Darwin and Feminism: Preliminary Investigations into a Possible Alliance

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**Summary:**

Grosz starts by discussing current (predominantly reluctant) feminist positions towards the question of nature and Darwin’s theory of evolution and change. She points out the importance of incorporating Darwin’s conceptions of transformation into feminist analyses, even if they seem antifeminist at first glance. She then first introduces Darwin’s theory and then reflects what exactly is useful for feminist theory. Grosz explains its main principles: individual variation; heritability of variation; and natural selection. **Individual variation** refers to random genetic variation of individuating characteristics, differences and features, often insignificant at first. **Heritability of variation** refers to an invariable tendency to superabundance in the rates of reproduction, meaning that every generation produces more offspring then the previous one, leading to struggle for survival. Individuals who possess variations advantageous in given environment are privileged relative to others, which promotes their proliferation. Heritability means that these spontaneous differences are or can be inherited, so they can amplify over time. This is how, according to Darwin, new species arise (when some differentiated groups of individuals are separated (e.g. geographically), through this successive amplification of their differences new forms are created) and inevitable variation occurs (as with every sexual reproduction, new combinations are created.)

These principles interact with to establishment of **natural selection**, which is a term comprising all the processes that create selective criteria which give meaning to the individual differences. I. e., the natural selection represents the pressure on individuals that determines who of them will survive and proliferate. In this way, it leads to greater divergence as the more divergent the living beings are, the more of them can survive on one area. It is the openness of the individual to variation that is important for survival as it helps him to adapt to the changing environment. Grosz also introduces two particular forms of natural selection, the artificial and sexual selection. The **artificial selection** represents the human-induced criteria of selection, it operates on the same principles as natural selection, but works with aesthetic, material or experimental investments of humans. The **sexual selection** deals with desire, pleasure and sexual attraction as selective criteria and is both additional and subordinate part of natural selection, as it works on the same grounds but adds new criteria and sometimes may operate even contrary to the basic principles of survival as the reproduction process is more complex than just an effort to survive.

Grosz shows the complexity of Darwin's theory and its possible use for feminism, demonstrating that it is not just an outdated deterministic theory. Quite the contrary, Darwin’s theory brings with it the notion of endless **transformation** and self-overcoming - the struggle for existence caused by overabundance means that new strategies for survival must be created, although the selective criteria constantly change, and successful strategies cannot be predetermined. In this way, Darwin’s model provides feminism with a new response to theories of oppression. It leaves an open space for future that is somehow constrained, but not fully dependent on history, as the history sets the conditions, but cannot control the direction of development. Yes Darwin brings a notion of “**temporalization**” - all beings are constantly transforming, and the present is just temporal. The direction of development is unknowable, it is a nonlinear process, which can be understood but not predicted through history.

Darwin’s theory can therefore be seen as a bridge between the classical science’s (assumpotions of) **determinism** and the postmodern indeterminism, as the evolution is not unlimited and orderless, but also not predictable and fully designated. This logic of self-overcoming, the motor of Darwinian evolution, converges with Foucault’s understanding of dynamics of power, where “power produces resistance which transforms power which produces resistances” (Grosz 2005, 29) – here similarly as in the evolutionary development, the dynamics of change is dispersed and comes also *from within* – the subordinated groups are not passive, they create resistance which leads to transformation of (therefore precarious) power. Grosz likewise applies the notion of transformation to feminism, which should therefore undergo continuous reconceptualization, as the growth and overcoming of what happened in the past is crucial for “survival” of species but of political strategies, positions etc. as well.

Grosz also shows how Darwin provides an approach that conceives **nature** and **culture** as dynamic and intertwined, as the evolutionary principles introduced by Darwin were not strictly applied to nature and they should be applicable to some cultural phenomena, such as the history and development of languages or technologies (Darwin saw a resemblance between species and languages - both evolve around proliferation, competition and natural selection.) In this way, Darwin provides feminist theory with a way of reconceptualizing the relations between the natural and the social (or biological/cultural), as he does not view them as dichotomous or unequivalent (such as that culture is an overcoming of nature). According to him, the culture is not the “completion of nature”, because the evolution is not directed towards any specific goals that should be completed, rather he views nature and culture as continuous and working on the same criteria of natural selection.

Questions for discussion:

(1) On what grounds have feminists critiqued Darwin’s theory? What kind of an approach to critique does Grosz suggest instead?

(2) Describe the interrelated workings of the three principles of evolution that Grosz explicates from Darwin. What is the role of sexual or artificial selection in relation to and as part of natural selection? Does this mean that culture is already part of nature?

(3) How does Darwin explain the descent of races and what does this explanation imply for our understanding of races as biological and/or socially constructed categories?

(4) Discuss the analogies between Foucault’s conception of power and resistance and Darwin’s conception of variation and natural selection.

(5) What are the central foci of attention that Darwin’s theory brings for feminist theory? Can you think of other examples of how Darwin’s ideas can be incorporated into feminist theory and activism?

(6) What does it mean that feminist theory should put itself at risk and how might we understand as its own “evolutionary” modes of self-overcoming, where it is confronted with its own limits?