Procreative Mothers (Sexual Difference) and Child-Free Sisters (Gender)

Feminism and Fertility

Juliet C.W. Mitchell

JESUS COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

ABSTRACT The article considers the changing position of women and the family from the Second World War until today using the UK as its example. It offers a theoretical perspective by setting out to examine the possibility that the rise of second-wave feminism both reflected and spearheaded an aspect of demographic transition to non-replacement populations. It considers the tension between the formation of 'sexual difference' to enable reproduction and what it calls the 'engendering of gender' in lateral relations which are indifferent to procreation. With the achievements of feminism as a political vanguard and the demographic transition as its socioeconomic base, women were no longer defined by the family; their definition ceased to depend on procreation. The article proposes that the new use of the term 'gender' entered the political arena to become a key concept of feminism to indicate non-procreative sexuality and sexual relations that need not be heterosexual or biologically procreative. Judith Butler's well-known suggestion that 'gender' troubles the status quo in a revolutionary manner cannot be sustained. Rather than disturbing the universe, the advent of 'gender' reflects the transition to a new demographic order.

KEY WORDS demographic change ◆ feminism ◆ fertility ◆ gender ◆ sexual difference

In order that the future does not miss out ('pass') on feminism, it is necessary for us to consider what feminism we are able to hand on ('pass on') to the next generation. Why does it seem to be the case that some benefits but little politics are transmitted? Has feminism created or reflected or both, a change in the position of women?

The aim of this article, then, is to consider the relationship of feminism to social change. In particular my concern is second-wave feminism as it

European Journal of Women's Studies Copyright © 2004 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi), 1350-5068 Vol. 11(4): 415–426; DOI: 10.1177/1350506804046812

started in the West in the late 1960s. Although my focus is historical, this is not in any way a historical account; instead I have selected specific instances or events which stand as icons for my thesis. The major social change which concerns me is the demographic transition to non-replacement populations. How far did feminism spearhead this, thus putting politics in command, and how far was its advent a reflection of a wider historical process which had thrown up feminism as one of its effects? The connection between feminism and fertility changes has been well noted (Banks and Banks, 1964). Here, however, I want to suggest that we have omitted half the equation: the fertility decline has not only women (and men) not reproducing so prolifically as hitherto, but it has as its other side the rise to prominence of non-reproductive gender relations which are, to a degree, socially and psychologically autonomous.

The two major concepts which I am interrogating in this enquiry are therefore, on the one hand, the notion of 'sexual difference' which feminism initially deployed to analyse female/male divergence, femininity and masculinity as a necessary minimal difference from each other and, on the other, 'gender' as a more inclusive concept which embraces the sexuality of both hetero- and of same-sex relations, but which is also deployed in a range of places which are not necessarily primarily or determinatively sexual. As Princeton historian Joan Scott once wrote: 'The rise of gender emphasizes an entire system of relationships that may include sex, but is not directly determined by sex, nor directly determining of sexuality' (Scott, 1996: 156).[1]

My suggestion is that the two concepts of 'sexual difference' and 'gender' can be understood as two equally significant dimensions of feminism's relationship to demographic change. The first relates to the psychosocial construction of heterosexual procreative sexuality, and gender to its other side – non-procreative sexuality. Another social trend should be held in tension with the triptych of gender, non-procreative sexuality and population decline: this is the prevalence and increase of sibling support and childcare in the so-called developing world, to which UNICEF has recently drawn anxious attention.

FEMINISM AND FERTILITY DECLINE: A BRIEF RECENT HISTORY

The long and uneven demographic transition will always interlink with changes in sexual and gender relations. What interests me here is the specific moments when a particularly acute transition from high to low fertility interacts both with sexual and gender relations and with active political feminism. I start by mentioning first-wave feminism in the late

19th century in order to give a point of historical reference for second-wave feminism in the latter part of the 20th century. It is important to note that there is no simple equation between fertility decline and feminism – the one can occur without the other. This does not, however, mean that their connection, when it occurs, is incidental or insignificant. The late 19th century in the western world saw the birth rate plummet (Seccombe, 1995). There were many different causes, but most, if not all, were related. Here I am concerned only with the interrelationship between declining fertility and the intensification of demands for equal rights of women made under the political banner of feminism.

