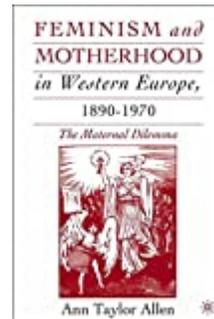




Ann Taylor Allen. *Feminism and Motherhood in Western Europe, 1890-1970: The Maternal Dilemma.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 345 S. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-6236-2.



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Balancing the Seemingly Impossible: The Feminist Struggle for Work and Motherhood

Ann Taylor Allen's new book opens with the words of Ibsen's Nora as she rejects her husband's charge that she is "first and foremost a wife and mother." Nora replies "that before all else I am a reasonable human being, just as you are—or at any event, that I must try to become one" (p. 1). Allen calls Nora's struggle to balance motherhood and her own individual development—the "maternal dilemma"—"one of the most intractable problems facing women in the West" (p. 1). Allen makes a convincing case for the centrality of motherhood and the "maternal dilemma" to feminist agendas in all the western European countries between 1890 and 1970. Her book traces the transformation of motherhood from an essentialist "biological destiny or moral imperative" in the nineteenth century to "an identity that was not innate but assumed, and might be refused or combined with other roles" after 1945 (p. 236).

Writing the history of the intersection of feminism and motherhood in Western Europe is an ambitious project. Allen correctly argues, however, that the comparative context is especially important during the twentieth century, because most major national trends arose

from forces that were international in scope (p. 6). Allen touches on feminism in all the western European countries, but she pays particular attention to Great Britain, Germany, France and Scandinavia. Her sources include traditional archival sources, fiction, autobiography, contemporary publications and political documents. She synthesizes existing historiography to place her women in an international and historiographical context. The question of how women combined motherhood and employment drives Allen's narrative onward. It is brought to life by the many engaging stories by individual women.

Allen's study opens with a chapter that examines nineteenth-century feminists' understanding of the origins of the patriarchy. Denying that patriarchal power and female subordination were universal, God-given patterns, these feminists argued that in a post-patriarchal social order, motherhood would become as powerful as it had been in prehistory. Feminists agreed that they should overcome women's subordinate status and improve the status of mothers, but national differences influenced women's visions of the future family. French

feminists emphasized social solidarity and the creation of a motherly state; British feminists proposed the empowerment of the individual woman through suffrage and other political rights. While some feminists emphasized women's maternal superiority, others sought to use new findings in anthropology and ancient history to support gender equality.

Across western Europe, feminists faced legal and economic systems that considered the family the private realm of the father, denied paternity outside of marriage and privileged men in the public realm. In chapters 2, 3 and 4, Allen examines feminist struggles for the legal equality of mothers and wives, reproductive choice and the right to combine motherhood and employment. Some feminists offered a gender-neutral definition of parental rights and duties that emphasized democracy and equality of rights in the home and state. They advocated women's equal right to work outside the home ("the tired but happy super woman") (p. 66). To lessen the "double burden," they proposed an array of options—including state and private organizations to help with childcare and housework (some, such as Lily Braun, even advocated collective households). Other feminists based their arguments on women's difference from men and emphasized mothers' unique and irreplaceable relationship with their children. They argued that since women's primary role (and greatest happiness) was motherhood, the state should recognize motherhood itself as a profession and remunerate women for staying home with their young children. Once children were grown, women could enter the customary labor market. For both groups of feminists, women's need to control their reproduction was crucial. Allen argues that by 1900, "the freedom to control fertility was at the heart of feminist aspirations to be both a mother and a human being." (p. 108). Since women had such limited rights, however, reproductive self determination could not be tied to a doctrine of individual rights or individual privacy. Instead it was children's right to a happy, healthy family life that won feminists alliances with medical and political elites at a time when population concerns were writ large.

In the prewar era, many feminists believed that the gender equality encompassed in maternal rights and reproductive choice were women's reward for a service to the state—the service of motherhood. However, not until the end of the century, when falling birth rates made each child a "national resource," did states begin to compromise paternal authority in the name of child welfare. In this context, the first state efforts to help women combine motherhood and employment came in the form of mater-

nity aid (Germany). By classifying maternity as an illness and limiting policy to the biological functions of pregnancy, childbirth and lactation, however, these programs did little to solve the larger "maternal dilemma." The life stories of the feminists who waged these debates (Olive Schreiner of Britain, Helen StÅ¶cker and Alice Salomon of Germany) reveal how difficult the "maternal dilemma" proved to be for individual women. When equality was not forthcoming, some feminists followed French feminist Nelly Roussel's call to women to refuse to reproduce for states that denied them equality.

For her coverage of World War I, Allen narrows her focus to three belligerent countries: France, Great Britain and Germany. She argues that most feminists saw motherhood as an essential service to the state. Though unwilling to appease feminist demands, all three states were forced by their wartime labor needs to introduce programs for women, including war kindergartens (Germany) and mother allowances (Great Britain, Germany) in order to make motherhood and work compatible. The French state granted mothers guardianship of their children in their husbands' absence. However, few other laws changed during the war. Moreover, Allen argues that the effort all three states exerted to ban birth control and abortion revealed that women were valued more as "producers of a vital and scarce resource than as individuals or citizens" (p. 122). A small group of feminists tried to create an international solidarity based on women's maternal qualities of love, compassion and nonviolence, but few feminists joined peace movements. Ultimately, as Allen clearly demonstrates, prewar feminists' plans for equality based on either independent mothers or egalitarian two-parent households fell short when faced with postwar reality that mother-headed households were associated with hardship and bereavement. Instead, the two-parent household became a symbol of stability, harmony and fidelity. The legal and social emancipation feminists had hoped for went unrealized, and only German women could vote without restrictions.

