

REVIEWS

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Nancy Chodorow. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978. 261 pp.

The last ten years have seen much attention devoted to analysis and critique of the sexual division of labor. Especially singled out for critical discussion has been women's unique role in the rearing of children—what has traditionally been called "mothering." In this book Nancy Chodorow has set herself the task of explaining "the reproduction of mothering," that is, how it comes to be that girls, unlike boys, grow up

desiring to become the primary parents in their children's upbringing, with the major responsibility for care and nurturance, physical and emotional. Of course such generalizations ignore variations, both between different families in one society and between different societies. Chodorow claims, however, that these generalizations are by and large true, and that the explanation resides in phenomena which are characteristic of all hitherto existing societies. It is, in fact, to the mother-child relationship that she looks for understanding. She claims that a situation in which women are the primary caretakers of children has its own psychological dynamic which leads to its reproduction in the next generation. In this regard, it is interesting to note that in a paper presenting an earlier version of her argument, Chodorow limited herself to discussing the implications of women's child-rearing role for psychological differences between the sexes. In the book under discussion she extends her argument, in what I regard as an unfortunate manner, in an attempt to provide an explanation of the social phenomenon of women's mothering in terms of its internal psychological dynamics.

Chodorow begins by considering the main explanations that have been previously proposed for women's primary responsibility for child-rearing. There have been many variants of explanations in terms of speculative biology. All of these theories, she thinks, are based on fallacious arguments or insufficient evidence. For instance, some research suggests that male hormones may have some influence on the differential behavior of the sexes. However, the evidence is inconclusive and also suggests that experiential factors are the dominant ones in the development of behavioral gender differences. Again, arguments based on the adaptive advantages of women's child-rearing in hunter-gatherer societies generalize this to other societies without presenting any serious argument. Many psychoanalysts have proposed variants of a drive to mother after giving birth, but their arguments are usually based on speculation and biased clinical evidence which itself is, in any case, open to multiple interpretations. All in all, the biologically oriented theorists generally present arguments based more on ideology than on evidence. On the other hand, it does not seem surprising that in societies where women must breastfeed their children and where child-bearing consumes a major portion of most women's lives (which after all, was the situation everywhere until quite recently) women have been given primary responsibility for children's upbringing. It is true, as Chodorow claims, that breastfeeding does not require that women raise children, but this does not mean that a sophisticated psychological theory is required to understand that they do. I believe that Chodorow has overextended the range of her thesis, and thus weakened her argument.

Chodorow's argument against the theories of role-training

and indoctrination is less clear, perhaps because she fails to make clear exactly which ideas she is criticizing. She attacks "the conventional feminist view, drawn from social or cognitive psychology, which understands feminine development as explicit ideological instruction or formal coercion" (p. 33) for failing to realize that adequate mothering requires that the mother "to some degree and on some unconscious or conscious level, has the capacity and sense of self as maternal" (p. 33, emphasis in original). Thus, explanations based on behavioral conformity and indoctrination cannot explain why women want to mother, which is essential to the successful carrying out of their task. Chodorow thus correctly focuses attention on a hitherto ignored aspect of the problem, namely, how the development of women's subjectivity helps reproduce the social arrangement in which women mother.