The extreme paternalism of Victorian England shifted from a pride in the quantity of children to a demand for the quality of children. There was a sharp decline in fertility and the rise of feminism, which as well as its dominant struggle for the vote, stressed the urgency of effective birth control. Christabel Pankhurst notoriously proclaimed: 'Votes for Women and Chastity for Men'. During the second industrial revolution from 1871 to 1911 there was an absolute fall of 36 percent in marital fertility. Fertility continued to decline until 1931 with the number of fecund women marrying also declining (Szreter, 1996). A century to a century-and-a-quarter ago, the main demands were for equal rights in education, the professions, civic responsibilities and in relations to property and children, and most notoriously, the gaining of the vote – in England first in 1918 and then fully in 1928. The discussion around freeing women into safe and hence restricted sexuality and maternity was central to all issues.

LATERAL RELATIONS AND CHILD-FREE FEMININITY

When the fertility decline of the last decades of the 19th century is analysed, all the explanations for changing birth rates are offered in terms of family practices. My contention is that there is another side to the coin of family demise that needs to be read into the picture. In the hegemonic middle classes, not only are women having fewer children but the opening of education and the professions means that a significant number of women in the same hegemonic social class are not only having *no* children but are not imagining or intending to do so. We need to think about child-free women not as mothers *manquées* but as deploying another part of a feminine psyche – a femininity that comes from a different social practice which therefore in turn makes use of different aspects of the psychic structure which might otherwise only be latent.

Florence Nightingale deplored the absence of a social class of British nurses and admired the French situation in which, thanks to Roman Catholicism, there was already in place a religious population of celibate nursing sisters. We can see what Nightingale achieved as the creation of a

lay sisterhood: the nursing sisters cared for the brotherhood of soldiers. Slightly less obviously, the growing band of women teachers trained to train a new professional elite of girls and young women. On the surface, generations of schoolgirls chanted of their great teachers, the famous pioneers of girls' education, 'Miss Buss and Miss Beale Cupid's darts do not feel, they are not like us, Miss Beale and Miss Buss', thus equating their own sexuality with heterosexuality and marking their teachers as negative – missing out on love as they missed out on procreation. Yet, despite this chant, in fact the girls and their teachers formed two groups relating to each other, not to men. Similarly, it has been argued that there were no models for women's education unless it imitated male education, which the pioneers did not entirely want to do (Strathern, 2000). The ideological framework was either the brotherhoods of male teachers and male students or women in relation to men. However, once again despite this framework, women professionals of all kinds formed a sisterhood, women relating to women. So too did the feminists, who can be seen as the political dimension of this band of women, bonding to each other and demanding to be let into (or respected by and as parallel to) the brotherhood – of soldiers, doctors, university professors, male students.

Job segregation along gender lines is astoundingly prevalent. We must remember how not only this segregation in jobs but also celibacy ruled all the women's professions for more than half the 20th century: women teachers and civil servants of any rank in England were not allowed to be married until the 1950s. Women's friendships, single sisters or friends as 'Auntie' co-parented with the overworked mother – wherever, whenever and however, women (like men) have always formed same-sex groups – which in some languages, which don't have the Anglo-Saxon 'gender', is referred to as 'social sex'. Finding a sisterhood already present in religious orders, both nursing and educational, can help us shift the framework and consider that women entering paid work with industrialization should not be seen as either a regiment of failed mothers or of surrogate men. Their job segregation although the basis for exploitation, is not only a result of the work, but also a precondition of it.

If there were two dimensions both to the population decline during the second industrial revolution of the late 19th century and to its feminism, this was no less true, although somewhat differently, of the second dramatic phase of both in the latter decades of the 20th century. What is the significance of the uneven development of the demographic transition to non-replacement birth rates among the dominant social classes such as we are witnessing everywhere today, but particularly in the 'developed' world, and the similarly uneven development of feminism and the demand for gender equality? Today's demographic transition, the social position of women and feminist political movements are intimately connected – and their connection is important.

