

REVIEWS

purpose. This is twofold: to indict Western cultural imperialism on the specific terrain of gender, sexuality and fertility; and despite repeated disclaimers, to place a cat among the pigeons in current feminist debates.

The elusive but recurring focus of the book is the relationship of sexual, marital, and familial patterns to the social regulation of population. Greer's basic argument is that societies have 'always' struggled to 'control the balance of population and resources'. The twentieth century programmes of the imperialist powers to promote fertility regulation through abortion, mechanical contraception, and sterilisation should not be seen as leadership to generate 'consciousness of a global responsibility' but rather as the latest phase in a long history of destructive colonial intervention into other cultures. 'Among the dubious achievements of the twentieth century, along with total war and the neutron bomb, will go our character as the sterilising civilisation.' But her attempts to explain this drive to sterilise the wretched on the earth — as a result of cultural alienation, ethnological imperative, racist ideology, the rise of the modern state — are a complete mishmash of material from all over the place. She lurches from genuine insights to gross analytical blunders. Yet I think the book should be taken seriously in its attempt to pose the question.

The most striking argument of the book is its celebration of the sphere of kinship relations: a sphere which has always been the source of collective strength and protection for women; one in which the (affinal) role of marriage is to link social groups as much as two individuals; and a central site of regulation of the delicate mechanism of fertility, sexual behaviour and the reproduction of 'cultural identity'. Greer points to the apparent resilience of this space in 'traditional' (ie, agrarian-based) societies, in the face of systematic onslaught by colonialism, evangelical religions, (although Islam gets off lightly here) and capitalism. The cutting edge of the book lies in its detail of the relentless assault on this sphere by family planners, the population lobby, national governments and Western cultural imperialism with its 'model of recreational sex'.

Despite her crude collapse of vastly different cultures, social relations and religions of the Third World into an amorphous sludge of generalities; despite her simplistic paradigm of 'traditional-modern' society, and the absence of any

sense of history, dynamism, or even contradiction in the world at large, I think that Greer has thrown a spotlight on a vital dimension of cultural imperialism. This point has long been made by women of African and Asian origin and descent, but it has not yet been sufficiently heard or understood in the Western Left.

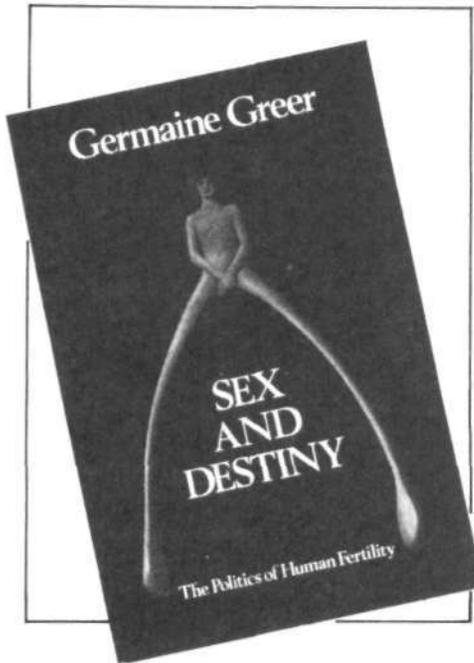
So what does she have to say to feminists? Greer is dealing with many subjects which (mainly white) Western feminism has not touched, and she has a global outlook which is sadly lacking from much of British feminism. There is no doubt that she is throwing a casual challenge to Western feminism, whose 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) was the principal expression of the familial and societal network of women, itself one of the essential cohesive elements in any society and a necessary haven 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.



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 she is not qualified to handle; specialists could take her to task on grounds which threaten to discredit her arguments. She could have written a shorter, cheaper, and less pretentious paperback which would have achieved a wider audience and still suited her political

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, sterility, 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

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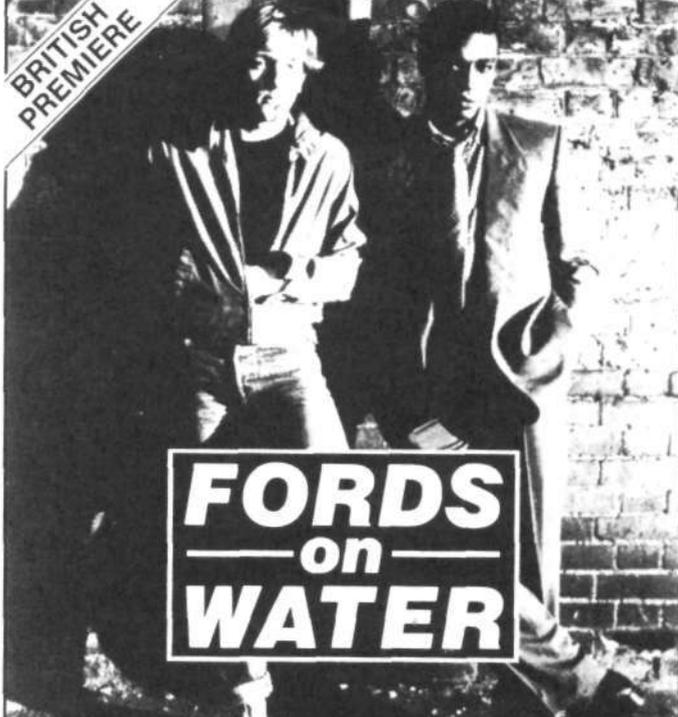
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