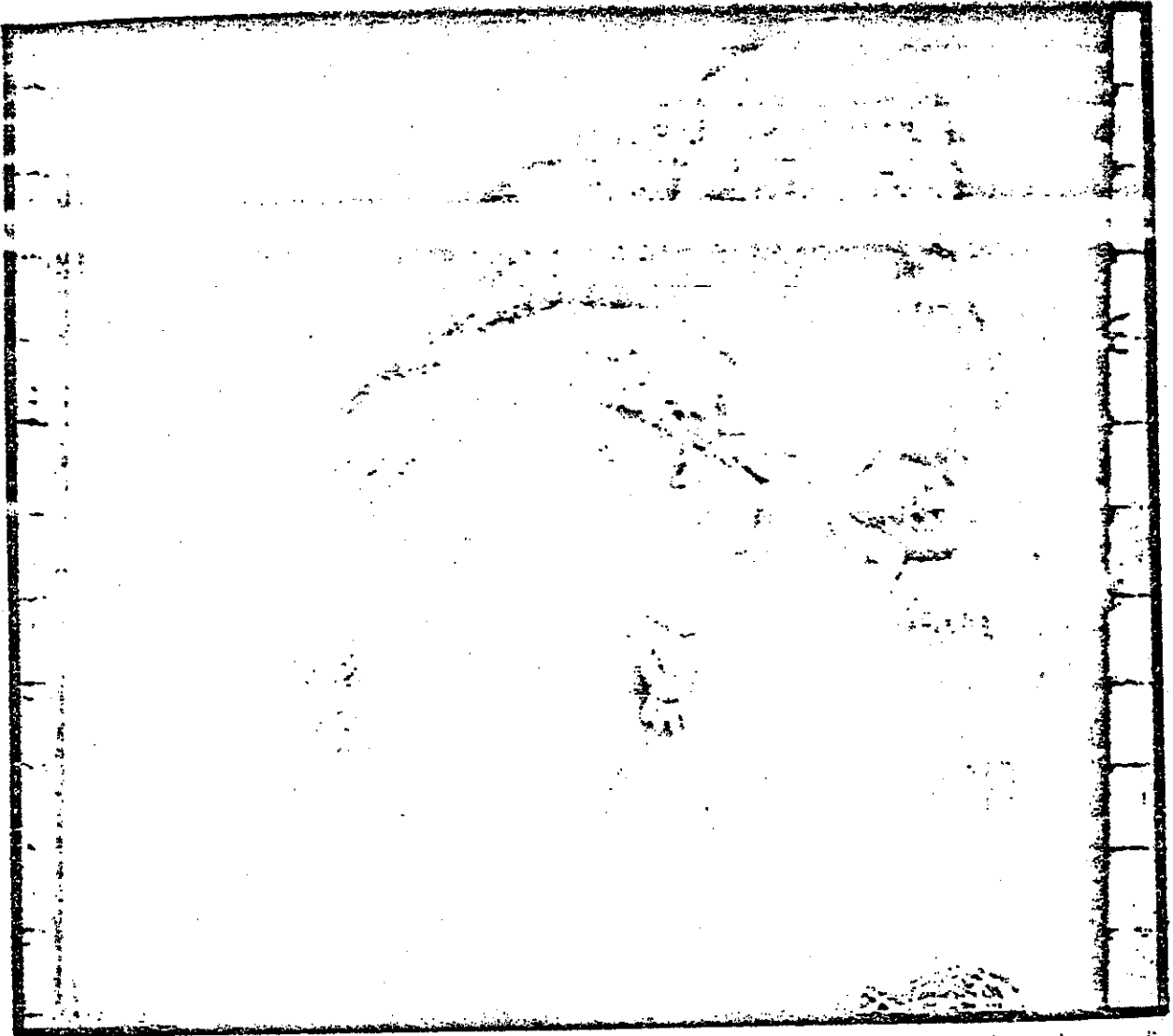
Chodorow's own approach to the problem of the reproduction of motherhood is based on the object-relations school of psychoanalytic theory. Developed in Britain over the last 30 years by Fairbairn, Winnicott, and Michael and Alice Balint, his approach has only recently begun to exert some influence, in a modified form, on American psychoanalytic circles. Unlike orthodox Freudians, the object-relations theorists have been less concerned with studying the vicissitudes of the instinctual drives (libido and aggression) and have concentrated attention on the growing child's internalization of his or her relationships to the parents and especially the relationship to the mother in early infancy. Some of these theorists eschew drive theory altogether, while others still nod in its direction while in fact formulating their theories in other terms. While object-relations theory is similar to the American neo-Freudian school in its concentration on interpersonal relationships, it differs in considering unconscious and fantasy relationships to be as important as real ones in the formation of the personality. Thus, it is not only the actual treatment of the child by other people that is important, but also how the child, consciously and unconsciously, construes these relationships. For example, it is likely that in some cases at least the horrible stories of maltreatment by their families that schizophrenics often tell, and that had such a strong influence on students of the families of schizophrenics such as R.D. Laing, not memories of real childhood relationships but fantasies developed due to the pre-schizophrenic child's being, for some reason, unable to make use of the love and attention given to her or him by the parents.