NON-PROCREATIVE GENDER

Central to my argument about this connection within second-wave feminism is my contention that the rise of the concept of 'gender' (initially in Anglo-Saxon languages) is an unconscious reflection of a move towards non-reproductive sexual relations, particularly for the highest economic groups. 'Gender' has come to replace 'women', as in 'Gender Studies' vs 'Women's Studies', at exactly that point where the intimate association between women and procreation is tending to become obliterated. It is not, as is commonly argued, that 'gender' allows men in that is significant, it is that 'gender' throws babies out. It is not that 'fatherhood must be reclaimed' but that the welding of true womanhood and maternity and hence of manhood and paternity has become unstuck.

To think of 'women' is to think of 'women and children'; to think of 'gender' is to think of 'men and women' but it is also to think of 'women and women' or 'men and men'. I do not agree with the central contention of Judith Butler's study *Gender Trouble* (see Butler, 1999) or her debates with Nancy Fraser during the 1990s that same-sex relations subvert the centrality and dominance of heterosexuality – they are always (and always have been) its alternative, latent or dominant in different contexts. Butler fails to link the growing acceptance of homosexuality, lesbianism and transgenderism to the prevalence of non-procreative sexuality which is crucial to the demographic transition to non-replacement populations particularly in the western world and in the upper social echelons of the developing world.

Against Butler I would point out that all societies tolerate or institute some version of non-procreative gender relations alongside reproductive heterosexuality; think of nuns and monks, eunuchs and castrati, brotherhoods and sisterhoods. However, what takes place unevenly with industrialization is a growing centrality of non-procreative gender and the relative marginalization of reproduction, either within a society or to other societies, or both. The issue is complicated and no aspect is unique, however, as a generalization we may witness this shift of non-procreative gender from the edge to the centre in changing marriage patterns, declining fertility and reproductive *technology* (as opposed to reproductive *relationships*). A related issue is the feminization of poverty exemplified by the lone mother: the lone mother is the woman whose motherhood is disallowed. Population decline would seem to be an effect not of political-economic systems (capitalism or socialism) but of processes of industrialization.

THE CONCEPT OF 'GENDER'

'Gender' was introduced in the early 1970s to distinguish the acquisition of social attributes from biological ones, for which 'sex' was reserved. 'Gender' addressed the social prescription of which gender can or cannot drive trains. Sex and reproduction were effectively fixed in biology, gender could be changed. This meant that the social practices following reproduction, such as being primary carers, fell under the flexibility of gender roles (see, for instance, Chodorow, 1978) – the processes of reproduction did not. 'Gender' gradually came to cover all relationships which had a sexual element, even if marked by its repression, as among nuns or soldiers: the other sex is present in its absence; or, more dominantly, same-sex relations. 'Gender' is now an inclusive term that ultimately has come to include even biology.

As a new concept, gender did not have a history or a psychology. The history of women was tied to the concept of sexual difference, it was the history of one side of the sexual difference equation and it was utterly bound up in the family; so much so that many texts of second-wave feminism of which Shulamith Firestone's (1971) *The Dialectics of Sex* was, perhaps, only the most far-reaching, proclaimed that women would only be free from oppression when freed from childbirth. Firestone's argument for test-tube babies illustrates the absence of procreative relationships within the rise of reproductive technologies. Thus the argument was made entirely within the terms of the ideology: women were mothers, women were oppressed, not to be oppressed meant not to be mothers or, at most, only part-time mothers. It was this thinking about the interrelationship between women's position and the family (even if the opposition to the equation led to feminism with its demand for women to be child-free or birth-free as in Firestone's account) which was then held to be responsible for a crisis of fatherhood and the decline of the family. An accusation which, I believe, misreads the relationship.

