

## MOTHERING THE CHILD

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Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering, Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. University of California Press, 1978. 263 pages.

The issue of whether an appropriation of Freudian psychoanalysis is possible, or even desirable, has long plagued feminist theory. Even feminists favourable to this project were initially unnerved when confronted with the psychoanalytic system of thought which assigns central importance to the *unconscious* roots of conscious thought and behaviour. The view that unconscious wishes, fantasies and desires, crucially mediate the realm of conscious intentional activity, undermines our culture's steadfast faith in the unity of the individual and the rational controlling ego. This same Cartesian faith remains a veritable bastion in this period of advanced capitalism. (One need only note the eagerness with which individuals accept the claims proffered by the various therapy movements to restore personal "wholeness", in order to realize its ideological potency.) By contrast, the Freudian subject is held to enter the social world divided, fragmented — achieving an "integrated" personality, (and then only tentatively), after successfully negotiating the prolonged and complex processes which characterize psychic maturation.

Making this appropriation more difficult is the unsettling Freudian notion that sexuality features prominently in the dynamics of our unconscious mental life. Indeed, the reconciliation of the demands of sexuality with those of the social order, played out at the unconscious level, has been identified as the condition of cultural progress itself. At the level of the individual, ego formation and adult sexuality are attained within the context of the organization of bodily-based libidinal demands, and their internal representations. The thin line between the "normal" and neurotic person rests primarily upon the degree of success which has been attained in repressing drive demands and integrating them into the ego.

## MOTHERING THE CHILD

Moreover, in addition to asserting that the attainment of subjectivity is itself problematical, Freudian psychoanalysis suggests a trans-historical and trans-cultural dimension to the structure and processes of mental life. The development of an autonomous, individuated ego from a drive-dominated, undifferentiating infantile ego, bespeaks an ontological transition from nature to culture, which is common to all humans, regardless of their historical or cultural specificity.

Finally, the free psychoanalysis offers for its theory does not derive from empirical observations of behaviour, or verifiable "facts", but resides in the interpretation of dreams, fantasies, neurotic symptoms and freely-associated thoughts. In this sense, the acceptance of the most basic psychoanalytic premises presupposes a certain degree of adherence to the interpretive claims of the psychoanalytic method itself.

The initial feminist response to Freudian psychoanalysis was triggered by Freud's description of psychic gender formation and, specifically, his elaboration of the notorious oedipus complex. Supported by the neo-Freudian version of psychoanalysis, early feminists charged Freud with "biologizing" features of psychic gender formation which in their view were culturally constituted. The sense of inferiority surrounding "penis envy", female lack of self-esteem and the rejection of femininity, all of which Freud observed in his female patients, could be understood as a product of the actual oppressed position of women in all spheres of Western culture.<sup>1</sup> Backed by neo-Freudian reformulations, in which cultural factors assumed a determining influence in mental life, feminist critics sought to relativize psychoanalytic categories, arguing that they were specific to individuals raised in the cultural context of the Western, nuclear family.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, feminists increasingly turned their efforts toward the promotion of progressive conceptions of femininity, with the aim of altering consciously-held, stereotyped sexual attitudes. These early feminist positions consolidated around the neo-Freudian view of the psychology of women, and, with the latest resurgence of the women's movement, provided the backdrop for renewed and broadened attacks on Freud.<sup>3</sup>

Given this tradition, Juliet Mitchell's defense of Freud in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, (New York: 1974) and her suggestion that Freudian psychoanalysis could be appropriated for feminist purposes, were greeted with extreme skepticism in the feminist community. Critically assessing Mitchell's analysis required tackling the psychoanalytic canon itself, and most feminists were sufficiently satisfied with earlier rejoinders to Freud. However, those who engaged in the debate around Mitchell's book were highly rewarded. Feminist theory concerning the unconscious acquisition of our cultural heritage, and specifically the internalization of gender identity, expanded and sharpened as a

## NANCY WOOD

result of this confrontation with Mitchell's interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

In brief, Mitchell defended Freud on the basis that "Psychoanalysis is not a recommendation *for* a patriarchal society, but an analysis *of* one." (p.xv) Perhaps of most importance for feminist analysis, Mitchell returned to Freud's theory of the pre-oedipal and oedipal phases in the structuring and reproduction of male and female personality differences.<sup>5</sup> As seen by Mitchell, Freud was the first to establish and analyze the primary importance of the mother in the pre-oedipal phase for the infant's future psychic development. *Both* sexes in infancy harbour desires for the mother, as she represents their primary source of erotic gratification. However, the demands of culture require that the mother be given up as a love-object and eventually replaced by non-familial object choices.

