A prescient view of women in evolution

The remarkable nineteenth-century German biologist August Weismann (Nature 522, 31–32; 2015) also took a prescient stand in the discourse on the role of women in evolution.

Weismann challenged a popular theory of heredity proposed by US zoologist William K. Brooks in The Law of Heredity (Murphy, 1883). On the basis of the Lamarckian idea of an inheritance of acquired characteristics, Brooks argued that the “hereditary force,” or Vererbungskraft (Weismann’s translation), was stronger in men than in women, writing that “something within the animal compels the male to lead and the female to follow in the evolution of new breeds”. Weismann roundly refuted this idea, pointing out that children inherit as many characteristics from their mothers as from their fathers (A. Weismann Die Bedeutung der Sexualen Fortpflanzung für die Selections-Theorie, Fischer, 1886).

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(1834 - 1914)

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NATURE/VOL 523/2 July 2015