There was indeed an explicit challenge to family values from both the 1960s youth movement and women's liberation groups, but more important was the fact that the presence of the social movements rather than their political challenges signified an alternative, non-intergenerational familial position. I would argue that it was the peer group of the one (the youth/students) and the sisterhood (a lateral same-generation relationship) of the other (women's liberation) that can be seen to indicate an alternative gender position. The women's liberation movement arose in part because women in the youth movements felt excluded from the brotherhoods of which they thought they had formed a part. They formed a sisterhood instead. Sisterhood, like brotherhood, is an organization of non-reproductive relationship – gendered womanhood without children (whether or not there are actual children). In our introduction to *What is*

Feminism? sociologist Ann Oakley and I wrote of the difficulties of sisterhood (Mitchell and Oakley, 1986). Relationships have their pains and pleasures – the point is that these are not the same as reproductive relationships although the actors can be predominantly one or the other or both.

We can select two iconic moments to illustrate the dual aspects – declining reproduction and non-procreation – both of the fertility decline and of feminism. My Anglo-Saxon examples can easily be transposed into others from elsewhere. For the first, at least on the surface level, there is the 1964 publication of *The Feminine Mystique* in the US and soon worldwide; for the second, in Britain, the Ford women machinists' strike for equal pay in 1968.

SEXUAL DIFFERENCE AND *THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE*

In 1964, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*. The book tackled not 'gender' but 'sexual difference' – it challenged the heterosexual relationship which had man as the breadwinner and woman as 'helpmeet' or in Parsonian terminology (which still has relevance) 'instrumental' men out in the world of work and 'expressive' women at home. Far from complementing each other as they were supposed to do, Friedan's research revealed women's distress and discontent with their so-called better part of the deal. Friedan's portrait of frustrated 1950s mothers and housewives in New England suburbia became instantly famous – it addressed the hegemonic familism of patriarchy exemplified by the Boston middle-class women Friedan interviewed. It challenged the world of sexual difference institutionalized in rigid segregation of roles – male breadwinner/female housewife with appropriate psychosocial distinctions. Friedan's book was emblematic of the revolt against the oppression of women in their sexual difference. At least on the surface, *The Feminine Mystique* attacked the side of the equation in fertility decline that relegated women to motherhood, and by implication, proposed their liberation from its exclusive hold. In fact we might wonder how far it spearheaded the underlying socioeconomic shift towards 'Women's Two Roles' to women having two jobs and being instrumental in the labour force and expressive at home.

Sexual difference applies to a psychosocial difference which uses the biological fact that two sexes are (still) needed to reproduce. (Reproductive technology avoids this psychosocial difference.) In her *The Dialectics of Sex* (1971), because she argued that the oppression of women would only end with the obliteration of sexed reproduction, American radical feminist Shulamith Firestone foresaw current reproductive technologies – test-tube babies independent of male progenitors and female procreators.

Her account too, although it 'negatived' the psychosocial dimension of reproduction, was within the framework of 'sexual difference'. Indeed, sexual difference in the service of reproduction was the only framework within which women were seen until the advent of 'gender'. The point was, women were not men. Why not? Because they were mothers. To look for the category 'woman' in the 1960s was not to find them; they were, as Sheila Rowbotham wrote 'hidden from history' (Rowbotham, 1977). The varied and numerous writings that had 'found' the hidden women during first-wave feminism were out of print and unavailable, even unknown. What was there was not women but the family that defined them. In a vituperative attack on my own attempt to deconstruct the family in a 1966 article, 'Women: The Longest Revolution', Quintin Hoare wrote: 'the whole *historical* development of women has been within the family; . . . women have lived and worked within *its* space and time . . . any discussion of the position of women which does *not* start from the family as a mode of her relation with society becomes abstract' (Hoare, 1967: 79).[2] Studies of the family abounded. If women were not mothers or potential mothers, they were nothing. The family, housework and motherhood which were areas outside the domain of politics, hid women. Women's other roles were invisible and remained untheorized. To be a woman could be only to be a mother and a daughter, whatever else a woman did, she did within the range of this framework.

There is, however, another text in *The Feminine Mystique* – one that was first picked up by Simone de Beauvoir. Simone de Beauvoir, the well-established author of *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1947) and a political radical but not at the time of Friedan's book, a feminist, read *The Feminine Mystique* shortly after its appearance. De Beauvoir published in *Les Temps modernes* Friedan's chapter on magazine images of women during the Second World War: teams of women were working, driving the ambulances, producing munitions and so forth – no motherhood, not even lone motherhood, was in sight in the iconography that recorded and encouraged them.