The oedipus complex facilitates this transformation by forcing upon the child the recognition that neither sex is sufficiently "equipped" to possess the mother. According to Mitchell, Freud not only stresses that both sexes must give up the pre-oedipal desire for the mother, he also offers an accurate description of the process of psychic resolution undergone by each sex in patriarchal society. The girl undergoes a struggle, sparked by the psychic registration of the fact of anatomical distinction between the sexes, which eventually forces her to recognize the shared "castrated" status of all females. Realizing that she has no physical basis for possessing her mother, the girl renounces her incestuous wish while simultaneously blaming her mother for not endowing her with the essential organ. At this point, she transfers her object love to her father, harbouring the (unconscious) hope of being compensated for her "lack" by receiving a baby from him (symbolically, baby = penis).<sup>6</sup>

The boy, by contrast, resolves his incestuous desire by temporarily ceding to the father's superior position and control over the beloved mother, with the expectation of a similar future reward. The corollary of this is that he also gives up his maternal emulation, replacing it with identification with the father and the social laws he embodies.

Mitchell notes Freud's contention that the girl's resolution of the oedipus complex is particularly difficult because the motive for the renunciation of pre-oedipal and oedipal wishes differs for each sex. The boy dissolves his oedipal complex under a felt threat of castration from the father, but in so doing, preserves his physical integrity, sexual orientation and "active" disposition. The girl is not so fortunate. She must not only accept the *fact* of castration (*i.e.*, she does not possess a penis and never will), but forever repudiate her mother as love object, and thus fundamentally shift her sexual orientation. Her oedipal love for the father is of relatively little psychic significance in comparison with the trauma of giving up her intense, pre-oedipal attachment.

## MOTHERING THE CHILD

When the female child perceives her fate as the inevitable consequence of the feminine condition, her mother, and the status of all females, suffer severe dépreciation.

Mitchell maintains that Freud's account of the oedipal process suggests universal features of the infantile experience and the achievement of the nature/culture transition (*i.e.*, the necessity of renouncing incestuous desires toward parents in the interests of sociality). Moreover, Freudian theory also contains an immanent critique of patriarchal gender relations. For only in a culture which insists that infantile sexuality be resolved through strict heterosexual object choice, and submission to male authority, does the renunciation of female "activity" and male "passivity" and the repudiation of femininity by both sexes, attain such psychic prominence. Thus, Freud's infant eventually internalizes representations of libidinally-cathected objects who are themselves social agents of patriarchy. Mitchell praises Freudian theory for assuming the modest task of analysing *how* this process unfolds.

Insofar as it locates the unconscious foundations of gender differences and points to the impossibility of explaining these discrepancies by the socialization process alone, Mitchell's interpretation of Freud is invaluable for feminists. At the same time, she insists upon the socially-specific basis which informs the process of gender formation, thereby making such a deeply-rooted phenomenon subject to criticism and historical transformation.

But her overall case is by no means airtight. Her staunch defense of Freud as a "closet" critic of patriarchy remains fundamentally unconvincing. As one critic has observed: "While 'society' in the form of the family, always plays the decisive role in Freud's case studies, it is never analyzed in its social or historical dimension, but only through its libidinal relationships."<sup>7</sup> In addition, despite many misguided or misinformed criticisms that feminists have made of Freudian psychoanalysis, it does not seem to me that Freud can be exonerated of the charge of ignoring the crucial influence of historically-evolving patriarchal gender relations on unconscious gender acquisition. Such a critique does reveal Freud's own penchant for regarding society as static and primarily psychically-determined. On the other hand, to the extent that psychoanalysis does speak to the problem of sexual oppression, feminist theory must find a way to appropriate psychoanalytic theory without falling prey to the trap of neo-Freudian revisionism.

At this point the explanatory power of Freud's own interpretation resurfaces. As mentioned earlier, Freud constructed his theories on the basis of his interpretation of fantasies, dreams, symptoms and free associations of his male and female patients. It seems quite possible to posit *other* feminist interpretations of male/female gender acquisition without sacrificing the insights gleaned from this psychoanalytic method of inquiry. It is in terms of this

## NANCY WOOD

possibility that Nancy Chodorow's book, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, addresses some of the inadequacies of Freud's (and Mitchell's) account of psycho-sexual development.

