BOOK REVIEWS

The Family in Political Thought

Jean Elshtain (ed)

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This book is written as a collection of articles about the family 'in political thought', but there is an undercurrent running through a number of the pieces which I would like to explore.

There has been a recent upsurge of interest amongst feminists in

England in Freudian and post-Freudian psychological theories. Feminists have argued that Freudian theory may fill gaps in both orthodox Marxist explanations of the position of women and in the classical Radical Feminist account, as represented, for example, by Shulamith Firestone. Orthodox Marxists, in their explanation of the position of women as deriving from the division of labour between men and women, failed to explain why it is *women* who tend to be the waitresses, seamstresses and cleaners; while classical Radical Feminists somehow eternalized, as part of nature's way, the oppressive sex role divisions. Feminists looked, therefore, to Freudian theory – either to the texts of the master himself, or to the works of his followers and those whom he influenced, to provide an explanation of something that is left unexplained by orthodox Marxism and assumed as natural by the Radical Feminists: the construction of gender identity.

In our contemporary patriarchal world, and in many cultures of the past, according to a rewritten version of Freudian theory, it is the structure of our parenting arrangements that brings about the creation of 'feminine' little girls and 'masculine' little boys. It is the woman's role as *mother* – as primary caretaker – that is either directly

reproduced in the little girl, or that produces feminine girls and masculine boys through the Oedipus complex. Nancy Chodorow, in her book *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), argued that mothers tend to identify more with their daughters than their sons; this identification overwhelms the little girl and produces in her a reciprocal identification. Thus she is reproduced as a *mother* – as a subordinate woman. Other writers in the same tradition have pinpointed the Oedipus complex as the locus of the construction of gender identity.

Is there any way out for the little girl? The implications of Chodorow's argument are that there is: to alter our parenting arrangements. I'd like to argue that this is a solution, and that a number of problems outlined in *The Family in Political Thought* would be resolved were it to be seen as such. I'd like, therefore, to discuss some of the articles in the book in this light.

Some feminists have believed that there are alternative solutions to the problems of women's subordination. One such solution is to concur with the opposition in representing the relative roles of men and women as different but to view them as *equal*. Elshtain argues in her article 'Aristotle: The Public-Private Split' that the suffragettes did this. She suggests that the suffragettes perpetuated a framework originally postulated by Aristotle. According to him, the good life is possible through participating in the life of the 'polis'. Life here is superior, and women, slaves and children do not partake. Aristotle distinguishes the 'natural' rulers from those who are naturally *ruled*. Wives could attain only the goodness of the naturally ruled – a goodness different in kind from that of the naturally ruling. Elshtain argues that the suffragists continued his framework, in so far as they believed that women's having the vote would change society but it would not alter *women*. Women would, as they are

in Aristotle's view, be separate, but now, unlike as they are in Aristotle's picture, they would be equal: women's nature would be brought into the political sphere.

But it is doubtful whether the suffragists' picture is a viable one. As is obvious, Aristotle himself believed in natural superiority and inferiority: women were 'as it were impotent men' because they lacked a certain part of the soul – that part which ensures that reason keeps the passions under control. Women were more immersed in their bodies: closer to nature. This view of Aristotle's reappears in several guises in our western intellectual tradition down the centuries. As Jenny Lloyd points out in her book *The Man of Reason* (1984), although Descartes, for instance, explicitly represents the sexes as *the same* in nature and in respect of the possession of reasoning capacities, in fact his emphasis on the role of reason served to reinforce and entrench existing divisions between the sexes. As Elizabeth I said in one of her letters to Descartes (1978:111) in 1643, women do not have the time away from the home to spend on the type of contemplative activity he advocated for the 'man of reason'. Practically all women and many men are too busy to cultivate their intellects after the fashion of a Kant or a Newton. Moreover, the equation of the nature of men and women with *reason* effectively served to downplay the actual activities of women. Either way – if women's activities as mothers are denied altogether or if they are upheld but described as equal to those of men – women are likely to be unequal.

Moving away from this view and in the Freudian direction is what is, in my view, one of the most interesting articles in the collection – the piece by Tracy B. Strang, 'Oedipus as Hero: Family and Family Metaphors in Nietzsche'. Strang offers a Freudian reading of Nietzsche's 'slave morality', as presented in the *Genealogy of Morals*. Freud's

Oedipus complex requires that the little boy both gets rid of his father and identifies with him – he must act, as Strang puts it, in 'two incompatible yet equally necessary ways'. Nietzsche's slave morality, Strang suggests, describes this and the situation of most of us – the boy remains the son, but takes on the father too, and a dynamic is produced which is both self-sustaining and self-destructive. The death of the father, in Nietzsche and in Freud, is partly a threat to the self, because the boy is, in part, the father: and all of this, for both Nietzsche and Freud, is an aspect of the logic of civilization. Strang goes back to Sophocles for confirmation of her view. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, she says, when Oedipus has his first suspicion that it may have been Laius whom he killed at the crossroads, he worries aloud to Jocasta, still, of course, under the suspicion that Laius is his father. Jocasta hastens to assure him, and, Strang quotes:

