

THE FEMALE WORLD FROM A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Jessie Bernard. Bloomington, Indiana:
Indiana University Press, 1987.

Teresa O'Brien

Jessie Bernard's book, *The Female World from a Global Perspective*, is an eclectic blend of sociology and politics, presented on a number of different levels which sometimes comfortably intertwine, sometimes not. It presents a theoretical position on women as part of a separate world. It contains as well a series of arguments and illustrative cases on the advantages (or otherwise) or separatist versus integrationist policies. This is not the same as the first level; one can argue that women should have the chance to develop themselves in a separate group where appropriate, given the fact of male dominance in many parts of our society, without accepting Bernard's position that the female world is separate from that of men. The book is also an overview of political events, UN strategies for female development, the feminist movement and its effects throughout the world, and of the major international women's meetings and their consequences. Finally, it is a series of illustrative, although disparate, case studies which serve to highlight the author's own theoretical position.

That the author is genuinely concerned with the future of women is always obvious: what are the best strategies for development; what place should women's issues hold in the overall scheme of things; can we have equitable integration without being co-opted into a male world; must separation lead to marginalization of women's issues? These questions straddle the entire book, as the author not only gives us a perspective on the female world but attempts to map out a paradigm which might provide some answers. A widely-travelled writer, Bernard draws on her experiences to illustrate the questions she advances and possible solutions. She has moved between Washington intellectual salons and international women's meetings, from Calcutta and Beijing to US development offices. The book, she tells us, is a view of the "2.5 billion females on this

planet" at a precise moment of time in a rapidly changing world.

Bernard argues that her own perspective is slanted in the direction of the female world as an entity in its own right, with an intrinsic logic of its own. All over the world women and men have lived together, produced children, may have cared for each other on a personal level; nevertheless, all over that same world, on a political level, "four times more female than male children are malnourished; two-thirds of the illiterates of the world are females, female-headed households are creating a new class of the poor worldwide."

Separation and integration are already part of the female-male relationship, just as major political and economic issues are re-enacted in the everyday lives of people. This dualism is reflected in domination and subordination, in the false dichotomy between public and private issues. One could argue that these issues cannot be tackled on a one-dimensional level, that neither class nor gender alone can adequately serve in the formation of a paradigm. Despite the material base of class, Bernard chooses to concentrate on gender as the major explanatory variable, resulting, she says, in the existence of two separate worlds.

It is, of course, true that women have many common life experiences bearing and rearing children, and that a biological fact has broad social implications. But just as obviously, women with men have played a huge part in the production process. Besides, as she tells us, women in many parts of the world are now spending less and less time on child-rearing and much more in the labour force. She acknowledges the fact that differences among females in life expectancy, child-bearing, child care and household size reflect enormous disparities in the world in which they live but "whatever the nature of the life course in the female world may be, women everywhere are not only shaped by it to contribute their part to the pattern but they are also shaped to find it tolerable."

Thus, there is at the same time a view of women as a separate, dynamic body, and a few moments later, a frustrating assumption of women as a passive entity, moulded by a male world. She talks of the different spaces men and women occupy, for example, men in Ghana in soccer

stadiums and bars, women in Church activities. I found myself vividly recalling the pictures in Pat Mahoney's book *Schools for the Boys*—of boys straddling fences, hanging from tree limbs, spread across the road, and of girls tucked away in corners. One can empathize when Bernard says "how isolated from one another the two worlds may be." Yet she goes further and tells us that even when men and women are working side by side, they still inhabit separate worlds, that "female and male children sitting side by side in a school room are not attending the same school." While we do know that different patterns of interaction between teachers and children may result in different outcomes for girls and boys, can we ignore the interaction between the two and conclude, as Bernard does, that "the genderised girl graduates in the separate adult female world?"

Bernard herself, in another part of her book, writes against this passive, stagnant view of women as victims of a socialization process over which they have no control. The women who are the actors in her many illustrative cases are not pawns of extrinsic forces but women who are very definitely taking control and expanding their niches.

She argues that the work women do throughout the world is different from the work that men do. Women tend to care for the children, for the household. But does this mean that "men and women live not only in separate psychological and social worlds but also in spatially different worlds?" In the large factories of China, Korea and Taiwan do women and men occupy different spaces? In Africa, where women produce 70% of the food and do 75% of the agricultural work, do men and women occupy different spaces? Is her theory only applicable in certain rural areas? The book provides us with no answers to these questions and the cases presented serve only to highlight the separateness for which she argues.

She tells us that female infants born in low-income economies have life-expectancies only two-thirds as long as infant girls born in richer economies. Yet this statistic involves two variables, gender and wealth, or resources. Likewise, within a country in the western world, we know that low income families have similarly poor health statistics as the ones she quotes for females from a global per-

spective. Native people in many parts of Canada fare very poorly in terms of health and wealth and life chances compared with non-Natives. To confront this issue only in terms of gender will simply not allow us to adequately analyse it.

