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6. Mothers' Union? (1992)

Christine Delphy

What I want to discuss is an intellectual tendency to be found to a varying degree in various parts of the women's movement, and to varying degrees in many individuals. It is an inclination to think in a particular way which exists more or less strongly, more or less manifestly, and more or less consciously in all of us. This inclination is not something which is explicitly formulated, but an element in writing on different subjects and in diverse campaigns and actions which together form a whole I call the 'maternal demand'.

This is defined by three aspects:

- it tends to base women's rights — claims for liberation — *on women's specificity* (and not on their universality, on being members of the human species);
- it tends to base this specificity on women's particular function in reproduction;
- it tends to demand special rights over another category of human beings: *children*.

This clearly shows the central problem posed by all ideologies of difference, whether they apply to women or to other groups. Specificity allows a group to demand exorbitant rights — rights which are not accorded to other groups. But the other side of the coin is that this same specificity requires the group to renounce other rights, rights to common treatment. The motherliness which marks out women is the basis on which some feminists currently claim exclusive ownership of children; and the individuals and groups concerned unquestionably set great store on acquiring this right. But whether they are aware of it or not, their approach is certainly not *objectively* compatible with other feminist demands based on universalism; and in making this demand they are implicitly renouncing full membership of the human species. In addition, there is the equally important problem that they are demanding ownership, not of goods, nor of their own bodies, but of other human beings.

The reason why I looked through various texts for indications of this position was because in the last few years my attention had been drawn to it by untheorised

attitudes amongst most of my feminist friends: by their 'spontaneous' reactions which all went in one direction. To them it seemed to be 'obvious' that when a couple separated it was a victory *for feminism* if the woman got custody of the children, and a defeat if her husband got them. After a while I started to ask myself why; and then I asked other people. But all I got was a look of astonishment. How could I even ask the question? In addition, various 'feminist' political actions seemed also to be inspired by the same implicit sentiment: that it is both 'good' (for women) and 'the right' of women to own children. Here I will take just three examples of the very diverse concerns within feminism which show evidence of elements of the maternal demand.

New reproductive technologies

Many feminists are currently studying the new reproductive technologies, and with few exceptions their attitudes towards them range from fairly negative to apocalyptic. Now, some disquiet about reproductive technology is certainly legitimate. Research suggests those who seek to have their eggs removed by laparoscopy and then re-implanted in their uteruses may not be making a fully informed choice. They may not know the risks involved in the operation nor realise the very low success rate. But is this something specific to surgical interventions to remedy infertility or doesn't it also apply to the majority of medical interventions? If so, what is at issue is just another instance of a more general problem — the retention of information and abuse of power by the medical profession.

Another line of criticism argues that surrogate motherhood will lead to poor women being exploited for the benefit of rich women, and suggests we should not accept surrogate motherhood in principle, since it involves selling one's biological processes. However, if the issue is the exploitation of poor women's bodies, then surrogacy is not the most striking instance. Every day hundreds of thousands of prostitutes, three-quarters of whom were captured or sold by a relative and held in conditions of slavery and torture, sell their bodies — often with no profit to themselves. There are a few hundred surrogate mothers and their exploitation lasts nine months; it is voluntary; and they themselves receive money. If feminist critics were really concerned about the exploitation of women's bodies, how can we explain their being more scandalised by surrogate motherhood than by prostitution? Which leads me to think it is not the exploitation of the body which is their real cause for concern.

In addition, those opposed to reproductive technology often paint apocalyptic pictures of a conspiracy by men to replace women by artificial uteruses. The goal

attributed to such men when the spectre of 'gynocide' is evoked, is the elimination of women thanks to artificial wombs. But the snag is that, as yet, not a single artificial womb exists. And even if men could produce such a machine, imagine what it would cost — and even more how much it would cost to produce millions of them! Can we really imagine the construction of enough such machines to replace three billion women?

But leaving aside the feasibility of the operation, to imagine this is the goal of the masculine half of humanity, is to think (a) that men only consider women in so far as we serve them; and (b) that women only serve men through reproduction. Although the first proposition is unfortunately true, the second is not. To say that men only 'use' us for reproduction, is to fall in the trap of accepting men's own ideology. Men do indeed often say 'women are only good for having babies', but this is their way of minimising how useful we are to them. Women also do more than half of all human work, and three-quarters of the work we do is unpaid and benefits men. So why should they want to eliminate us?