The other modification of psychoanalytic theory undertaken by the object-relations school is to place increased emphasis on the dyadic mother-infant relationship of early life instead of the traditional emphasis on the triadic, "oedipal" relationship between mother, father, and child that is presumed to occur between ages four and six. Freud's theory, focused on the oedipal period, dealt with neurotic conflicts, e.g., conflicts internal to the person, such as the obsessive-compulsive conflict, in which a person may feel compelled to avoid stepping on the cracks of a sidewalk in order to prevent catastrophe, even though he or she is aware that this fear is groundless. In recent years, more attention has been devoted to problems which involve a diffuse feeling of difficulty in living. Therapists today are more likely to perceive their patients as suffering from global feelings of something being not quite right, or general emptiness and boredom, and of vague depression and anxiety which cannot be attributed to specific causes. The classic description of a rather extreme form of this kind of

patient is R.D. Laing's *The Divided Self* which describes the so-called schizoid person who is unable to feel "real" and connected to his or her activity in the world. The cause of this change in therapeutic attention is unclear; relevant factors may be a change in the selection of patients, changes in social structure, revision of therapeutic techniques, and modifications in the theoretical conceptions of therapists. In any case, this change in the prototypical patient has been accompanied by changes in psychoanalytic theory. Modern analytic theory works on the assumption that the problems of the contemporary patient are more likely to arise during the early (so-called preoedipal) relationship with the mother, when a primal sense of self was formed. This has led to many attempts to theorize about this early "first relationship" or which object-relations theory was the forerunner and, perhaps, the most influential variant.

Though it may constitute a beginning, object-relations theory has not formed an adequate account of human development. One of its greatest weaknesses is its lack of any detailed account of psychic structure. Traditional Freudian concepts such as id, ego, and superego, which are metaphoric attempts at describing psychological functioning, are dropped or reduced in importance, but nothing takes their place. This results in hidden appeals to common-sense and vague metaphors which are never examined. Thus, writers of this school are often extremely imprecise in their use of such fundamental concepts as "internalization," "fantasy," "object-relationship," etc. They often use verbal tricks which cover over their lack of clarity through the use of such undefined concepts as "maturation," "love," and "whole person," which carry us along with their suggestive power, but which ultimately need to be either made more precise or dispensed with. I agree with Chodorow that object-relations theory is one of the most promising developments in psychoanalytic and psychological theory, but I feel that it shares many of the faults of other psychoanalytic schools and that fundamentally new theoretical directions will ultimately have to be taken. Probably this will involve an integration of psychoanalytic clinical insights with work on cognitive development like that of Piaget, and with the observational work on child development being done by developmental psychologists. However, no one has so far been able to achieve this desired integration, and we are forced to continue working with partial theories in order to determine how useful they are in dealing with various problems.

As the foregoing account of object-relations theory suggests, Chodorow's discussion of feminine psychology and the reproduction of mothering relies heavily on an analysis of the infant's first relationship to another person, which in most situations consists of a tie to a female mother—whether she is in fact the biological mother or another woman. She adduces much evidence—both clinical and social-psychological—that boys and girls experience relationship to the mother differently during all phases of development. These differential experiences, she argues, provide a psychological basis for the sexual division of labor in adulthood, and, in particular, for the fact that women usually perform most of the childrearing functions. My summary of her presentation will be little better than a caricature of her subtle and nuanced argument, which relies on data from many different sources and approaches. One avoids the trap fallen into by many of the others who have dealt with these questions (e.g., Juliet Mitchell in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*), who seem to believe that the truth can be



found simply through arguing about the interpretation of texts (be they those of Freud, Lacan, or the latest guru) without confronting the texts with the facts that they are intended to help us understand. Similarly, she avoids the position which says that data collected outside of a laboratory and unaccompanied by elaborate statistics is of no interest.

Much clinical psychoanalytic evidence suggests that the mother-daughter tie is usually characterized by identification and merging which is more prolonged and intense than that between the mother and her son. The mother tends not to consider the daughter to be a separate person, but an aspect of herself. In technical terms, there are "patterns of fusion, projection, narcissistic extension, and denial of separation" which "are more likely to happen in early mother-daughter relationships than in those of mothers and sons" (p. 103). This treatment by the mother makes it difficult for the daughter to recognize herself as a separate person. She instead perceives herself as a part of, or an extension of her mother. This mode of relating to her mother is later generalized to other aspects of the world. In contrast, Chodorow suggests that the young son is more likely to experience himself as the *object* of his mother's fantasies and desires. The boy's experience of his mother will tend to catapult him into "oedipal" conflicts regarding gender identity and gender differences earlier than the girl.