That many economic and social arrangements have served men at the expense of women is not at issue. But patriarchy does not exist in a social vacuum. One has only to look at the exploitation by multinational companies all over the world to recognize the fact that economic and political structures and the resulting class situations have a major effect on the distribution of resources.

The Female World from a Global Perspective gives the impression of women all over the world as a separate entity from men, of there being two worlds. Unfortunately, this picture is not a refutation of previous male biases, but is rather a mirror image — only now males become invisible except as a source of women's problems. That the female world has to be made visible is obviously necessary. We need to know basic statistical and sociological information about women, but garnering this information on the preconception of dual, disparate cultures will ultimately lead to a false sense of reality.

It is perhaps Part Two of the book which is most rewarding and interesting. Here Bernard analyses the pros and cons of working for a better world for women by the use of separate or integrationist policies. She draws on a wealth of information, statistics, theories and analyses of real events; the result is a very valuable contribution to an area all too often ignored.

She points out that the separatist policy in development programmes for women, as it has been practiced, is not truly sepa-

ratist but takes instead a male-defined form characterized by poor staffing and financing, and low priority, and subject to male control — regardless of the political inclinations of the government. It is unfortunate that this is explained by the functionalist argument that "In many parts of the world, leftist movements were wooing the support even of women. For women were *needed* for a variety of services" (my emphasis). Again, one is given the impression of a large group of passive females shunted in and out of jobs and positions as the system dictates or needs them. Is it not rather unfair to generalize that all governments, whether left-wing or otherwise, are always so self-serving?

While the separatist policy could and did lead to marginalization and isolation, it could also provide a power base for women, a chance to learn and develop skills which would help them in their subsequent participation in mixed groups. Separate projects could also provide more personal support and encouragement for women. Integrationist policies, while overcoming some of the negative consequences mentioned above, could also be problematic, a major negative here being the "hazard it presents for co-option". She cites typical problems that might arise in male-female gatherings, where men tend to dominate the agenda and the outcome. Since women do not enter into these deliberations on an equal footing, equitable integration seems to be often impossible, women gaining little and usually losing their identity.

Yet separation may be a necessary transition in order to give women a chance to increase their social power. Again, one is reminded of recent research on the benefits of girls-only schools, rather than co-

education for females, as a sphere for gaining control and identity before having to confront the real world. This argument is indeed very plausible, but the case studies Bernard cites point up the fragility of such organizations; while women did come to feel more confident, in "Latin America, women's organizations... have little experience in labour unions and political parties."

As women all over the world have tried to come together to address their problems, Bernard brings us through the trials and tribulations endemic to the building of the women's movement. We are confronted with endless scenarios of men organizing women's conferences, of co-opted females arguing for the necessity to include Zionism, Iranian politics or whatever. We are also confronted with the uneasy realization that our feminist movement was perceived by many others as a form of western feminist dictatorship, that many women from the Third World did feel reduced to passive accommodating audiences for western feminists.

Gradually there emerges the present picture of women really getting to know each other, opening up communication systems, providing translations, and networking. The sad tale of political manipulation at both the Mexico and Copenhagen UN World Conferences gives way to the more optimistic note that, while the Nairobi Conference certainly did not change all that, at least most of the more than 350 items in the final document dealt with women's issues specifically. The book ends on a note of practical optimism when Bernard talks of a "world of women becoming well prepared to achieve equitable integration with — not into — the male world."

THE COMING OF WORLD WAR THREE, VOLUME I: FROM PROTEST TO RESISTANCE/THE INTERNATIONAL WAR SYSTEM

Dimitrios I. Roussopoulos. Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1986.

Deborah Jurdjevic

Dimitrios I. Roussopoulos has written a troublesome book. One wants to welcome any effort toward raising political con-

sciousness which sustains our sense of social responsibility. But however imminent our demise, we read *The Coming of World War Three* with certain pragmatic concerns: what is the point of the book, how certain are its arguments, for whom is it being written?

Roussopoulos' thesis seems straightforward enough: not enough is being done to prevent World War III. It will happen. If this is not only the starting point, but the final verdict, one wonders to what end the work has been presented to the public. The title doesn't help. *The Coming of*

World War Three, Volume 1 (a second volume follows) conjures up an image of a committed author, churning away until the very holocaust overwhelms him.

If one can come to terms with an historical approach to disarmament issues, written with the supposition that there is no future, then, there are several strengths to Roussopoulos' study. The first strength is the historical method itself. Roussopoulos offers no example without ample context. The second and third parts of this three-part book trace the development of anti-war protest groups. Part two focuses