SEX AND DESTINY: THE POLITICS OF HUMAN FERTILITY
Germaine Greer
Seeker and Warburg hbk £9.95
ISBN 0 436 18801 5

Germaine Greer's book is like a shooting star: it will glitter for a while, and then disappear into the void. It is ambitious, and brilliant, but ultimately a failure.

She traverses a vast terrain in the book: from the anthropology of motherhood to the causes of sterility; from the history of eugenics, to the demography of the globe. What is new, and brilliant, about this passionate tome is the placing of certain ideas in relation to each other in order to pose some vital political questions. But her basic mistake was to pitch the book at a semi-academic level, on a breadth of subjects which (mainly white) Western feminists have not yet been sufficiently heard or understood in the Western Left.

So what does she have to say to feminists? Greer is dealing with many subjects which (mainly white) Western feminism has not touched, and she has a global outlook which is sadly lacking from much of British feminism. There is no doubt that she is throwing a casual challenge to Western feminism, whose achievements and goals she is implicitly evaluating in the light of her model of 'traditional' society. In her whirlwind travels around the globe, Greer has stumbled on the importance of extended kinship networks to female solidarity and the value of motherhood to women in different cultures:

'The management of pregnancy, childbed and child-raising (is) the principal expression of the familial and societal network of women, itself one of the essential cohesive elements in any society and a necessary leaven to the competitive hierarchies of men,' (p 19)

'That motherhood is virtually meaningless in our society is no ground for supposing that the fact that women are still defined by their mothering function in other societies is simply an index of their oppression', (p 25)

An important recognition, and perhaps a precondition for communication between Western and African feminists, for example, although Greer has absolutely no means to analyse the different ways in which motherhood is constituted in different national, ethnic, or class contexts.

But she goes further. She suggests that as a result of capitalist industrialisation Western women have been expropriated from their gender power; and that 'It is largely as an unconscious reaction to this diminution of women's role that women are now exerting such pressure to be allowed into the competitive male hierarchy'; this has led to a vicious circle whereby Western women 'cultivate a masculine sense of self; — so that increasingly childbirth has been seen as disruptive, and children are disliked. Is she accusing feminism of colluding in the promotion of sex religion, the nuclear family, hostility to children? Perhaps rather she is accusing Western feminism of remaining ethnocentric and not squaring up to the problem of reproduction.'
When Greer asks 'Is reproduction actually simply a way to orgasm, and are children nothing but a by-product?'; and when she asks why she as a twentieth century feminist should 'be among the few champions of the Family as a larger organisation than the suburban dyad', I do not think she is simply doing a somersault on the fundamental tenets of the feminism of the early 1970s. Rather, she is attempting to reconsider whether the goals of sisterhood, or female solidarity, are not negated by the wider conditions of Western society and economy.

But in saying this, she is far from the lone voice in the wilderness which she fancies herself to be. The changing class, racial and age composition of Western feminism in the 1980s has already forced debate on these questions. Greer, however, wants to play extremist devil's advocate. She cries for a total reordering of priorities: fertility, sterililty, childrearing, kin networks (within which the significance of marriage is affinal, not conjugal) must be reclaimed by Western women as part of the feminist project.

If not, she says, we are doomed to competition with our men, which both places our gender identity in deeper and deeper crisis, and leads to our collusion with the worst kind of cultural imperialism.

I do not think, as some do, that her book is dangerous, stupid or irrelevant. On the contrary, the shooting star can make us pause and reflect on the galaxy.

Judy Kimble
Sex and destiny: the politics of human fertility. by Greer, Germaine. See all formats and editions. Suppressed. Place Hold.

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A well researched look at attitudes towards childbirth, motherhood and fertility across many cultures. Raises an awful lot of questions about how socially constructed these attitudes and mores are. A really thought provoking and insightful book, if it is controversial at times it only highlights how unsettled some of our conventional wisdom on this topic really is. One of Greer's more incisive and to the point books, quite easy to read. flag Like · see review. Nov 22, 2017 Noah Graham rated it liked it. Online version: Greer, Germaine, 1939- Sex and destiny. New York : Harper & Row, ©1984 (OCoLC)654517192. Document Type

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