

Jean Grimshaw talks to Phyllis Chesler

## Mother Nature

Most feminists have rejected the notion that motherhood should necessarily be central to women's lives, or that a woman has 'failed' as a woman if she does not have a child. Drawing on her experience as a consultant in custody cases in North America, feminist Phyllis Chesler has argued, however, that feminists have not been sufficiently aware of the extent to which women are commonly deprived of the children they *do* have, on the grounds that they are 'unfit' mothers.

In *Sacred Bond: Motherhood Under Siege* (Virago, £6.99) she tackles the issue of so-called 'surrogate motherhood' and adoption. Discussing her work with me, she suggested that, in many respects, adoption is similar to surrogacy and that there is an increasing 'traffic' in babies in which white, middle-class men with professional, legal and financial power can, to use her own words, 'strip-mine the fertility' of poor or powerless women to produce children who carry their own genes. Commercial surrogacy is banned in Britain, but it has been widely practised in the United States.

Chesler documents her involvement as consultant and activist in the case of 'Baby M'. Mary Beth Whitehead had agreed by contract to bear a child for another couple, the Sterns, for payment, using the husband's sperm. After the birth, however, she decided that she did not wish to relinquish the baby and refused to accept any money.

When the baby was four months old (and still being breast-fed), she was forcibly removed by court order from Mary Beth and handed over to the Sterns. After a protracted legal battle, the supreme court of New Jersey ruled that commercial surrogacy constituted illegal 'baby-selling'. Bill Stern, the genetic father, retained custody on the grounds that this was in the 'best interest' of the child, but Mary Beth was awarded liberal visitation rights.

Chesler describes the ways

in which Mary Beth was vilified and branded as an 'unfit' mother, and how public sympathy, including that of many feminists, was with the Sterns. Paradoxically, Mary Beth was seen as 'unfit' because she wanted to *keep* the baby. She was seen as 'bad' both for having agreed to the contract in the first place *and* for wishing to break it and she was described as 'mentally unstable' because she was over-attached to the baby.

Chesler argues that the fundamental reason why she was judged 'unfit' was that she was not affluent, not middle class, not part of a 'professional couple' like the Sterns. In adoption, and in surrogacy and custody battles, the assumption is commonly made that an affluent, middle-class lifestyle, (often one which only men can finance), is automatically 'better' for a child than a less affluent one in which the child remains with the biological mother. The question of the child's tie to the biological mother is central to *Sacred Bond*.

Chesler says: 'We have to get a lot more tolerant of diverse experiences of mothering and of motherhood and we should not put women up against the wall.' She is critical of the tendency to 'pathologise' working-class or black mothers whose styles of mothering may be very different from those of the middle class. But she does not merely want to argue for such tolerance.

She disagrees with the way that much feminist writing has firmly separated the issue of child-bearing from child-rearing and has implied that the biological tie to the mother is relatively unimportant. She argues that the bond between the 'biological' mother (the mother who was pregnant and gave birth) and the child is of primary importance. But what kind of a 'bond' is this? Chesler is very clear that she does not think that the 'bond' between mother and child entails the need for constant maternal presence or a single maternal caretaker, she believes, for example,



**Mother's pride: But is it the bond eternal?**

that 'each child needs at least 10 adult caretakers'.

She also agrees that adoptive mothers may feel closely 'bonded' to their infants and that not all birth-mothers feel like this but, nevertheless, she maintains: 'At the moment the woman gives birth to a child, she is bonded with that child. She has done the nine months. Nobody else is bonded to that child.'

She believes that the

mother-bond is 'eternal' and that all birth-mothers and children who are separated from each other will suffer some sort of psychological damage. But Chesler is unclear about what she really supposes the nature of that bond to be. She seems to think that it is a 'tie' which is simply dictated by 'nature', that it can never be broken and that its maintenance is essential to the welfare of

mother and child.

It is clear that men *have* abused their power over women to claim custody and that notions of an 'unfit' mother have been used against women. It is clear that forms of commercial surrogacy, in which a woman's uterus is regarded as little more than a type of property which is 'rented out' to a man in order that he can bear a genetically related child, are immensely problematic. It is clear that adoption can be abused. It is clear that if a birth-mother wishes to keep her child, she should, if possible, be enabled to do so. But I do not see why, in order to oppose these abuses, we need to insist on an 'eternal' tie, dictated by nature, between a birth-mother and her child.

In so far as there is a 'bond' between birth-mothers and their children this must surely depend upon context. Its importance will depend on many other circumstances and in some it may shrink to vanishing point. 'Nature', or the facts of pregnancy and birth, cannot determine its meaning, nor dictate that it is eternal.

There is perhaps a paradox here. Chesler is rightly concerned with the ways in which both children and the uteruses of women are seen as forms of 'property' which the affluent can buy from those who are poorer or less powerful. But the theory of the eternal 'mother-bond' itself seems to suggest that many women have a 'proprietary' investment in the children they bear. They have 'done the nine months', they have a right to their 'own' children.

To assert this right may at times be a necessary strategy to combat the coercive and oppressive removal of children from their birth mothers. But the language of the 'mother-bond', of 'rights' and of one's 'own' children does not provide an adequate language for talking about the needs of children as well as about the rights of mothers. It may even divert our attention from the complexity of the issues surrounding questions of child-

care, custody and the needs of children.

It is increasingly common now for people to live in households which comprise complex collections of both 'biological' and 'non-biological' relationships. Not all women or men who parent or care for children to whom they are not biologically related have had 'coercive' relationships with the birth-mother, nor do they see all children as a form of 'property'. I am sure Chesler would agree with this. But a simple insistence on the rights of the birth-mother or on the 'bonding' of the birth-mother with her child doesn't seem to get us far in thinking about these complex questions. Nor does it

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help us to think through how we are to care for children in ways that do not see children as the 'property' of *either* women or men.

The idea of the 'mother-bond' could even be used in ways that work against women's interests although she does not see her view as having implications for the abortion debate. 'I do not' she says, 'see the foetus as a person.' But it is not clear how the two can be so easily disconnected. If the bond begins during pregnancy, at what point does it start? If the mother is irrevocably damaged by the removal of the baby, why not by the removal of the foetus?

This is dangerous territory. Chesler is right that we need to fight forms of abuse which forcibly deprive mothers of their children, or use money and power to trade in babies and in female reproduction. But we are not helped by doing this in a language which itself veers uncomfortably close to those abuses which it is opposing - a language which can far too easily imply the sorts of 'connections' between mothers and children by which so many women have been trapped in the past. •