The fear that women will be physically eliminated is both unfounded and in the present circumstances (given the wide-ranging exploitation to which women are subjected), absurd. It is hard to believe this is really what preoccupies those who oppose the new reproductive technologies. So what is at stake for them? I think one indication is given by their constantly repeated assertion that women's role in biological reproduction is more important than men's.

In order to pass new laws on assisted reproduction, a single, unique form of descent and kinship, the western married couple and their legitimate children, has been erected as the unchangeable and supposedly natural model. But not only has this always been a model, an ideal which has never been the statistical norm, it is itself in the process of losing its normative status. Things are being asked of people who want to use assisted reproduction — that they be heterosexual and married, etc. — which other people not only do not fulfil, but which are not even asked of them any longer. Some feminists' views on what should be allowed and what forbidden when reproduction is assisted, *also* involve a model based on reference to nature — though theirs is not the same nature as the nature invoked by legislators. In 'feminist' nature:

- the only biological tie in reproduction is the one between a woman and a child.

The role of the biological father is minimised (read ignored);

- this biological bond between woman and child is considered to be the basis of kinship, ie of affiliation or descent.

But this supposedly natural matrilineal descent also does not prevail in either norms or fact. So here it is feminists who are demanding of potential 'non-natural' parents (those seeking assisted reproduction) that they conform to so called natural requirements — things they do not require of natural parents.

Such feminists seem to find the debate on reproductive technology an occasion on which to express their views on what descent *should be*. But whatever form descent may take, it is *always* a social convention. Instead of attacking the social convention and demanding that, as a social convention, it could and should be changed, most feminist critiques of reproductive technology simply assert that descent exists already, in nature.

Feminist reconstructions of human evolution

The same assertion is also found in feminist writing on the origins of women's oppression which draws on ancient history, anthropology and prehistory. Books written in the 1970s and 80s interpret knowledge, from frequently disparate scientific universes, in the light of certain assumptions. These are not usually explicit. Sometimes they are totally implicit and sometimes they are produced simply as assertions which require no proof. They speculate about the possible conditions of human existence either in an ahistorical, absolute condition or in a primitive community whose technological level and cultural forms are not specified. So what they are really doing is questioning under what conditions human existence would be possible prior to the emergence of any social formation or organisation.

So far the disciplines of anthropology and sociology are concerned, however, such a question is a contradiction in terms. So despite their use of anthropological material about real human life, these writers in the end attach themselves to a tradition of philosophical thinking which places the individual chronologically prior to society and tries to imagine the emergence of life in society on the basis of the (biological, psychological, etc) 'needs' of these pre-social humans. They therefore postulate a non-social human nature.

I call such accounts 'feminist reconstructions', because the way they operate has the same mythological character as patriarchal reconstructions. Both share the same surreptitious abandoning of the anthropological premise that human beings and culture cannot be dissociated from one another; they also share certain presuppositions about the conditions of existence of the first human beings, who are sometimes seen as a mythical group, and sometimes conceived of on the model of existing hunter gatherers (the population with the lowest known level of technology).

Feminist reconstructions differ from their patriarchal counterpoints, however, in their interpretation of these same premises. Both feminist reconstructions and patriarchal constructions see the reproductive role of women as largely dictating their social role. Both take for granted particularly that

- the woman who gives birth to a baby will necessarily suckle it;
- the woman who nurses a child will necessarily care for all its other day-to-day needs;
- each of these functions will be performed by just one person; and
- all these functions will be performed by the same person, who will be called the mother.

Patriarchal reconstructions distinguish descent — the affiliation of the newborn into society via a given individual or individuals (the ‘father’, ‘mother’ or ‘family’) — from the responsibility for upbringing. Feminists, however, not only see all the roles as intermingled and as deriving from the act of giving birth, but also affiliation or descent as automatic. A baby is deemed to be automatically affiliated to the woman who brought it into the world. Descent is seen to flow naturally from giving birth, with no social mediation and no decisions being made.

The second point of difference from patriarchal reconstructions is that in feminist reconstructions, women, or rather females, are the ones mainly responsible for the survival of primitive society. This is firmly linked to the first point, since the fact of giving birth is seen as itself carrying social responsibility for the young, just as it carries the social attachment of the child to its biological mother. Thus, for instance, according to Maria Mies women were concerned with gathering and later invented agriculture, so as to feed themselves and ‘their children’. Note that they were the women’s children — with no question asked or explanations sought. In these feminist reconstructions, women’s specific role in reproduction entails responsibility for — or ownership of — ‘their’ children, without further formalities.