Women's mothering is one of the few universal and enduring elements of the sexual division of labour. (p. 3) Following in the footsteps of recent feminist anthropology,<sup>8</sup> Chodorow traces the origins of this division by utilizing the concept of the "social organization of gender" — a process in which kinship and family arrangements confer cultural and social order onto sexuality, procreation and gender identity. In "primitive" society, women's biological claims to reproduction and their assumption of child care responsibilities assured their primary location in the domestic realm and created the basis for the structural differentiation of the domestic and the "public" spheres. (p. 10) To the extent that social and political institutions and social alliances appeared to distance humanity from its "natural" and biological origins, "public" life, (the primary social location of men) became increasingly separated from, and elevated above, domestic activity. Whatever function the "public"/domestic distinction has served historically, it is nonetheless an ideological construct which serves to legitimate continued relations of domination between the sexes. To definitively undermine the logic which naturalizes and universalizes women's subordinate position on biological grounds, Chodorow neatly separates the biological requisites of procreation from the requirements of *social* reproduction, thereby exposing the fundamentally "public" nature of women's mothering.

Despite the changing character of many family responsibilities with the rise of capitalism and industrialization, and the concomitant separation of home and workplace, "mothering" remains central to the reproduction of the social existence of human beings. Although the responsibility for schooling and child care now tends to be usurped by non-familial institutions, there has been an intensified need for the emotional and psychological sustenance which the "mothering" role provides. The fact that this role has been filled almost exclusively by women, and has been largely executed within the domestic sphere, suggest that the reproduction of mothering is a "central and constituting element in the social organization and the reproduction of gender". (p. 7)

However, for the more complicated task of laying the basis for the supersession of *exclusively* female mothering, Chodorow turns to psychoanalytic insights to locate the unconscious base of this pattern of social reproduction. The role of mothering assumes a capacity for this task, and Chodorow believes this capacity is acquired specifically by females in the course of psycho-sexual development. She summons the psychoanalytic theory of personality formation in order to establish the links between the structural division of labour in the family and its continued reproduction by the men and women who undergo

## MOTHERING THE CHILD

their psycho-sexual development and attain their gender identity within this context. In her own cogent account: "The sexual and familial division of labour in which women mother and are more involved in interpersonal, affective relationships than men produces in daughters and sons a division of psychological capacities which leads them to reproduce this sexual and familial division of labour." (p. 7)

Like Mitchell's Freud, Chodorow sees the primary function of the patriarchal family to be its transformation of the bisexual, polymorphously perverse infant into a genitally heterosexual, monogamous adult. However, Chodorow does take issue with the manner in which this sexuality is harnessed. The basis of Freud's theory was that psychic development occurred as the various stages of infantile sexuality unfolded and were organized by the developing ego. Chodorow prefers the perspective of object-relations theorists,<sup>9</sup> who agree with Freud's assessment of the importance of the gradual organization of sexuality, but emphasize the *inter-subjective* dimension of this development. Libidinal drives are "object-seeking". Thus, the organization of sexuality is played out primarily in relation to significant figures in the infant's social relations. It is not simply a question of these figures providing the context in which libidinal organization can take place. The motive behind the experience, manipulation and fixation on bodily zones, is always rooted in the infant's *relational* needs. Against the Freudian stress on libidinally-induced psycho-sexual development, Chodorow argues: "Zones ... do not become eroticized through a maturational unfolding. They become libidinized because they become for the growing child vehicles for attaining personal contact ... [infants] manipulate and transform drives in the course of attaining and retaining relationships." (p. 48)

This orientation shifts the grounds of the pre-oedipal and oedipal conflict slightly, but significantly. It will be recalled that Freud located the origins of pre-oedipal love in the erotic gratification which the mother represents to the child. In the object-relations scheme, the same infantile experience is primarily a relational one — a concern with a sense of "self-in-relationship" — and only secondarily a search for drive gratification through sexual object choice. The quality of early parental relationships is still of primordial importance, but not for the reasons suggested by Freud. This explains why, in Chodorow's formulation, the *asymmetrical* organization of parenting assumes profound psychic, as well as social, proportions.

The early period in which an infant embarks on the precarious road to autonomy and individuation occurs almost exclusively in relation to the mother. This pre-oedipal phase, which is of central importance to Freud, is monumentally so in Chodorow's analysis. For even as the child experiences the mother as primary love-object, and seeks to retain the gratification found in union with her, the attainment of personal independence and autonomy

## NANCY WOOD

depends upon the child's recognition of the mother's separate existence. The confrontation with maternal omnipotence explains the intense ambivalence which characterizes the pre-oedipal phase. The mother represents the promise of total gratification *and* the threat of psychic annihilation if the child's desires are too often indulged. The reaction of each sex to this dilemma constitutes the crux of sexual differentiation. Moreover, this reaction has already been primed by patriarchal norms which the mother herself has internalized.

