

discussion

On Juliet Mitchell's

'Women: The longest revolution' (NLR 40)

In NLR 40 some thirteen and a half thousand words, rich in quotation from Marx, Engels and Lenin, from Louis Althusser, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Talcott Parsons, were used by Juliet Mitchell to back up her advocacy of four reforms: equal education, free state provision of oral contraception, legalization of homosexuality (strange demand in an article on women, considering that it is only *male* homosexuality which is illegal in Britain; and why should Cuba be singled out for Juliet Mitchell's indignation?), and the abolition of illegitimacy (just like in Sweden and Russia!).

These reforms are of course unexceptionable, excellent measures, measures which anybody from the Liberal Party leftwards should support. But however does it come about that after all the work and thought that clearly went into Juliet Mitchell's article, and despite the correctness of its underlying premise—that is to say, that the whole area she sets out to discuss has been neglected shamefully in socialist thinking—that nonetheless the result is so banal and falls so far short of her intentions. There is clearly nothing wrong with Juliet Mitchell's intentions. But I think that there is something very wrong indeed with her basic assumptions and her method, and it is that which explains both the anti-climax of her conclusion and many of the inconsistencies in the article as a whole. It is because the subject is one of the utmost importance that it is necessary to analyse carefully where she goes wrong.

In the first part of her article, Juliet Mitchell criticizes the 'economist approach' of the classical socialist writings on women—that is, their discussion of them in terms of the family, and of their participation in economic production. She writes: 'the position of women in the works of Marx and Engels remains dissociated from, or subsidiary to, a discussion of the family, which is in turn subordinated as merely a precondition(!) of private property. Their solution(!) retains this overly economic stress, or enters a realm of dislocated speculation'. This initial rejection structures the whole article.

We are warned that the article will not provide an historical narrative of women's position. But what, in fact, happens is that she *excludes* history from her analysis. How can one analyse either the position of women today, or writings on the subject abistorically? It is this which prevents her from realizing that the whole *historical* development of women has been within the family; that women have worked and lived within *its* space and time. We may all agree that her place should not be there, but it is. Any discussion of the position of women which does *not* start from the family as the mode of her relation with society becomes abstract. Furthermore, human history is based on production and relations of production. This is equally true for men and women, and hence the 'economist' approach of Marx and Engels is *the basis* for a discussion of the position of women. What specifies the position of women in history until the industrial revolution is that her participation in production was mediated through the family.

However, the Marxist tradition can and should be criticized for its failure to understand the specificity of women. Juliet Mitchell's instinct is correct here, but since, she does not define their specificity in socio-economic terms she falls into simple empirical description. The Marxist tradition can be criticized in particular for its mistaken identification of the social role of women, in treating them as if they were a class; for workers or peasants are exploited actively, at their place of work, while women's subordination is a passive one—they are appropriated together with other property. The central weakness of her whole analysis is that she bases it on a historical categories: fundamental, marginal, etc.

Her own article is, in fact, itself an unwitting proof that it is impossible to achieve a global analysis of the position of women *outside* the premises of classical Marxist discussion. For her discussion too moves from the family (sexuality, socialization, and reproduction) to productive work. Failing to situate women historically in socio-economic terms, her position remains the traditional feminist one, which is in its essence moralistic: the history of women is presented as a sequence of oppression by the male sex.

Because she sees the whole question in terms of men oppressing women, it is not surprising that she does not understand the emphasis that Marx and Engels placed on women's work in industry (summed up in the excellent passage from Engels which she quotes with disapproval on p. 14–15). Surely the difference between a woman-worker and a woman-peasant is that the work in the first case is dissociated from the family and is *socially* hers.

Women are not oppressed by men—they are *socially* oppressed; this distinction is methodologically essential, even though the two in fact coincide. The totality of the exploitation of women transcends their relationship with men and the appropriation of their work. At the beginning of her article, Juliet Mitchell claims that women cannot be exploited like other social groups, since they are essential 'to the human condition'. This is not good enough, for it is equally true that workers are essential to capitalists, peasants to landlords, etc.