As well as these differences in the early preoedipal mother-infant relationship, the differential treatment of boys and girls continues into the oedipal phase when, as already indicated, issues regarding the differences between the sexes and the formation of gender identity are dominant. The classical psychoanalytic problem concerning female development during this phase is to explain why it is that the girl turns from the mother to the father (and other men) as object of her desires, both sensual and affectional. It is to solve this problem that the concepts of penis envy and women as castrated people were introduced (as well as to explain clinical evidence of unconscious desires for a penis in adult women patients). As is well known, these ideas have raised a storm of controversy and have become a focal point of discussion among the various psychoanalytic approaches to feminine psychology. Some authors, e.g., Helene Deutsch, claim that penis envy is an inevitable "psychological consequence of the anatomical distinction between the sexes," while members of the culturalist school claim that penis envy is a result of the girl's desire for the greater power of the male in a patriarchal society, and that the oedipal girl's turn toward her father is a result of an inborn heterosexuality. Both these positions thus end up with biological explanations for feminine heterosexuality.

Chodorow's idea is that it is the constraining nature of the

oedipal mother-daughter relationship which leads the girl to turn to the father in an attempt to escape from remaining a narcissistic extension of her mother in order to become a self in her own right. The penis is desired by the girl because it is a symbol of the desired independence. Quoting the French psychoanalyst Chassequet-Smirgel: "Basically, penis envy is the symbolic expression of another desire. Women do not wish to become men, but want to detach themselves from the mother and become complete, autonomous women." (p. 123, emphasis in original). Meanwhile, as Chodorow's reading of social psychological literature suggests, the father has probably been acting seductively toward the girl and encouraging her to act in a "feminine" manner.

The girl does not abandon interest in the mother while this turn toward the father is occurring. She is still intimately involved with the mother, though in complex ways that cannot be gone into here. One important result is that in girls, unlike boys, the oedipal phase tends to be a prolonged process which is never really resolved. This helps explain differences in the male and female experiences of adolescence. The adolescent girl is more likely to remain emotionally involved with her mother and to experience conflicts regarding dependence on and separateness from her than is the adolescent boy.

One important result of the girl's path to development is that she will emerge as an adult woman with a greater ability to experience another's desires and conflicts as her own—that is, for "empathy"—than most men, who did not have the experience of being considered an extension of their mother. Furthermore, due to the nature of girls' early ties to their mothers, they "come to experience themselves as less differentiated than boys, as more continuous with and related to the external object-world and as differently oriented to their inner object-world as well" (p. 167). Chodorow discusses specific aspects of the developmental history of boys that make it difficult for them to experience those continuous, merging ways of relating to the world. It is these states of merging with and empathy for others that are important in caring for young children, and are involved in the derivation of pleasure from this activity. The seeds of this caring are created in both boys and girls by their early experiences of being cared for by a loving mother. However, the vicissitudes of development that we have sketched above and that Chodorow discusses in detail suggest why women are more likely to become mothers.

These differences in personality are also involved in the wider realm of the sexual division of labor. It is typical of our society and most other existent societies that women tend to play a preponderant role in familial life and affective matters while men are largely concerned with nontamilial production. Chodorow cites Michele Rosaldo who suggests that in all societies

feminine roles are less public or "social,"... they exhibit less linguistic and institutional differentiation, and that the interaction they involve is more likely to be kin-based and to cross generations, whereas man's interaction remains within a single generation and cuts across kin units on the basis of universalistic categories. Women's role in the home and primary definition in social reproductive sex-gender terms are characterized by particularism, concern with affective goals and ties and a diffuse, unbounded quality. Masculine occupational roles and men's primary definition in the sphere of production are universalistically defined and recruited, and are less likely to involve affective considerations (p. 180).

The division of labor has social and psychic costs, as well as contradictions leading toward its abolition. In her brief appendix entitled "Women's Mothering and Women's Liberation" Chodorow claims that:

the sexual division of labor and women's responsibility for child care are linked to and generate male dominance. Psychologists have demonstrated unequivocally that the very fact of being mothered by women generates in men conflicts over masculinity, a psychology of male dominance, and a need to be superior to women. . . . Thus the social organization of parenting produces sexual inequality not simply role differentiation. It is politically and socially important to confront this organization of parenting. Even though it is an arrangement that seems universal, directly rooted in ideology, and inevitable, it can be changed. The possibility of change is indicated not only by a theoretical critique of biological determinism, but by the contradictory aspects of the present organization of parenting. Even as the present forms reproduce mothering, they help to produce a widespread dissatisfaction with their own limitations among women (and sometimes men) (p. 214).