He cannot make the death of Laius
Accord with the slaying of the oracle
For Loxias expressly said that Laius
Was doomed to die by my child, that
child

However shed no blood, *since he first
perished himself*. (1982:183)

Jocasta, in other words, is telling Oedipus that he is already dead. This passage, Strang suggests, expresses the 'suffering of existence'. The only escape from it lies in reciprocity with others – Oedipus must give up both his paternity of himself and his paternalistic rule. We, Strang says, must avoid becoming our own fathers. Nietzsche himself manages to avoid this. He himself, along with his dramatic heroes, becomes, through an act of will, a fully rounded self – an independent being. He escapes becoming his father as well as slave morality.

Strang's reading of Nietzsche is an unusual one. Her piece is important, too, because of her recog-

nition that the Oedipal situation is disadvantageous for the boy (for humanity, as she would have it, but certainly for the boy). As a father, he is no more a fully rounded, independent self than is the girl as a mother (though the power is on his side). Two difficulties I have with her thesis, however, are the following: first of all, she speaks as if the situation which, in Freud, is peculiar to the little boy is 'the logic of existence'. She does not discuss the position of the girl. And *her* position, in Freud and in fact, is different. There is no danger nor likelihood of her becoming her father. Instead the little girl becomes her *mother*. Her role is both less self-destructive – she is not, according to the myths, required to kill her mother – and yet more so, for she must identify with someone who is caught in a subordinate role. And secondly, it is as if, in Nietzsche perhaps as in Schopenhauer, we can overcome the 'logic of civilization' or the 'suffering of existence' merely by an act of will. By a truly determined *volte face*, we can persuade ourselves out of our dire circumstances. But this, surely, is not the case. On the contrary, only an alteration in the conditions that give rise to the Oedipal situation – the parenting arrangements whereby women mother and men play the role of absent father – could remove the need for the boy's identifying with the father. It is this fundamental difference in the roles of the two sexes, surely, which produces gendered or partial personalities. An alteration in our parenting arrangements could be a step in the direction of eradicating altogether our gender identities. Okin, in her article 'Plato on Women and the Family', takes up this theme. She describes the way Plato advocated abolishing altogether the private world of the home, where the woman is wife and mother, and transporting childcare into the public sphere. Children were to be the collective responsibility of the state. In such circumstances, there would,

he believed, be no significant differences between men and women. In the situation of the Greek city-state, this may, in fact, as Elshtain points out in her Introduction to the book, have involved women in giving up some of the power they may have had in the home. Clytemnestra took revenge on Agamemnon for his usurpation of the activities of her private sphere – hardly the behaviour of a passive, powerless individual. But, outside the domain of the Greek city-state, the woman has little power in the home. The power of the housewife and mother today is severely circumscribed. Anyway, altering the arrangements we make for the care of children need not imply that the activity becomes the responsibility of the state; it could, instead, be as it increasingly is today, the responsibility of a man and a woman, two people of the same sex, or several people, privately, together.

Jane Flax, in her article 'The Family in Contemporary Feminist Theory', concludes her discussion of the contemporary literature along the lines I am advocating. She critically discusses the work of Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodorow:

Both Dinnerstein and Chodorow ... unlike the thinkers who focus on sex role or conditioning, enable us to understand how intertwined gender is with our core identity, and accordingly how difficult it is to change our core selves. Their account of the particular forms of gender identity created through female-dominated child rearing provides an explanation for the phenomenon that Radical Feminism identified – the male desire to dominate women – although it cannot explain the origin of the sexual division of labour. These two writers' concrete analysis of early childhood counters the abstractness of Firestone's treatment of children and points to the inevitable influence of early experience on children. (1982:248)

But she suggests that the limitation of the work of these two is that it does not pay sufficient attention to non-psychic factors – economic and social – and to the influence of class and other social relations on the psyche.

Maybe this is so, but if mother-dominated childcare has been almost ubiquitous, then it surely *does* explain what it sets out to do, even without looking at these other factors. If the Freudian explanation is right, then the role of the woman as mother is the major cause of the subordination of women. This is not at all to denigrate the mother, but it does suggest that views of women as 'earth mothers', as 'naturally' nurturant, perpetrated by Greenham Common women and others, are misleading. Certainly we need to re-evaluate the notion of motherhood; we must come to look upon it as it is, as a complex, difficult and challenging activity, instead of as an occupation of lower status than paid work. But we surely must not go to the opposite extreme and celebrate it as our natural glory.

The Family in Political Thought is both an interesting read, and a useful text for the light it throws on the creation of gender identity. Though 'political thought' covers only western thinkers, and mainly the works of white males at that, this feminist evaluation has expanded the way in which these ideas may be understood.

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References

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