'The reasons for the historic weakness of the notion (of the family) is that the family has never been analysed structurally—in terms of its different functions. It was a hypostasized entity: the abstraction of its abolition corresponds to the abstraction of its conception.' Thus she sets up her structures in opposition to the 'abstract' notion of the family in Marx and Engels: and, not surprisingly, in doing so she loses the notion of the family altogether. Her method is more than a method—it demonstrates her whole ideological orientation. She divides women's condition into structures, so that the particular 'combination' of these constitutes at any moment that condition. This method is not a movement of the parts to the whole and back—not at any moment does she provide a totalizing synthesis, so that even in her conclusion the structures remain separate. The result is not only non-Marxist (that is, non-social, ahistorical), it is also sterile.

'A revolutionary movement must base its analysis on the uneven development of each, and attack the weakest link in the combination.' When one looks more closely at the structures, what does one find? The advent of the industrial revolution should have liberated women, but it didn't; the relaxation of sex taboos seems the weakest link, but is actually absorbed into the fun-ethos of the capitalist market; the socialization of children used not to be woman's primary role, but today it is. To understand how all this has happened, that is to unite all these structures into a meaningful totality, one needs history. Having failed at the beginning to explain the *social* (in contrast to individual) subjugation of women, and since her analysis does not bring her any nearer to such an understanding, she finally falls into reformism.

Juliet Mitchell's refusal to connect women as a social group historically with the family leads her to odd conclusions both on the past and on the future. Her discussion of the experience of post revolutionary Russia is an example. In fact, the liberalizing laws of the October Revolution did not in the first instance signify the sexual liberation of women, but rather the abolition of the family. However, Juliet Mitchell tells us: 'Women still retained the right and obligation to work, but because these gains had not been integrated (!) into the earlier attempts to abolish the family and free sexuality, no general(!) liberation has occurred.' This explains precisely nothing about what went wrong with regard to the question of women in the Soviet Union. And as far as the future is concerned, her suggestions fall comfortably into the domain of the English liberal tradition—against all her intentions. Thus women should not necessarily be mothers, but only if they wish to; the family should be merely one option among others, but at the same time should remain a social institution; equal education, contraceptives, kindergartens, should be made available. As if women *choose* to be mothers! To restructure society so that such a choice would be possible, one would have to go further than Juliet Mitchell ever imagines.

The family used to be an economic unit—today it is not. On the basis of this, she suggests that the idea of the family being a form of private property is incorrect today. Because she does not understand the concept in the writings of Marx and Engels, she equates no family with a state of common property—and uses a quotation from Marx incorrectly

to make the point (p. 35). She does not see, therefore, that merely to replace monogamy by a plurality of marriages is to retain private property relations in the future socialist society. (The idea that the abolition of the family could be by-passed by changing its form is analogous to Proudhon's scheme for workers to buy the whole of France out of their savings, which he understood as abolishing private property: see Engels' letter to Marx in Selected Correspondence p. 34.) But Juliet Mitchell never admits that the family is a form of private property—hence she contrasts administrative measures with free choice, the social with the individual. Thus she says that 'any society will require some institutionalized and social recognition of personal relationship', without explaining who requires that, and why. And although she does recognize the family as a social institution, she really sees marriage in our society as a free choice of man and woman, she confuses the relationship between the sexes with marriage.

But all this flows naturally from her ahistoricity, or rather from her evolutionist standpoint. Society becomes a 'long passage from Nature to Culture', and socialism is defined (!) by the unity of equality and freedom. In this view of history and society, Marx might never have existed.

What one can ultimately hold against Marx and Engels is that they were not more interested in women, that they did not see the question of women's position as being very important (which is why they give them a merely symbolic value whenever it comes to the point). But if they were wrong in failing to understand the importance of the emancipation of women to the class struggle, Juliet Mitchell certainly does not make any clearer why this was.

Perhaps I should make it clear that my concern is not primarily with methodology: it is with the problem of the emancipation of women. The history which could provide an analysis of the position of women and a context for their emancipation (politicization) is not some Hegelian concept—it is a concrete history which still largely remains to be written and made. And this history can only become concrete if its basis is the class struggle, subsuming feminism and at the same time transcending it. It is only within the praxis of a hegemonic movement that it is possible to pose 'demands' which cannot be absorbed by the existing ruling class—i.e. which are not reformist.

Quintin Hoare

Juliet Mitchell writes:

It is difficult to take issue with Quintin Hoare's criticisms of my article. He seems to have totally misunderstood my work, largely to have misconstrued the application of Althusser's theses, and at least partially to have failed to see the meaning of a crucial area of Marx's thought. It is pointless for me to rebut every random charge and correct