Chodorow points to the different nature of attachment each sex has to the mother. In the mother/daughter relationship, there tends to be a strong element of over-identification — an inability to completely accord the other a separate status. "Primary identification and symbiosis with daughters tend to be stronger and cathexis of daughters is more likely to retain and emphasize narcissistic elements, that is, to be based on experiencing a daughter as an extension or double of the mother herself, with cathexis of the daughter as a sexual other remaining a weaker, less significant theme" (p. 109). By contrast, the self/other distinction is more easily made in the mother/son relationship, since male over-valuation in patriarchal society serves to emphasize and reinforce the fact of sexual difference.

Probing this logic further, Chodorow locates the oedipal phase as that stage at which the infant must initiate the break away from primary love and identification in the face of perceived maternal omnipotence. She offers here a unique interpretation of "penis envy" which brilliantly illustrates this theme: "A girl wants it [the penis] for the powers which it symbolizes and the freedom it promises from her previous sense of dependence, and not because it is inherently and obviously better to be masculine." (p. 123) To the girl, the penis symbolizes the requisite of a more easily-obtained autonomy — an object needed to defend herself against the yearnings of symbiotic union with the mother. In this instance, the oedipal turn to the father offers one solution to the girl's inner ego crisis prompted by this problematical relational stance to her mother. Female oedipal love may not stem from simple hostility to the mother, as Freud suggested, but from the more complex process of establishing a self/other distinction in light of intense primary love. Taken in concert with the female child's recognition that her mother's preferred love object is phallically-endowed, she is further induced to want the organ that promises this access. Her acceptance of castration, however, is the only path open to her in a world of exclusive heterosexual partnering. In sum, Chodorow emphasizes that the oedipal phase is embedded in, and constantly informed by, psychic *and* social pre-oedipal object relations. Because of its intensity, love for the mother continues to feature prominently for females, especially in subsequent emotional relationships with women.

The male child does not slip through the web of maternal love so adroitly.

## MOTHERING THE CHILD

Chodorow counters Freud's account of the relatively straightforward resolution of male oedipal love. The supersession of mother/infant unity must be even more anxiety-arousing for the boy whose masculine identity — hastened by the oedipal phase — rests on a more complete obliteration of his early identification with the mother. In adult life, he may safely retain the heterosexual orientation of his earliest relationship, but must constantly avert the danger of succumbing to its emotional consequences. The devaluation of women and continued assertion of male superiority might be seen as the (unconscious) refusal to acknowledge the maternal identification, and the presence of feminine elements deeply lodged in the male psyche. Consequently, masculine autonomy is a more tenuous state than appearances would lead us to believe.

Chodorow provides us with one of the most developed theoretical perspectives to date with which to further tackle the intriguing dialectic of inner and outer worlds. However, the psychoanalytic perspective she proposes that feminists adopt for this task must be examined more rigorously. As her analysis reveals, object-relations theory and the libidinally-based orientation of Freudian thought are not mutually exclusive. However, points of contention do exist, and because these are significant for psychoanalytic theory in general, and for feminist analysis in particular, it is important to elaborate them. For example, it could be argued that as long as libidinal urges provide the main impetus for the search for love objects, the child of Freudian theory will take a relatively "utilitarian" approach to subjective interaction. Even though sexual drives are operative in the exchange, the child of Chodorow's analysis (and of object-relations theory) seeks, above all, "the connection to the object as another subjective being".<sup>10</sup> Such an approach provides a crucial link between psycho-sexual development and the *quality* of social interaction, noticeably absent from Freudian theory.

The consonance of the object-relations theory of personality formation with the feminist attack on the current familial division of labour, renders it even more appealing. For instance, the feminist demand that men participate in the care and nurturing of children might, among other positive effects, anticipate a new setting for the staging of oedipal conflict. The attachment to familial love objects presumably will still feature prominently in infantile psychic experience. However, with a continued struggle for qualitatively better familial relationships (which demands experimentation with non-traditional forms of family life), oedipal resolution might be fostered under conditions more amenable to sexual equality.

The continuing danger is that in further specifying the conditions which *culturally mediate* the process of psycho-sexual development, feminist theory will tumble into the neo-Freudian trap of positing personality formation as entirely culturally constituted. *The Reproduction of Mothering* stands as proof

## NANCY WOOD

that negotiating this treacherous course is indeed within our grasp.

