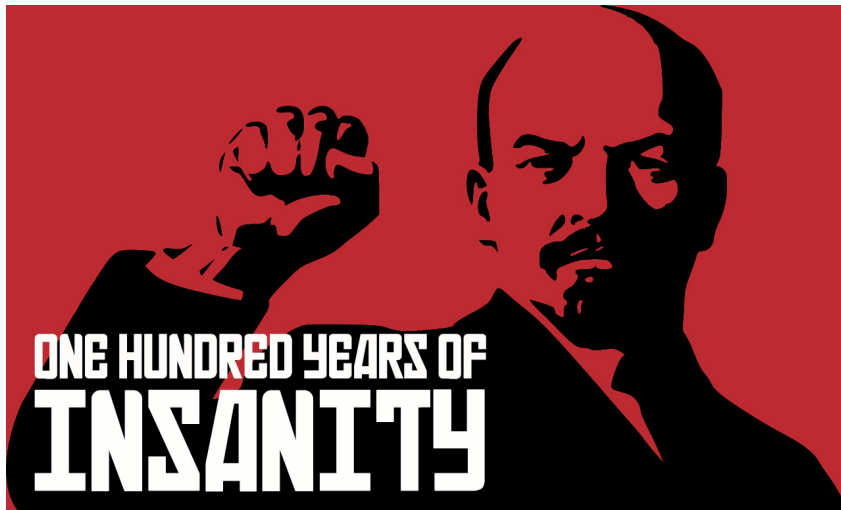
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