

How Mothers Divide the Apple Pie: Maternal and Civic Thinking in the Age of Neoliberalism

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“I JUST HAVE TO DO WHAT’S BEST FOR MY OWN CHILD”

In countless conversations about schooling, I hear a refrain from the mothers I talk with: “I just have to do what’s best for my own child.” Most often the line is used to wrap up discussion of some choice — where to send a child to kindergarten, for instance, or whether to rally for some policy change, or how to expend personal and collective resources. Mothers generally offer it as a trump-card rationale, as a truth whose self-evident logic forecloses all other possibilities. After all, who could deny a parent’s responsibility to look out for her child? I have noticed, though, that the line is often uttered in defense of some action that, minus the motherhood justification, appears inequitable, unfair, unkind, selfish — in defense of some action that is, in some other ethical framework, not self-evidently right at all.

These mothers are all relatively privileged. They are able to choose whether to send their respective children to private or public school, to this neighborhood school or to one that requires luck in the lottery or a change in residence. They can choose whether or not to protest the heteronormativity of a daddy-daughter dance, as their daughters have fathers on hand to take them. They have ample resources to expend. The ethical stance their refrain implies could therefore easily appear a smokescreen to cover self-interest, and my first reaction was to see it as such. On further reflection, however, simple condemnation seemed too quick. It is not self-interest exactly, as many of these mothers are making significant personal sacrifices — of time, income, ambition, energy — for their children’s sake. Furthermore, our national unwillingness to support children and families means that these mothers are accurately identifying a problem: if they do not tenaciously defend their own children’s interests, those interests will go unaddressed.

They are thinking and acting as mothers, invoking the mother/child relationship and the demands it makes as grounds for partiality. Yet, how legitimate maternal partiality is to be squared with ethical obligations to the wider community remains a problem. The practice of mothering has been theorized as supportive of ethical commitments extending beyond family, but the inward turn that many real and decent mothers take, toward supporting their own children at the expense of public commitments, challenges this paradigm.¹ This question of whether mothers’ commitments to their own children supports a concern for the welfare of other children is directly relevant to public schooling. Parents shape public schools, in their choices of where to live, what and whom to vote for, what resources to offer schools and teachers. Parental influence is counterbalanced by the state, by teachers, by children themselves, but it is a fundamental assumption of public schooling as a system of mass education that the dedication of individual parents to their own children serves

to support the common welfare of all children. If this is not the case, and if parental concern instead detracts from the common good, a great deal of rethinking is called for.²

Accordingly, this essay asks whether intensive commitment to the good of one's own child supports the kind of civic commitment that public schooling depends upon. Can mothers, thinking as mothers, also think as citizens? Whether motherhood is compatible with citizenship has been a live issue at least since it was raised by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Mary Wollestonecraft. This essay revisits it in the context of ongoing transformational changes in parent-child and parent-state relations. In the past few decades, the American family has changed dramatically, in its internal composition and in its relation to the market and the state. The history of ideas and empirical research alike suggest that what this change means to mothers — both how mothers themselves act and how observers interpret mothering — depends on the sociopolitical context, and this essay therefore engages with both philosophical accounts of mothering and social-scientific research on mothering in the neoliberal age. While this may sound relativistic, I argue that attention to sociopolitical context is in fact a universal characteristic of thinking like a mother. The mother/child relation is sometimes conceived as intensely dyadic, but this depiction is too limited. Child-raising requires a mother to attend carefully to the social world into which she is raising her child, and, I argue, this kind of attention is an essential aspect of what it means to think like a mother. Ultimately, the essay concludes that if mothering is understood as including this social-mindedness, mothers can, in fact *must*, think as citizens, though not in the impartial way conventionally associated with citizenship.

THE PRACTICE OF MOTHERING

On my use of “mothers” and “parents,” a few words of clarification. As social expectations around mothering and fathering have shifted, with fathers increasingly expected to invest more time and affective labor in child-raising and mothers increasingly serving as primary breadwinners, discourse has also shifted. Philosophers of education now often discuss the intimate, relational aspects of child-raising and the subjective experiences of those who raise children in terms of “parenting,” rather than an earlier generation’s “mothering.”³ Although sometimes there is reason to use the gender-neutral terms “parents” and “parenting,” the experience of child-raising remains deeply gendered, and I fear that talk of “parents” obscures persistent differences. It remains the case that mothers do the lioness’s share of child-raising overall, that women are expected to do so, and that they are discredited if they choose not to.⁴ Men’s involvement in child-raising continues to be enacted and perceived differently. This essay therefore adopts a somewhat eccentric use of terms. Following Sara Ruddick, I shall generally use “mother” to mean “a person who takes on responsibility for children’s lives and for whom providing child care is a significant part of her or his working life,” recognizing that “although most mothers have been and are women, mothering is potentially work for men and women.”⁵ Yet, I have found it impossible exclusively to use “mothers” because to do so makes it difficult to engage a recent and thoughtful literature that does use the

term “parents.” Therefore, the essay shifts between “mothering” and “parenting,” depending on its usage in the texts under discussion.