We know that in England many women following the Second World War were happy to leave employment and enter the feminine mystique of the 1950s. This does not, however, mean that our analysis should follow suit – understanding women only as wives and mothers. The other side of women, the side of sisterhood, of non-procreative sexuality, had been evident in the war. As with the critique of the mystique of motherhood, it too contributed its psychology to the fertility decline. The Second World War offers a crucible for understanding this second dimension.

GENDER, WAR AND WORK: THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND THE 1968 FORD WOMEN MACHINISTS' STRIKE

In fact, contrary to expectation and also contrary to the general assumptions of hindsight, fertility did not decline in the war (Kiernan et al., 1998). It had declined in the preceding years of the Depression. One suggested explanation for wartime fertility compared with the prewar period is that the late age of prewar marriage made people realize that it was now or never if they were to have children. Pro-natalist policies were also encouraged from the 1930s. But also during the war, there was good social provision for children. The war provided both high employment for all and the welfare facilities of childcare so women could work. These latter may have been the main reasons for relatively high fertility during the war as where these have persisted or been reintroduced, for example in France today, the birth rate has been maintained (France where it is 2:2 in distinction to Italy's 1:2 [Kiernan et al., 1998]). What is important is that although, for whatever reason, wartime women were reproducing, to be a woman was other than a maternal definition. 'Rosie the riveter' was not a surrogate man, a lesbian or a mother *manquée* – she was a woman at work – with other women. Women have always worked; women have always formed sisterhoods, be it in the harem or in feminist struggles, or had the potential for such relationships. They parallel brotherhoods and are, to some degree independent of the patriarchate or an autonomous feature within it.[3]

It is commonplace to argue that the worldwide phenomenon of unequal pay despite egalitarian legislation in 'advanced' countries can be explained at least in part by gender job segregation: women are doing different and hence lower-status, lower-paid jobs. What the analysis fails to point out is that women as a group pre-exists this distribution: girls and boys are differentiated as children in relation to each other and they organize themselves along gender lines irrespective of their future role as differentiated parents. Women may like working with women, men with men – their same-sex friendships were set down in childhood. Rather than the job categorizing the worker, the worker is predisposed to same-gendered work not through the quality of sex (caring, delicate fingers, low ambition, etc.) but through same-gendered relationships. Women's work is not suited to women qua some psychological sex difference emanating from actual or potential motherhood, but because of the pre-existent social relation of women along gender-different lines, through the lateral relations of girls to girls and boys to boys. It is then downgraded simply because the workers are women.

The Ford women's strike for equal pay, which was one of the initiators of second-wave feminism in England, is emblematic. Women machinists were doing essentially the same job as men machinists – but the

argument was made that the job was somewhat different in accordance with gender skills. As I write, women who maintain the Cambridge college to which I belong are paid less than men who do so, on the grounds that women work indoors and men work outdoors because of their gender propensities. Although outdoors/indoors, front-seats/back-seats of cars are attached as gender attributes, these I believe only play on the social gender distinction already in place: women would not machine front-seats or work outdoors because they are socially constructed to form a group with other women – often still called 'other girls' indicating not just class denigration but the gender provenance in a childhood of girls and boys. That much is recognized, what is not taken into account is that this social group is not constructed along the line of women as mothers.

SISTERHOOD IS ALWAYS PRESENT

My argument is that these lateral gender groups, as distinct from the sexual difference derogated from maternity and paternity, are, like the latter, set up in earliest childhood, through differentiation of siblings, peers, schoolchildren. They are already present to assist job segregation or the segregation of mental illness, of criminality or the formation of feminist movements. This can be seen if we look at the actors who initiated second-wave feminism. Feminism highlights a propensity to emphasize lateral gender difference over vertical sexual difference. Being girls together rather than mothers of the nation might also be traceable to the Second World War. That the 1960s saw the introduction of an effective means of birth control, not necessarily directly linked, the population decline which followed is only one side of the equation – the other is the exceptional suitability of the young people concerned to form non-reproductive groups along gender-differentiated lines. It was not only that Friedan's 1950s mothers had been war-workers, it was also that their children were socially cared for in peer groups. 'British Restaurants' where even young children could eat on their own without their parents, daycare and crèches, the evacuations of cohorts of school children, all provide an extraordinary resource for contemplating peer group interaction, children who identified with each other as well as with their absent parents. The evacuation programmes referred to the evacuees not as children of their parents, but of the nation – 'our children' fed with free national orange-juice, milk, sodium malt and cod-liver oil.[4]

