

BOOK REVIEW

Juliet Mitchell. *Psychoanalysis and feminism*, Allen Lane 1974. (pp. 456) £4.00.

This is a book which purports to be in favour of feminism. It states bravely, and I believe correctly, that 'The change to a socialist economy does not by itself suggest that the end of patriarchy comfortably follows suit. A specific struggle against patriarchy - a cultural revolution - is requisite, . . . It seems to follow that women within revolutionary feminism can be the spearhead of general ideological change as the working class is the agent of the overthrow of the specifically capitalist mode of production.'

But when we look at the way this book is actually put together, we find that 88% of it is devoted to discussing the work of three *men* (Freud, Reich and Laing, with Freud getting the lion's share). The rest is devoted to a destructive discussion of the work of six *women* - de Beauvoir (14 pages), Friedan (8½ pages), Figs (11½ pages), Greer (6 pages), Firestone (4½ pages), and Millett (4½ pages). She explains that she does not deal with Naomi Weisstein (whom she refers to as Weinstein) who she likes 'least of all', because she has already dealt with her in *Woman's Estate*.

It seems that there is *not one* feminist writing in English who can be recommended, because they have all got Freud wrong. The only writer Mitchell can support, apart of course from Freud, is a French psychoanalyst named Jacques Lacan. (And, with reservations, Levi-Strauss). And the only feminists she has a good word for are the members of a French group, *Psychanalyse et Politique*, who draw heavily on the work of said Lacan.

And it seems to be mainly Lacan (some of whose work has been published in New Left Review, on whose editorial board Mitchell sits) who has led Mitchell into her most wild, weird and whirling chapter, the climax of her conclusions about the family, entitled *The Different Self, the Phallus and the Father*, in which she says things like -

Lacan suggest that it (the phallus) represents the very notion of exchange itself - it is not a value in and of itself, but represents the actual value of exchange, obviously symbolic exchange. The phallus is the very mark of human desire; it is the expression of the wish for what is absent, for reunion (initially with the mother).

Yes, Mitchell does believe in penis envy. Yes, she does believe in the vaginal orgasm. Yes, she does go all the way down the line with Freud and his 'son' Lacan.

She even takes from Freud his notion of science. According to this notion, science is objective, and the scientist stands outside the phenomena he is describing, and explains them correctly. She continually criticises Freud's opponents for treating his descriptions as prescriptions. What science is about, she thinks, is 'some explanation

that accounts for why one thing leads to another, why a certain response to a certain situation produces this and not that particular result.' What she admires Freud for is 'attempting to found a science which would analyse how the way-we-live operates.' This is the traditional empiricist and positivist view of psychology, which ultimately leads to the prediction and control of people's behaviour, for the benefit of those who rule. She seems not to have heard of the view of science which has now spread quite widely and which I agree with, that social science (including psychology) is always prescriptive, always has values built into it. It is always on somebody's side.

And it is clear from this book that Mitchell is firmly on the side of patriarchy, and against feminism. The whole book is written in the traditional male way, with one generalised and abstract statement succeeding another. There is no 'Juliet Mitchell' in there anywhere. The remarks in favour of feminism, which were quoted at the beginning of this review, are tacked on like an afterthought, and do not inform the rest of the book in any way what I can detect.

So what use is this book?

Well, it does contain a lengthy discussion of the difference between the Oedipal stage and the pre-Oedipal narcissistic stage. This is a clearer statement than I have seen anywhere else, and it will no doubt influence all general discussion of Freud's position from this point on. The thing that makes me despair is that Mitchell restricts herself to *expounding* Freud/Lacan. She never asks the question - 'Is it true?' She never even suggests any way of finding out whether it might be true or false: a bit odd, from someone who is so concerned about science.

It also contains a good discussion of Reich, which explains his position more clearly than I have seen elsewhere. Mitchell seems to get easily lost in Laing, and I didn't find her chapters on him at all enlightening.

All in all, this comes out as a pretty weird book: a male book written by a woman, which supports feminism by damning every feminist I know, and seeks to overthrow patriarchy by explaining how necessary it is. I can't resist one more quotation:

The symbolic father, for whose prehistoric death the boy pays the debt due, is the law that institutes and constitutes human society, culture in the fullest sense of the term, the law of order which is to be confounded with language and which structures all human societies, which makes them, in fact, human.

If you really believe this, I don't see how you can do the work of overthrowing the symbolic father - yet this is the cultural revolution advocated in the first paragraph of this review.

O. Void