In patriarchal reconstructions, the domination of women by men is not a problem. It is inscribed in the unchangeable nature of the human species: in women’s reproductive role and everything (giving birth, breastfeeding, and caring for children) which is thought to be part of this reproductive role. Women’s subordination does not have to be explained or to have an origin. It was always there. It has simply continued.

In feminist reconstructions, however, women are the motor of progress, and they are this not despite but because of motherhood. Therefore the overthrow of

mother right is for these feminists *the overturning of a whole social and cultural structure*, which included as a fundamental trait descent through the female line. This original social organisation was motherly, responsible, and particularly careful of the immediate and future survival of the group. Maternal care induced a culture where the values of peace and co-operation predominated, and where aggression, violence, individualism and egoism were prohibited.

This whole edifice rests on one assumption: that women feel a responsibility towards future generations, and hence to the entire group, because of the way their experience is shaped by being responsible for 'their' children. And this assumption itself rests on another, for this feeling of responsibility is attributed to all women, and denied to all men, for just one reason: women give birth and men do not.

The sacred bond

Such theories are also evident in essays which fall into the category of 'general feminism' and which stress feminine qualities and values, for their authors see such qualities as deriving from an experience specific to women: motherhood. In an analysis of the emergence of conservative and pro-family 'feminism', Judith Stacey notes that its principal advocates draw inspiration from accentuating 'the life giving values associated with motherhood'. Authors from this new current pay only lip service to the problematic of gender. They may affirm at the start of their work that the values and attitudes they are going to talk about are historically constructed, and they deny that they support any form of biological determinism. But having said that, they proceed as if the values and attitudes in question were shared by all women: by all women irrespective of the society in which they are geographically located, by all women who have ever lived within the same geographical area whatever the epoch, and by all women who live in the same country at the same time whatever their social background.

These authors are therefore calling 'feminine values' a collection of very specific values, which correspond more or less to those of western housewives of the last half century; and they are then projecting these values on to all the women of the world across the centuries. In addition, these values correspond only 'more or less' to those of western housewives, since the authors speak more of the norms than of reality. But whether or not the values and attitudes they call feminine are really those of even a particular generation of women, is less important than the fact that they generalise in such a way that their thesis is actually ahistorical.

These writers make modern motherhood into not only a supposedly universal experience, but also an entirely positive one for both women and children. This is

pretty astounding. How can anyone idealise motherhood in a movement where half the activists are in therapy because they are mothers, while the other half are in therapy because they have been children?

Women's liberation or a mothers' union?

This new current tends to see only positive behaviour and values in motherhood, which involves a stupefying misinterpretation of the facts. But what this does, and this is perhaps its purpose, is to make us totally identify the interests of women with those of mothers; and the interests of children with those of mothers. The identity of women is thus once again completely circumscribed by motherhood; and children's dependence continues to be taken for granted.

It is assumed children have at best, or at worst, two parents; and that only a parent can defend a child against its other parent if he is bad. People don't ask why children are dependent on adults, and on just two adults; nor why they are so fragile and so exposed to violence. Abuses of parental powers, are caused by/attribution to the character of the parents, and given it has been shown that women are good and men are wicked, to men's bad nature. People forget that there can only be an abuse of power when power already exists, and that changing the protector does not change the situation of non-power which underlies the need for protection.

A feminist project which does not question all forms of subjection, including those which seem natural (because after all we are well placed to know that our subjection was also, and is still, considered to be natural) no longer deserves to be called a liberation project. And I do not want to witness the transformation of our liberation project into an attempt to defend the immediate interests of *some* women. I fear even more women's interests being identified with acquiring the entire set of rights of parents: with wresting from men what remains of their parental authority.

I view with deep disquiet the feminist movement transforming itself into a fight for the ownership of children. There are many (too many) signs which indicate we are taking this path. Whether it is a question of action around the new reproductive technologies, or the new feminist myths of origin, or the idealisation of motherhood, the same leitmotif is everywhere: 'Children belong to women'. (Phyllis Chesler's book on the 'Baby M' case where a surrogate mother opposed adoptive parents with whom she had made a contract, was entitled *Sacred Bond*.)

Maybe we will end up with full ownership of children; but I don't think this will help children. It won't be much of an improvement for them, even if the new owner proves better than the old one. Nor do I think it will help to liberate women. It may constitute a short-term increase in power for some women within the gender

system as it exists; but it will be at the price of renouncing the objective of having the gender system disappear.

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