The Second World War demonstrates very vividly the tension between a need to produce parents and the creation of strong lateral gender cohorts. Women have a social and psychological history other than the potential motherhood that it is claimed defines them. With the

demographic transition this other history is coming to the forefront, it needs feminism to take control of it. There is an urgent need not only to hand on, but to develop further a critical (and self-critical) politics of feminisms. Virginia Woolf rightly contended that we need to look back through our mothers – we do. We need also to look forward through our daughters. But both backwards and forwards and in the present, we need also to look sideways through sisters, peers and friends.

NOTES

Earlier versions of this article were given as talks at the 'Women and Society' conference, University of Seoul, Korea, 2003 and Panteion University, Athens, 2004.

1. Scott has recently argued against the use of 'gender', in her revised preface to *Feminists Theorize the Political* (Butler and Scott, 2003).
2. For a brilliant analysis of this vituperation, see Swindells and Jardine (1990).
3. On this point, I disagree with Carole Pateman's interesting analysis (Pateman, 1990); see Mitchell (2003).
4. For a description of the importance of this for the subsequent generation of feminists, see Steedman (1987).

REFERENCES

Banks, J.A. and O. Banks (1964) *Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
Butler, J. (1999) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Inversion of Identity,* 10th Amnesty rev. edn. Routledge, London. (Orig. pub. 1992.)
Butler, J. and J. Scott (2003) *Feminists Theorize the Political*, rev. edn. London: Routledge. (Orig. pub. 1992.)
Chodorow, N. (1978) *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
De Beauvoir, S. (1947) *Le Deuxième Sexe*. Paris: Gallimard. (English edn, *The Second Sex*, New York: Knopf, 1952.)
Firestone, S. (1971) *The Dialectics of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution.* London: Jonathan Cape.
Friedan, F. (1964) *The Feminine Mystique.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Hoare, Quintin (1967) 'On Women: The Longest Revolution', *New Left Review* 41 (Jan./Feb.): 78–81.
Kiernan, K., J. Lewis and H. Land (1998) *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Britain: From Footnote to Front Page.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Mitchell, J. (2003) *Siblings: Sex and Violence.* Cambridge: Polity Press.
Mitchell, J. and A. Oakley (1986) *What is Feminism?* Oxford: Blackwell.
Pateman, C. (1990) *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory.* Cambridge: Polity Press.
Rowbotham, S. (1977) *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It*. London: Pluto Press.
Scott, J. (1996) 'Gender as a Category of Analysis', *Feminism and History.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Seccombe W. (1995) *Weathering the Storm: Working-Class Families from the Industrial Revolution to the Fertility Decline*. London: Verso.
Steedman, C. (1987) *Landscape of a Good Woman*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
Strathern, M. (2000) Talk to 'Women Education Study Day' conference, Gender Studies, University of Cambridge, 25 November.
Swindells, J. and L. Jardine (1990) *What's Left? Women in Culture and the Labour Movement*. London and New York: Routledge.
Szreter, S. (1996) *Fertility, Class and Gender in Britain, 1860–1940*, Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy and Society in Past Time. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Juliet Mitchell *is Professor of Psychoanalysis and Gender Studies and convenor of the Centre for Gender Studies at the University of Cambridge, UK. She is also a full member of the International Association of Psychoanalysis. Her most recent books are* Siblings: Sex and Violence *(Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003) and* Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria and the Effects of Sibling Relations on the Human Condition *(London: Penguin, 2000). Her earlier* Psychoanalysis and Feminism *(London: Penguin, 1974) was reprinted with a new introduction in 2000. Address: Jesus College, Cambridge CB5 8BL, UK. [email: jcwm2@cam.ac.uk]*

◆