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### Notes

1. See, for example, Karen Horney, "The Flight from Womanhood", *Feminine Psychology*, New York: 1967; Clara Thompson, "Cultural Pressures in the Psychology of Women", reprinted in Jean Baker Miller, ed., *Psychoanalysis and Women*, New York: 1973; Alfred Adler, "Sex", reprinted in Miller, *op. cit.* For the relationship between neo-Freudianism and the rise of feminism see "Culture and Personality", in Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, New York: 1977, and "Freud, the Freudians and the Psychology of Women", in Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, New York: 1974.
2. Karen Horney, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*, New York: 1937.
3. See, for example, Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, New York: 1963; Eva Figs, *Patriarchal Attitudes* London: 1970; Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunich*, Paladin: 1971; Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, New York: 1970; Naomi Weistein, "'Kinder, Küche, Kirche' as Scientific Law: Psychology Constructs the Female", reprinted in Robjn Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood is Powerful*, New York: 1970. As Juliet Mitchell points out, Shulamith Firestone's, *The Dialectic of Sex*, New York: 1970, offers the most favourable commentary on Freud but advises that Freud's ideas be understood as "metaphors" for actual power relations in the family. In Firestone's scheme, there is no appreciation of the unconscious representations of the outer world.
4. For a sampling of this lively debate, see the following: Sherry Ortner, "Oedipal Father, Mother's Brother, and the Penis, A Review of Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*", *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 2, #2/3; Elizabeth Long, "Psychoanalysis and Feminism", (review), *Telos*, #20, Summer 1974; Christopher Lasch, "Freud and Women", *New York Review of Books*, October 3, 1974; Mark Poster, "Psychoanalysis and Feminism", (review), *Telos*, #21, Fall 1974; Eli Zaretsky, "Male Supremacy and the Unconscious", *Socialist Revolution*, Vol. 4, Nos. 3-4, January, 1975; Richard Wollheim, "Psychoanalysis and Feminism", (review), *New Left Review*, #93; Eli Zaretsky, Nancy Chodorow, (reply to Wollheim), *New Left Review*, #96; Lacan Study Group, (reply to Wollheim), *New Left Review*, #97; Gad Horowitz, "The renunciation of bisexuality", in *Repression, Basic and Surplus Repression in Psychoanalytic Theory: Freud, Reich and Marcuse*, University of Toronto Press, 1977.
5. Mitchell's book not only offers a new way of "reading" Freud, she also formulates a political prognosis that is highly dubious and which the above reviews address critically. It is often argued with respect to Mitchell, that it is her uncritical reliance on structuralism which makes the theory of permanent psychological structures, and thus "eternal patriarchy" so palatable. For an examination of Mitchell's structuralism, see Zaretsky, "Male Supremacy and the Unconscious", *op. cit.*, and Ortner, "Oedipal Father, Mother's Brother, and the Penis", *op. cit.*
6. "Feces, penis, and baby are closely associated in unconscious thought, not only because they are physical extensions of oneself but because they represent gifts from the child to its parents. It was this kind of evidence, and more generally the connection between eroticism and ex-

## MOTHERING THE CHILD

crement — not some naive 'biological determinism' — that Freud had in mind when he made his famous remark that 'anatomy is destiny'." Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*, *op. cit.*, p. 203 (f. 46).

7. Eli Zaretsky, "Male Supremacy and the Unconscious", *op. cit.*, p. 30.
8. See Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Women, Culture and Society*, Stanford: 1974, for a collection representing the developing theory of feminist anthropology. Also, Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex", pp. 157-210, in Rayna Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, New York: 1975.
9. Chodorow acknowledges her debt to the following object-relations theorists: Alice Balint, 1939, "Love for the Mother", and 1954, *The Early Years of Life: A Psychoanalytic Study*; Michael Balint, 1965, *Primary Love and Psychoanalytic Technique*, and 1968, *The Basic Fault: Therapeutic Aspects of Regression*; Fairbairn, 1952, *An Object-Relations Theory*; Guntrip, 1961, *Personality Structure* and 1971, *Psychoanalytic Theory, Therapy, and the Self*; Winnicott, 1958, *Collected Papers: Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis*, 1965, *The Maturation Processes*, and 1971, *Playing and Reality*; Roy Schafer, 1968, *Aspects of Internalization*, and Hans Loewald, 1962, "Internalization, Separation", and 1973, "On Internalization".
10. Jessica Benjamin, "The End of Internalization: Adorno's Social Psychology", *Telos* #32, Summer 1977, p. 47. Benjamin offers a very insightful and useful critique of the Frankfurt School appropriation of psychoanalysis from the object-relations perspective.