

The Challenging Feminist: Notes on Germaine Greer's Sex and Destiny

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This book has been caricatured as a retraction of Greer's feminist commitment. (1) In reality it is an important source for those of us interested in adapting feminist ideas to a third world context. The book has weaknesses: most obviously the absence of a historical materialist framework means that her flashes of insight are informed by indignation, rather than any clear conceptualisation of the issues involved. However, several of her insights are important and challenging in that they cut across the mainstream of feminist thinking in advanced capitalist societies about, for example, 'the family' as the source of women's oppression, and the prioritizing of sexual fulfilment.

Sexuality.

Her starting point is that sexual organisation is an essential part of all cultures and that the proponents of birth control are often insensitive to the cultural patterns of sexual restraint (such as post-partum abstinence) in many third world societies. Such proponents often operate on the assumption that the sum total of sexual energy available for expression is uniform across all cultures. In advanced capitalist societies sex has become "the new opiate of the people" (p. 199), but behind what she terms "sex-religion" Greer sees a particular form of repression, namely a tremendous sexual orthodoxy. "We have long understood that different cultures express sexual activity differently; that while some have 'high affect' (that is, they are obsessed by sex in thought and word) they have low activity (that is, infrequent genital contact); others have low affect (that is, they take a very casual attitude to sex) and a very high level of activity". (p.204) She points to anthropological evidence on societies which have both low affect and low activity and no evidence of sexual energy sublimated in

war or artistic activity, and concludes, "the truth is that the sexual energy of the human animal is not a pan-cultural constant but rather developed in response to complex cultural stimuli to varying levels in various cultures". (p. 204) The implication is that "Freud's image of man as a highly sexual creature may in fact derive from his own experience of the victims of a culture of extremely high affect, principally expressed in detailed prohibitions and a vigorous pornographic subculture, as well as medical fascination with the subject, and low activity". (p. 204) This is clearly relevant to those contemporary psychologists who are the inheritors of Freud and Reich, and who tend to view the sexual orgasm as of overriding psychological importance in releasing tension which will otherwise generate aberrant behaviour and neurosis.

That same intellectual tradition has informed what Lasch (1980) has termed the contemporary 'culture of narcissism' in which sexuality is debased by our self-involvement and inability to sustain meaningful relationships. (2) Without referring to the Lasch critique, Greer expresses the central insight: "The state of being inorgastic is sometimes described as being 'out of touch with oneself', a revealing phrase, for it gives away the basic self-centeredness of the whole cult, or 'not into one's body' which in turn reveals the drawing away of the individual's attention from the external world of politics and social activity". (p.201) It is this preoccupation with self-discovery and personal growth that Lasch terms "unseemly self absorption". In his view this signifies "a retreat from politics", a withdrawal from engagement with social issues, an erosion of "the will to change social conditions, to restore meaning and dignity to everyday life". Contemporary psychologists are culpable in that "the therapeutic solution justifies self absorption as authenticity and awareness".

Greer is aware of the link between modern obsessions with sexuality and consumerism. She writes, "sex is the lubricant of the consumer economy" (p. 198) and suggests that sexual commodities are possibly the most profitable area of capitalism "next to the market of aggression - the armaments industry". (p. 207) However, she fails to relate this commoditization of sexuality to capital's quest for a universal market.

Her views on the social construction of female sexuality in advanced

capitalism' hints at a deeper critique of the 'emasculatation' of modern feminism. In South Africa this emasculatation is currently taking two closely related forms: firstly the co-optation of feminist politics by white bourgeois women concerned with making more room at the top for an already privileged fraction of our population. Their demands, whether for equal pay or reforms in our marriage laws, are easily incorporated by a capitalist state. In this process the revolutionary potential of feminism is defused. Secondly, at the ideological level, feminism is being distorted ('masculinized') into male patterns of behaviour. This pattern involves an emphasis on competition and 'achievement' within the existing order, a process which Greer denounces. She writes: "In order to compete with men, Western woman has joined the masculine hierarchy and cultivated a masculine sense of self". (p. 12) In her view western feminists have been "duped into futile competition with men in exchange for the companionship and love of children and other women". (p. 25) Greer sees this process operating in the sexual arena, "whether women like it or not, current sexual mores are conditioning them to become clitorally centred: their sexuality is being conditioned into the likeness and the counterpart of masculine responses". (p. 213) "There is now no reason why a woman can't be more like a man. Female sexuality has been tailored to fit male adequacy. One dimensional man has been joined by his one-dimensional woman". (p. 214)

At one level Sex and Destiny is a celebration of difference and diversity in the radical humanist tradition of writers such as Illich and Schumacher. At another level, her analysis is seriously weakened by the absence of a marxist understanding of how the private sphere under capitalism is structured upon and controlled by the public sphere, notably by the economy and the state. The outcome is an uneasy tension between her emphasis on privacy and individual sexual choice, and her recognition of the importance of culturally imposed restrictions on sexual activity to maintain a balance between population and resources.

Greer's analysis is also weakened by a certain romanticism in that she undoubtedly views the various cultural apparatuses of third world societies through rose coloured spectacles. The most striking example

of this is the omission of any discussion of female circumcision. In her earlier book, The Female Eunuch she attacks the "barbarous" practice of clitorrectomy in America at the turn of the century as "cunt hatred". Millions of women are circumcised in some african and muslim societies. (3) Yet in Sex and Destiny this issue is reduced to a brief footnote.

The Family

Her romanticised view of the extended family in third world societies means that this is defended in feminist terms. It represents a network of female self help, "the dynamism of sisterhood in action". (p. 241) Greer acknowledges that "it may seem strange for a twentieth-century feminist to be among the few champions of the Family as a larger organisation than the suburban dyad, for most families are headed by men and men play the decisive roles in them, or at any rate, usually appear to, but there are reasons for such a paradoxical attitude. For one thing, if the Family is to be a female sphere, then it is better for women's sanity and tranquility that they not be isolated in it, as they are in the nuclear family. The Family offers the paradigm for the female collectivity; it shows us women co-operating to dignify their lives, to lighten each other's labour, and growing in real love and sisterhood, a word we use constantly without any idea of what it is". (p. 241) Her conceptualisation of the family as the necessary site of domestic labour, and her unproblematic acceptance of the sexual division of labour within it, is to ignore feminist struggles over many years.

While research in South Africa has documented the extent of women centered support networks among the african urban working class (4), this has surely to be understood in class terms. In such terms the family represents an arena to be defended against the assaults of capital and the state. The same research has pointed to the extent to which children are a central source of meaning in african women's lives. Greer emphasises the extent to which this is true in other societies. She writes, "My association with Italian peasants and with South Indian women and aborigines offered endless examples of the undemanding pleasure which children give to non-materialistic peoples, for whom they are the only entertainment, and the reason for undergoing all the hardships which are their daily life". (p. 220) But in the South African context the struggle involved means a working class increasingly divided along sexual lines.

The challenge to us in South Africa is to produce a feminism which theorises class and race as well as sexual inequalities and generates demands which strengthen working class struggles to achieve a more just and equal society. If nothing else, Germaine Greer's book is a warning that feminist demands cannot be simply transposed from an advanced capitalist context, and written onto the South African reality.

Notes

- (1) See for example the cover of The Listener (15.3 1984) in which Greer is described as "the feminist who changed her spots".
- (2) C. Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism. (Abacus, 1980)
- (3) See for example, A. El Dareer, Women, why do you weep? Circumcision and its consequences. (Zed Press, 1982).
- (4) J. Cock, E. Emdon and B. Klugman, Childcare and the working mother. (SALDRU, 1984)



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