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Feminism and Motherhood in Western Europe, 1890-1970

The Maternal Dilemma

Ann Taylor Allen

Ann Taylor Allen's book focuses on the different answers feminists, of different nations and times, have given to the question if it is possible for women to be both, mother and autonomous individual. She calls this question the maternal dilemma.

In her introduction Allen states that the feminist discourse on the maternal dilemma has known an exceptional shift in Western Europe during the twentieth century. From being the highest of human achievements, motherhood became a means to oppress and confine women. To prove this point and particularly to explain the changes in feminist opinions, Allen has set up an international and comparative research. By presenting examples of different countries, Allen describes the major trends about motherhood. She illustrates how, among others, law, war, patriotism, totalitarianism, science and economy, were and are important factors that contribute to different perceptions of motherhood in societies and particularly in feminist milieus. For example, Allen's analysis of the social position of unmarried mothers and their children, makes the added value of a European comparison understood. For Allen is able to prove that the status of unmarried women differed importantly in countries that had a legal code based upon the Napoleonic Code from those countries where the legal code was based on Germanic legal traditions.

The book's international scope is Allen's biggest and most admirable contribution to the fields of gender history, women's studies and the history of childhood. As Allen does not only compare better-known large countries, as France, Germany and Great Britain, but also includes less-studied and smaller nations as Austria, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, the Scandinavian nations, Spain and Switzerland. But what is even more exemplary is Allen's use of primary sources for almost all of these countries. It is not that common that a rich body of secondary literature is complemented with research in different national archives and with different contemporary national newspapers, periodicals, books, brochures and documents. Subsequently, Allen's bibliography is remarkable.

The enormous quantity of information has some downsides. Allen obviously introduces many important feminists from all over Europe. But in the text the references to persons are often accompanied with small bibliographical explanations. These descriptions become unnecessary repetitions as the same persons are cited frequently. A glossary of person would have solved this problem and would have done credit to the book. Furthermore, Allen sometimes describes the national situations too consecutively without comparing them profoundly enough. Allen proves that the major trends have been relevant in the analysed countries, but she does not always fully demonstrate how these trends differed locally. If Allen had concentrated more on the international networks that existed between feminists, women organizations, journals and periodicals, she would have given the reader a better insight into the different national debates and the ways by which these debates were exported to other countries and, most importantly, how they were imported and adapted to national situations. Such additions would have made *The Maternal Dilemma* into a reference work about Western European feminism. But as this was not the ambition of the author, it would be superfluous to develop these points any further. Surely the content of the book is interesting, profound and valuable enough to call it a standard work about feminism.

Allen focuses on the period 1890-1970. But one can say that priority is given to the years between 1918 and 1939 as four out of nine chapters are dedicated to the Interwar Period. This is a legitimate choice as Allen convincingly defines the interbellum period as the major transition period. Two major trends, both elaborately scrutinized by Allen in previous chapters, were questioned in the

Interwar Years. The exalted image of the mother, coined as “the angle in the house” was deconstructed and people no longer accepted a governmental view on children as national resources and on maternity as “a productive activity that manufactured the most important commodity of all, citizens.”(65-66)

The atrocities of World War I, political controversies, the start of European totalitarianism and the financial crises of the interwar era, contributed to the dismissal of any plan of child-care funded or organized by the government. Every notion of reproduction as a service to society, despite the widespread feminist opinion that gender equality would be a reward for this service, went by the board. *The Maternal Dilemma* argues that after World War I the state lost some of its credibility and was no longer the major authority on maternity and child welfare. Family privacy became emphasized. But the private sphere was also subjected to changes as the wartime experience made the mother-headed family to be “associated with the hardship and bereavement of wartime; by contrast, the restoration of the two parent household promised a return to stability, harmony, and fertility.”(133) The Victorian ideal mother, pure and altruistic, was displaced from her pedestal. A two-parent household in which the man dominated and demanded the woman to live up to her maternal and feminine roles replaced her. The same process occurred after the Second World War, when the restoration of the father-headed family seemed the most logic step toward normality and stability.

Allan asserts that this twentieth century preoccupation with the two-parent family had negative implications for women. This fixation affected the single mother in the first place. While a single mother used to be regarded with sympathy because her child was a valuable citizen, she now had to live with the chance of losing state support. Benefits were distributed to the “normal” family only. But the two-parent preference also affected the married woman, as motherhood became an intense obligation in this family constellation. Due to the fact that totalitarianism, with its harsh youth movements, had discredited stringent parenting, the conviction grew that, within the father-dominated family, a mother should pay as much time, attention and love to her child as possible. This idea clashed with the post-war feminist road to emancipation, namely out-of-house-employment. Unfortunately enough to achieve that, women got the double burden. In stead of men taking up more parts of fatherhood, women had to take up an extra role in a male dominated work structure, next to their mother-role. The maternal dilemma was still the basis of gender inequality. “Even the renunciation of motherhood was an admission of inequality – for men did not experience the same pressure to choose between career success or other aspirations and parenthood. And in the world of work that women now entered in great numbers, they would encounter new forms of discrimination, inequality, and marginalization.”(233)

It is clear that Allen attaches great importance to World War I as a decisive factor. Especially the war’s influence on the perception of the child has changed motherhood. The importance attributed to World War I in Allen’s profound cultural history, mirrors the recent interest in general historiography for this war. It is however surprising that *The Maternal Dilemma* dedicates so little attention to religion. Certainly for countries dominated by the catholic Church, more contemplation should have been given to, for example, the reinforcement of the “angel in the house” or the two-parent family by the catholic Church.

In all, Ann Taylor Allen has carried out first-rate international research and wrote an impressive book. She discusses the thoughts of three generations of women. As Allen frequently cites from the fictional works of writers as Henrik Ibsen, Aldous Huxley, Virginia Woolf and George Bernard Shaw, it is appropriate to compare Allen’s historical study with Michael Cunningham’s novel *The Hours* (1998). In Cunningham’s book three women of different times tell their story. As with *The Maternal Dilemma*, the reader of *The Hours* understands that these three women live in different times, with changed societies, altered marriage status and different grades of autonomy. Yet, despite these changes, the three women still live with the same problems, the maternal dilemma being one of the most important.

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