

Shulamith Firestone obituary

US radical women's liberationist whose ideas on gender inequality were ahead of her time



Shulamith Firestone co-founded New York Radical Women, the city's first women's liberation group. Photograph: Michael Hardy

Julie Bindel

Thu 6 Sep 2012

Shulamith Firestone was one of the early US radical women's liberationists who provided the theoretical foundation for a second wave of feminism. Along with Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, Betty Friedan's *The Second Stage* and Jill Johnston's *Lesbian Nation*, Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970) contributed to a theory of women's oppression and male supremacy that is as relevant today as it was at the time of publication. She has been found dead in her apartment in Manhattan, New York, at the age of 67.

Firestone, who was only 25 when the book was published, adapted the theories of Marx and Freud to an analysis of women's oppression. She argued that women occupy a sexual class below that of men, and that gender inequality originates in social structures imposed upon women through their biology – pregnancy, childbirth, childrearing and so on. Advocating the abolition of the nuclear family in favour of community units in a socialist society, and the abolition of the cultural importance of gender, she challenged the assumption that biology is destiny.

Firestone wrote in *The Dialectic of Sex*: "The 'natural' is not necessarily a 'human' value. Humanity has begun to transcend nature: we can no longer justify the maintenance of a discriminatory sex class system on grounds of its origins in nature. Indeed, for pragmatic reasons alone it is beginning to look as if we must get rid of it."

One of six children, she was born Shulamith Bath Shmuel Ben Ari Feuerstein in Ottawa, the capital of Canada, to orthodox Jewish parents. Firestone grew up in St Louis and Kansas City, both in Missouri, and went to Washington University in St Louis.

While studying for a fine arts degree at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, Firestone, along with Jo Freeman, founded the Westside Group, the predecessor to Chicago Women's Liberation Union. In 1967, at the National Conference for New

Politics, members of the women's caucus were refused a platform, and Firestone and feminist comrades who rushed the podium were told: "Cool down, little girl, we have more important things to talk about than women's problems." This prompted her departure from the left.

After graduating in 1967, Firestone moved to New York and co-founded New York Radical Women, the city's first women's liberation group. During this time she wrote essays such as *Women and the Radical Movement*, and *The Jeanette Rankin Brigade: Woman Power?* (both 1968). Firestone believed the suffrage movement to be a conservative one, and wrote in her 1968 essay *The Women's Rights Movement in the USA: New View*: "For what is the vote worth finally if the voter is manipulated? Every husband knows he's not losing a vote, but gaining one."

In *Notes from the First Year New York: The New York Radical Women (1968)* she wrote: "Contrary to what most historians would have us believe, women's rights were never won ... As for sex itself, I would argue that any changes were as a result of male interests and not female. Any benefits for women were accidental."

In 1969 she founded Redstockings with Ellen Willis and set up the New York Radical Feminists with Anne Koedt.

Firestone had a knack for being ahead of her time, and in *The Dialectic of Sex* she predicted that the technologies of IVF and foetal sex selection would result in further oppression and control of women via their reproductive biology.

She withdrew from politics in the early 70s, and moved to New York's East Village, where she concentrated on painting. Firestone was known to have been suffering from mental health problems in the late 80s and did not publish anything until her collection of short stories on poverty, mental illness and psychiatric hospitals, *Airless Spaces* (1998).

Firestone's legacy is her challenge to the left in her refusal to accept that women's liberation should be shelved until after the revolution. "We shall need a sexual revolution much larger than – inclusive of – a socialist one to truly eradicate all class systems." Firestone is survived by four of her siblings and her mother.