After the war, the idea of motherhood as women's service to the nation lost credibility and family limitation came to be connected with a sense of individual entitlement to present happiness and self-realization. As family reconstruction became a national priority, two models of motherhood vied for legitimacy: one based on full-time, homemaker status, the other on a combination of domesticity and employment. In contrast to previous studies that have viewed interwar feminists as conservative, Allen argues that beyond the reconciliation they sought with men, feminists' views of motherhood

were distinctly modern and included equality of parental rights, the right to combine marriage and motherhood with paid work and controlled reproduction and rationalized childrearing.[1] Allen documents the dramatic shifts that took place in the contours of the “maternal dilemma” in the 1920s. First, state emphasis on stable marriage (an assertion of Allen’s that diverges from most historians who see natalism as the state’s priority) prevented all but Great Britain and Scandinavia from conferring legal equality on women.[2] Second, as reproductive self-determination (which won general acceptance in all democratic countries except France) was increasingly connected to personal fulfillment, some women in the interwar era began to opt not to mother. Third, women increasingly saw motherhood as a role that could be accompanied by—if not combined with—paid employment. As women built identities as mothers and workers, psychologists increasingly questioned the maternal impact on children. In chapter 8, Allen examines the way three feminist experts on childrearing (Dora Russell [Great Britain], Madeliene Vernet [France] and Adele Schreiber [Germany]) addressed the maternal dilemma theoretically and personally. By the end of the interwar period, mothers were simultaneously blamed for societies’ ills (and told the solution was their return to full-time domesticity) and liberated from full-time motherhood (which might in fact damage their children) so that they could pursue employment. As the lives of Russell, Vernet and Schreiber reveal, however, society continued to be ill-suited to support women struggling to balance motherhood and employment. As Allen demonstrates, “the reception of psychology hastened the decline of maternalism and its exaltation of mother-love as a benevolent force in families and society” (p. 208). While the “maternal dilemma” had originally been conceived chiefly as a political struggle pitting the individual woman against the forces of church, state and patriarchy, after the war it became increasingly personal. Although the baby boom that followed the Second World War seemed to symbolize the end of feminism and the rebirth of motherhood, Allen argues that feminist issues immediately resurfaced and by the end of the 1950s, European welfare states had revised their law codes to give women equality in parenting, to legalize some access to birth control and to provide benefits for families. For women, who increasingly saw motherhood as a stage in their lives, and combined maternity and employment, the maternal dilemma loomed large. Some argued that women should enter the labor market only when their children started school; others advocated daycare and greater involvement of fathers. Still others agreed with

Simone de Beauvoir that maternity, a “strange mixture of narcissism, altruism, idle daydreaming, sincerity, bad faith, devotion and cynicism,” was “insoluble because maternity was the enemy of autonomy” (p. 228). Even those who did not share de Beauvoir’s pessimism worried about women’s “double burden” and by 1968, the equalization of parental roles had become a goal of the new feminist movements in all countries. Simultaneously, a rising number of women refused to mother at all. As Allen points out, however, even opting out of maternity forced the burden of decision on women. As one Italian feminist manifesto stated, “women’s first reason for resentment against society is being forced to face maternity as a dilemma” (p. 233).

Feminism and Motherhood traces many changes in the relationships between women and motherhood, motherhood and work and European states and mothers. From the nineteenth century (when states took mothers’ subordination to fathers for granted) until the late twentieth century (when equality was legislated and many women chose not to be mothers at all), the “maternal dilemma” remained an intractable problem. *Feminism and Motherhood’s* strength is also its weakness. Allen’s broad geographical focus provides the reader an invaluable comparative insight into how feminist attitudes toward motherhood developed and changed across Europe between 1890 and 1970. She traces the transformation of motherhood from a biological destiny to a role and finally to a choice. She also examines the impact science had on childrearing and motherhood. The comparative perspective is crucial in revealing how similarly feminist struggles developed across Europe, even when political events like the First World War did not affect all countries alike. It also demonstrates how the rise of fascist dictators in Spain, Germany and Italy interrupted women’s progress. The details regarding individual women (usually prominent feminists but occasionally—through the use of published sources (like *Maternity Letters*)—other women too) allow Allen to make demonstrable connections between larger legal and theoretical fights and the individual women coping with the “maternal dilemma.”[3] Occasionally Allen’s effort to provide evidence of feminist activity in so many countries can be overwhelming and loses its tie to the women affected, but this occurs infrequently. All in all, *Feminism and Motherhood* is sweeping in scope and a welcome contribution to our understanding of feminist struggles across western Europe.

Notes

- [1]. Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making Peace: The Recon-*

struction of Gender in Interwar Britain (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[2]. Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, Atina Grossmann and Marion Kaplan, eds., *When Biology Became*

Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984).

[3]. Margaret Davies, ed., *Maternity: Letters from Working Women* (New York: Norton and Co., 1978).

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