

From the natural gender order to the nature of women

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ABSTRACT

Whether it be divine, immanent, or physiological, Nature has served as the primary argument that enabled the modern era, in keeping with the Enlightenment, to unquestioningly justify male domination and the inferiorization of women. A European consensus established a hierarchy between the genders based on their nature: due to their physical and mental fragility, along with their incessant suffering due to their “organization,” women were the “weaker sex.” They were naturally and necessarily subjected to men, the “stronger sex,” for whom the public sphere was reserved. By virtue of their bodies, the domain of women was the private sphere, maternity, and even love. This naturalization, which had powerful social and political effects, was strikingly stable, for despite scientific progress and the fight against gendered discrimination, it gave way only after belated challenges during the second half of the twentieth century, although it was adopted by feminists for their own ends. During the twenty-first century, naturalizing gender has found new vigor for opposing purposes.



Bund Deutscher Mädel parade (League of young German women, the feminine branch of the Hitler Youth), 1941. © Wikimedia Commons/German Federal Archives. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hitler_Youth_1941.jpg)

nature with a capital N was invoked by religious leaders, philosophers, scientists, and even politicians. While they did not agree on its origin, they all agreed that it legitimized male domination. This was implied by the very definition of femininity in the *Encyclopédie* (1751), which stated that a woman was the “female of man,” superior in spirit and in body. Women were therefore subordinate in the family as well as in society, for “nature appeared to confer [upon men] the right to govern.” All reserve, gentleness, and compassion, women were destined for the reproduction of the species, to which they instinctively aspired. The France of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* forbade a few years later, in 1793, all women from approaching “the rostrum, the bar in the Senate, or carrying out the duties that nature assigned to men alone” (Pierre-Gaspard Chaumette, 1763-1794). This offensive culminated in 1801 with the draft bill – which was never adopted – proposed by Sylvain Maréchal (1750-1803) “prohibiting teaching women how to read.” Reason must obey Nature, which ordered the world, and intended the private sphere for women and the public sphere for men. This reasoning made its way from Nature to the nature of women, which was weak and fragile, and fed into the construct of gender difference that was shared across Europe and inscribed in civil codes. This gendered hierarchy was supported by dictionaries of medical science. For instance the “Panckouke” (Paris, 1812-1822), which was a reference across Europe, repeated the Hippocratic doxa that the uterus epitomized feminine organization, and reduced women to their childbearing function. Between menstruation and pregnancy, puberty and menopause, women were perpetually ill, a weakness that education could not eliminate; men were therefore naturally and irremediably superior, “such is the true natural relation between the sexes.” This conclusion, which was also uttered by the German philosopher Georg Hegel (1770-1831), was confirmed by psychiatry from its very beginnings, for it identified a connection between the nature of women and madness. The mental instability of women, who were unable to control their emotions, rendered them incapable of making proper use of reason. The “weaker sex” consequently had to be protected—as did society from its harmful influence—by being confined to the household, where its nature and maternal instinct could flourish. The only domain in which women excelled, assisted by their beauty, was love, through which they influenced men and softened customs. During the nineteenth century, Great Britain built the “cult of true femininity” around this identity, a combination of piety, purity, and domestic dedication. Any rejection of this model was a sign of pathological abnormality, or of moral and social deviance. Its decline at the turn of the century was seen as a dangerous feminization of society. The naturalist argument was clearly anti-feminist. For instance, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) wrote “it would be a very desirable thing if this Number Two of the human race were relegated to her natural place in Europe as well” (*On Women*).

The advances of science during the first half of the twentieth century did not modify this naturalization of women. For instance in 1926, the Spanish endocrinologist Gregorio Marañón (1887-1960) biologized gender difference, which served as the foundation of masculine and feminine social roles, and lauded the maternal duties of women (*Tres ensayos sobre la vida sexual*). The assumption that woman’s nature existed was integrated into psychoanalytical theories centered on feminine sexuality, what Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) called the “dark continent.” Donald Winicott (1896-1971) identified a “pure female” that was transmitted by mothers, by virtue of the fact that they were women.

Whatever the version of this determinism, it made any modification of gender norms unthinkable. There were, however, voices that denounced this as prejudice. In the tradition of Nicolas Condorcet (1743-1794), for whom the inferiority of women was a sociopolitical construct, John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and August Bebel (1840-1913), among others, challenged the anti-feminism that underpinned this common preconception. Marxists made capitalism solely responsible for the condition of women, but without denying the existence of a feminine nature that required protective laws. These challenges accompanied the emergence of gender awareness, which was a foundational element of feminism. Its radical militants, such as the German Hedwig Dohn (1831-1919) in her *Die Mutter* (1903), called this naturalism into question, and denied the existence of a maternal instinct. Yet it was less in the name of universalism than innate feminine qualities, which were linked to the capacity to give life, that the majority of militants demanded rights of gender equality. As a result, the argument was for a long time taken up by

opposing camps, with the exception of the Soviet bloc, which practiced a familialist policy but did not reduce women to their supposed nature. In conformity with their natural destiny, women were tasked with repopulating Europe during the interwar period, and political and economic power consequently remaining the prerogative of men. While feminists demanded the inclusion of women in public life in order to complete democracy and even consolidate their pacifism—a prolongation of their femininity turned toward life—fascist projects claimed to respect the nature of women by excluding them from the public sphere. Nature legitimated the 3 Ks of *Kinder, Küche und Kirchen* (“children, kitchen and Church”) that the Third Reich imposed on German women, as well as the French state’s dismissal of wives from administrative posts to their homes, or its institutionalization of mother’s day. Spanish falangism declared that true feminism was the one that respected the nature of women by keeping them in the home. The second half of the twentieth century was not to be outdone: as the labor market became feminized, women’s nature justified the gendering of trades, pay and career gaps, and their limited access to politics, supposedly due to their lesser innate ability. This was in spite of Simone de Beauvoir’s (1908-1986) resounding antinaturalist attacks, and her phrase “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (*The Second Sex*, 1949). Vilified by the second-wave feminism of the 1970s, the assumption of a feminine nature was diverted for its own purposes by its essentialist branch, which was particularly active in Scandinavia and Italy: it was based on the conviction that feminine and masculine natures existed, a theory supported in France by Antoinette Fouque (1936-2014). Despite being deconstructed by anthropologists such as Françoise Héritier (born in 1933), the naturalization of the genders during the twenty-first century continue to be torn between reformist and even revolutionary tendencies—which refuse (innate) *nature* and juxtapose it with (acquired) *nurture* in gender identities (LGBTQI movement)—and conservative and even reactionary tendencies, which demand respect for feminine nature and natural gender difference (France, Italy: Demonstration for all, Poland: Radio Maryja Family, Croatia: In the name of the family, [Finland](#): Aito avioliitto). For all that, asserting a feminine nature and proclaiming—as the right wing Polish Member of the European Parliament Janusz Korwin-Mikke (born 1942) did—that “women should earn less than men because they are weaker, [...] smaller and [...] less intelligent” (March 2017) is considered by the European Union as a form of sexism subject to legal prosecution.

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