

Phyllis Chesler and Incorrect Feminism

by Michael Curtis



I shall be telling this with a sigh. She took the road less travelled, and that has made all the difference. She never bothers with people she dislikes; that's why the lady is not a tramp.

Polarization and partisan acrimony are inherent in all organizations. In the famous *Federalist Paper* No. 10, James Madison regarded factions as inevitable, and stated that people will continue to form alliances with others who are or feel similar to themselves. It has always been puzzling that commentators have tended to regard feminism as if it were a united monolithic movement rather than one divided, as all other organizations, by passion, interest or ambition. More correct is the analysis by Phyllis Chesler in her book, *A Politically Incorrect Feminist*, in its discussion of 20th century American leaders of the feminist movement, some of

whom she describes as noble, self-sacrificing, and generous, and others she regards as confrontational women and lunatics who do not treat each other in the movement with respect or compassion. Chesler minces no words, and she is formidable, intrepid, courageous, and opinionated. Her book is like the curate's egg, part good and fascinating, part suspicious in its acceptance of gossip about other feminists. She wants to save feminism for true believers.

Phyllis Chesler, emerita professor of psychology and women's studies at CUNY, the City University of New York, is well known as an activist and author on various topics, especially for her account of her astonishing short marriage to an Afghan man and sad experience in Kabul before she could escape. Now aged 79, she tells something of her background, coming from a family of Jewish working-class immigrants, her cold mother, and her sometimes brutal father. She suggests that her early treatment made her an individualist, a loner, but she is forthright in self-revelation, including her liaisons with men and women, and two abortions. The book is a mixture of analysis, autobiography and gossip, thoughts about feminism, concern about mental health professions that stigmatized women, criticism of violence in the Muslim world, and disapproving of left-wing feminists who blame the West for all problems and focus on class warfare. Chesler deals with the difficulties of divorced women, the problem of adoption and commercial surrogacy. But for most readers its main interest will lie in her depictions of the behavior of well-known U.S. feminist leaders, even if her account may sometimes appear to be a settling of scores, and breakage of relations with former close friends.

Feminism, a term coined in 1837 by Charles Fourier, is a mixture of various ideas and programs, at a minimum all aimed at equality between men and women in matters relating to economics, government, and socio-political matters. Feminist movements have often been described in terms of "three waves."

The first in the 1800s and early 1900s focused on suffrage and equal property rights; the second wave, liberal, radical or cultural, beginning in the early 1960s, and important until the 1980s, was concerned with legal equality between men and women, gender, sexuality, the workplace, reproductive rights, domestic violence and the creation of liberation movements. Chesler holds that most feminists of the "second wave" did not focus on motherhood as sacred rites of passage or as feminist issues. The third wave, sometimes referred to as post-feminist or intersectional, is diffuse and ongoing, with differences on sexuality and pornography. Chesler is honest in confessing she cannot understand contemporary French feminist writers, influenced by the post modernism of Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, the Belgian Lucy Irigaray, and the French Helene Cixous. She also has little time for Israeli Jewish feminists who specialize in criticism of their own government.

Daughter of Jewish working class immigrants, Chesler tells her story as a politically incorrect feminist largely through encounters with and candid comments on many of the talented women, feminist personalities of the second wave. She tells of a number of encounters with men and rape, but she does not fully explain the reasons for her change to bisexuality when she was in her mid 40s.

Chesler has had a full life as a teacher, scholar, a key figure in making women's studies into serious scholarly programs, co-founding the National Women's Health network and present at the founding of Ms magazine. She was active in the National Organization for Women, in the Association for Women in Psychology. Her earlier writings were useful and influential for discussion of important psychological issues such as depression, and problems of sexuality..

She helped write a feminist Haggadah for the many Passover Seders she held.

She explains her support for Israeli women wanting to pray at

the Western Wall.

In this age of MeToo, it is timely that she points out the prevalence of sexual harassment by professors, employers and even strangers, and that she, like other women, kept quiet about it. She talks of the extra baggage for women, and that because of daily prejudice and victimization, women can become disabled, with symptoms such as uncontrollable weeping, bad temper, paranoid accusations, envy of those seen as more talented, and inhumanity toward other women. Her book is not a history of feminism, but a highly personal and critical account of some major U.S. feminist leaders.