Chodorow only hints at what these contradictory aspects are. She suggests that the recent nuclear family arrangement in which a lone woman has almost sole responsibility for taking care of her children tends to produce a situation in which the mother is both overinvolved with, and profoundly ambivalent about her children. This, in turn, has psychic consequences for them. Further tension is induced as women increasingly enter the paid labor force, but are still expected to maintain primary responsibility for the care of their children. These tensions can produce efforts toward the transformation of the system of exclusive female mothering, but Chodorow does not really say much about what could or should replace it, except for a brief nod at experiments with collective childrearing in the kibbutzim, China, and Cuba, which she claims indicate that children so reared show "more sense of solidarity and commitment to the group, less individualism and competitiveness, are less liable to form intense, exclusive adult relationships than children reared in Western nuclear families" (p. 217). It is atypical that Chodorow gives no reference for this assertion, which, in the case of China and Cuba, at least, is probably based on the impressionistic accounts of the revolutionary groups who can interpret every attempt of a "Communist" state to control its population as a victory for human liberation. Other observers have interpreted the same character traits as signs of a "totalitarian" destruction of the individual and of a strong sense of self. It is not at all clear that the problem of the relations of the individual and the collectivity will be solved under socialism simply by replacing the conformist individualism of contemporary capitalism by conformist collectivism. Hopefully, the changed social conditions of a socialist revolution will lead to a revision in the way this question is formulated. At present, most discussion of this question is largely a matter of value judgments, which is probably the result of our lack of adequate social experience and the appropriate theoretical concepts to deal with it. It remains an open question to what extent psychoanalytic categories will be useful in this analysis. In any case, Chodorow does come out for the equal participation of women and men in childrearing, which would significantly alter the typical pattern of child development outlined in this book.

These questions point to the greatest weakness in Chodorow's book. She recognizes that changes in family and social

structure should result in modifications in the basic pattern of differences in male and female child development. However, the question remains as to what aspects of the psychoanalytic theory and clinical material she relies on so heavily will turn out to be inappropriate for dealing with human development in societies basically different from those in which it was developed. This is especially important because Chodorow relies heavily on the analysis of detailed clinical reports, all of which are from Western societies, and most of which are of people from middle and upper class backgrounds. Thus we need to know if the patterns of differences between mother-daughter and mother-son relationships that she describes as typical of our society hold up in detailed studies of lower social classes and of other societies. This would require clinical study capable of unearthing details of psychic development for people in other classes and cultures comparable to those that psychoanalytic clinical work provides for middle- and upper-class individuals in our own society. Reliance on sociological data is not sufficient. My own view is that the broad outlines of psychoanalytic theory will prove useful in this task, but it remains to be seen what modifications this theory will require. As I indicated in my discussion of object-relations theory, I feel that psychoanalytic theory needs to be modified in order adequately to conceptualize psychic reality in our own culture. These difficulties regarding the extent of applicability of the theory are not Chodorow's alone, and may even be inherent in the project of applying psychoanalytic insights to cross-cultural subjects. What is needed is not an end to such attempts, but an awareness of their dangers.

This book is, in my opinion, one of the best attempts to apply psychoanalytic concepts to the understanding of social phenomena. However, it shares with all works of this genre the characteristic of being stronger on intuitive plausibility

than on solid proof of its hypotheses. In this light we should keep in mind Chodorow's own reservations as presented in the earlier version of her argument mentioned above:

In a formulation of this preliminary nature, there is not a great body of consistent evidence to draw upon. Available evidence is presented that illuminates aspects of the theory — for the most part psychoanalytic and socio-psychological accounts based almost entirely on highly individualized Western society (and on the middle and upper classes in that society — S.S.I.). [This is in some sense a programmatic appeal to people doing research. It points to certain issues that might be especially important in investigations of child development and family relationships, and suggests that researchers look explicitly at female vs. male development, and that they consider seriously mother-daughter relationships even if these are not of obvious "structural importance" in a traditional anthropological view of that society.]

As an appeal for further research in these areas, this book is extremely effective. It would be a great mistake, however, if its hypothesis were to be accepted by others as proven and as evidence for other ideas. Too much of radical social thinking already rests unawares on what are simply plausible hypotheses.

Stephen Soldz

Notes

1. Nancy Chodorow, "Family Structure and Feminine Personality" in Michèle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Woman, Culture and Society*. Stanford, 1974.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 45.