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The biases of science

by Geoff Stone

Science is neither objective nor unreconcilably biased, says Kathleen Okruhlik, chair of Women's Studies at Western University in Ontario.

Okruhlik spoke at a lecture on Science and Sexism last Thursday in the MacMechan Room.

Okruhlik described various examples of supposedly objective scientific theories in reality biased politically and culturally by the scientist.

She described the 19th-century principle that by the theory of the conservation of energy, women, who had many nerve endings in the uterus, obviously had to expend all their energy on reproduction. Any disease women acquired was caused because the uterus would shrivel and produce the disorders.

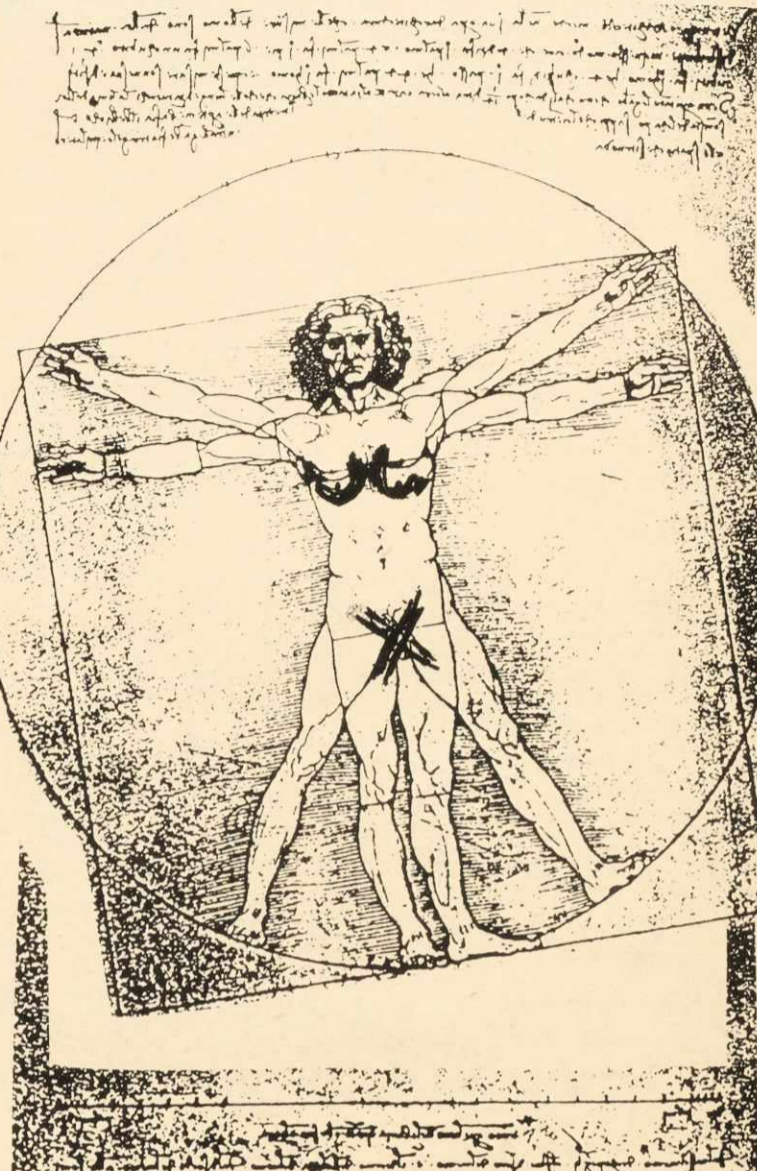
Such false scientific theories were then used to prove the inferior social status of women.

According to Okruhlik, such biases were not limited to more conservative scientists. The "rebel" of science, Charles Darwin, based his origin of species theory in many ways on the principles of English society, rather than on solid evidence. Because natural selection depends on the struggle of species, it was obvious that the English exploitation of workers and colonialism were simply part of the natural way of things.

This also explains female/male relations, says Okruhlik. She noted how Darwin said in nature, "man is always superior to woman", based on his other false assumptions of natural selection.

This bias also extended into anthropology. Anthropologists concluded that in African societies, the male hunters' success determined whether a group would survive. But in reality, it was found that most food obtained by the group was from the gathering activities of women. These societies are currently referred to as hunter/gatherer, Okruhlik said.

Okruhlik said there are other examples in the twentieth cen-



tury of these prejudices. One of the most prevalent is in physiology, where the male body is taken to be the "norm" of a healthy body. For this reason, Okruhlik said, women must still put down 'menopause' as a disease on some employment forms.

Other issues included the assumption by doctors that many physiological disorders in women, including morning sickness and painful childbirth, were really only psychogenic disorders because of, for example, a woman's unresolved underlying conflict of being pregnant or giving birth.

Finally, Okruhlik discussed how a painstaking examination of moral values in children of many cultures discovered that all these children's moral values were similar. It was also proven that women were more morally lax than men.

It was then found that the

researcher had only used boys for the test, so that the results did not apply to the women at all.

Okruhlik said these examples could be described as bad science which did not follow the true scientific method. Alternatively, these examples could show how science itself is fraudulent, with political and social biases, and is simply another way of controlling people and reinforcing stereotypes.

But Okruhlik said science might simply be taken as a system of multiple standpoints. Each standpoint in itself will naturally be biased, but with a number of different views, the underlying 'truth' of the science can be brought closer to reality.

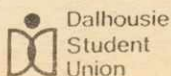
Okruhlik said that just as in arts and humanities, women must take a look at science as part of culture, and women must get involved in science so both science and feminism will be better because of it.

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