In telling her story Chesler appreciates that the major feminists have done much of value, but also some of the gains were tempered by the constant backbiting, claims of plagiarism, and need for recognition among the women, especially by those of the left. Chesler says she was stunned, blindsided by the incomprehensively vicious behavior among feminist leaders.

The overall impression Chesler, both insider and outsider, gives of those leaders is that they were very flawed, with individual petty jealousies and group bullying. According to Chesler, some of the most charismatic and original thinkers had psychological problems, were clinically schizophrenic, or manic depressive. It is well known that famous men have been mentally ill or disturbed, Baudelaire, Hemingway, Robert Lowell, Ezra Pound, Percy Shelley, Dylan Thomas, but Chesler indicates, though not all will agree, that this is true of some feminists, such as Canadian radical Shulie Firestone, author of *The Dialectic of Sex*, Kate Millett, author of *Sexual Politics*, or Andrea Dworkin, a close friend who wrote on pornography, but a fanatic who felt she was always the victim, or Jill Johnston, journalist who wrote *Lesbian Nation*, and who Chesler alleges is antisemitic.

Chesler's comments are acid, especially about Betty Friedan,

who changed many lives through her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, whom she pictures as "a rare harridan constantly raging at everyone." Chesler sees Friedan as cantankerous, abusive, abrasive, outrageously demanding, and an out-of-control drunk. According to Chesler, Betty, jealous of Gloria, and saw her as a lightweight people-pleaser, a prom queen who made off with the captain of the football team, and once accused her of being an CIA agent, was not an intellectual.

Other portraits are almost equally unflattering. Gloria Steinem is a tireless networker. She goes where the media goes, and often succeeded in persuading the media to follow her. She accuses Steinem of becoming the sole face of second wave feminism through *Ms* magazine. In her watered down radical feminism, Steinem defended Bill Clinton against Monica Lewinsky. Kate Millett was a mad genius, often in mental hospitals. Robin Morgan was an inveterate scene stealer. Erica Jong, good hearted and generous, yearned for fame as if it were the Muse itself. Andrea Dworkin was a demanding, domineering figure who knew how to badmouth others. Susan Sontag was naive.

Chesler spends some time on the incident and consequences of her rape in 1979 by David Nicol, Under Secretary at the UN, a married Sierra Leone citizen, who was supposed to discuss with Chesler a conference to be held in Oslo in July 1980. She was attacked in her home while her infant son and his babysitter were in the next room. Her feminist colleagues, Gloria and Robin Morgan, refused to support her action against the highly placed Nicol. Chesler holds they sacrificed her to defend their brand of feminism and their control of international feminist networks.

Sometimes Chesler seems petty, as with her animus against someone who refused to review her book in 1976. But she, a serious intellectual, is attempting to illuminate the true path for other feminists. Is feminism failing? It is telling that a generation ago there were more than a hundred feminist

bookstores, now there are twelve. Chesler's work, politically incorrect though it be, is important in addressing the contributions and the complications of feminist writers.

Chesler concludes with explaining that the rise in antisemitism reconnected her to her Jewish roots and led her to revise Jewish rituals in feminist terms. She is bitter about Western feminists, who after 9/11 were afraid to criticize Muslim violence, and who are more interested in blaming the West for the world's miseries than in defending Western values. Philosophically, feminists are supposed to be universalists, but Chesler argues that many modern feminists are isolationist, and believe that speaking out against Muslim bad crimes and behavior is somehow racist. For her not speaking out against racism is perhaps the greatest failing of current feminists.

But the feminist movement is more important than the personality traits and feuds among individual feminists, and one can criticize Chesler's book for concentrating on those issues. However, Chesler is an idealist, who believes in the principles of feminism, equality, and social justice for all. At the same she is one of the few feminists who recognize the hostility of Islam to Western values. Her views deserve to be heard on college and university campuses today.