A second element this essay adopts from Ruddick is the concept of mothering as a *practice*, rather than as a biological or legal *status*.⁶ Like other practices, mothering is “distinguished by the aims that identify [it] and by the consequent demands made on practitioners committed to those aims.”⁷ Ruddick’s approach holds the door open to those other than a child’s biological mother(s), including men and adoptive mothers, and makes no preemptive claims about the constitution of families. And, importantly, the notion of “practice” provides a means for recognizing the inescapably social nature of mothering. As for the demands that establish the practice of mothering, Ruddick identifies three: children demand to be protected, children demand that their growth be fostered, and society demands that a mother shape her children’s growth in socially acceptable ways. The last demand in particular supports my argument that what it means to be a mother is inherently political: mothering requires a negotiation of the child’s flourishing within a particular sociopolitical context. About this point, I shall say more later. For now, suffice it to say that by mothering I mean Ruddick’s notion of a goal-determined practice that can be taken up by anyone who takes on responsibility for raising a child and for whom this work is a primary commitment.

THE STATE OF FAMILIES

In *Democratic Education*, Amy Gutmann suggests a “democratic state of education” as superior to both the “family state” and “state of families.” Under the “family state,” the relation between members of the society is properly that of members of a family, and the purpose of education is to “cultivate a level of like-mindedness and camaraderie among citizens that most of us expect to find only within families.”⁸ The “state of families” begins instead with a conception of children as members of distinct families, which are the best protectors of their interests. Gutmann’s major concern is the proper distribution of educational authority within a pluralistic democracy, and she ultimately argues for a different, and more justifiable, conception: a “democratic state of education,” in which citizens share authority over education in order to consciously reproduce pluralistic democracy. Her recommendations regarding public education exemplify what citizens, thinking as citizens, would reasonably conclude. Gutmann’s argument, however, is subject to the critique made of contractualist approaches generally: it is grounded on the assumption of a “reasonable person,” represented in a way that erases differences and thereby excludes alternative conceptions of reasonableness. Of particular concern to my project, Gutmann’s account implies that, in regards to education, parents can and should transcend partiality for their own children and reason as citizens committed to the good of all children. Gutmann’s theory of democratic education transcends conflict between the interests of parents and the welfare of a society’s children, but it is questionable whether it is reasonable for *parents*, thinking as parents, to think transcendently.

It is even more questionable that we *do* think like this. “As citizens,” says Gutmann, “we aspire to a set of educational practices and authorities of which the

following can be said: these are the practices and authorities to which we, acting collectively as a society, have consciously agreed. It follows that a society that supports conscious social reproduction must educate all educable children to be capable of participating in collectively shaping their society.⁹ The actual choices of American citizens suggest other, conflicting, aspirations. Since Gutmann wrote *Democratic Education*, the United States has moved farther from Gutmann's ideal, becoming ever more a "state of families" in regards to the education of children. Parents are asked to take on a greater burden of children's education, while public support for this project is reduced. In part, this can be attributed to forces little considered by Gutmann, who calls it "common-sensically clear" and "broadly acknowledged in the United States" that primary education should *not* be distributed by the market.¹⁰ Contemporary neoliberal discourse suggests otherwise. The privatization of education goes beyond "reform" discourse that valorizes free-market approaches such as vouchers, charter schools, and anti-union rhetoric. Privatization reaches into the educational practices carried out by families as well. Over the past three decades, government programs supporting families and children have been reduced and workplaces demand longer hours, while a discourse of parental accountability has arisen in parallel with the discourse of teacher accountability. As Stephen Ramaeker and Judith Suissa argue in *The Claims of Parenting*, the dominant logic of "parenting" suggests that parents ought to professionalize their relation with children, which subjects parenting to the kind of "quality control" expectations more appropriate to a factory.¹¹ Like workers, parents are expected to do more with less.

As citizens and the market have, in their choices at the polls and in corporate boardrooms, moved public education back toward a "state of families," the state of actual American families has undergone radical transformations. Half of American marriages end in divorce, and 40 percent of American children are now born to unmarried mothers.¹² Children negatively impact their mother's economic wellbeing, with many women tumbling into poverty after divorce, and the lifetime earnings of others sharply curtailed.¹³ The replacement of welfare with workfare means that single mothers are no longer supported if they choose to remain at home with infants and toddlers.¹⁴ In response to stagnant real incomes, more middle-class mothers are working outside the home, outsourcing the nurture and care of their children to low-wage care providers, many of whom are forced to leave their own children for the sake of a living wage.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the public is told that parenting is a key ingredient to children's educational success, and that what a parent does for a child from birth to age three lays the foundation for a child's educational and economic future.¹⁶ Families, in short, are under tremendous stress.

While impoverished families are certainly the most pressured, middle-class families have not been immune. In *Perfect Madness*, Judith Warner describes middle-class motherhood as a train wreck of ideology and bad public policies.¹⁷ The ideological aspect of middle-class mothering is best examined by Sharon Hays who argues, in *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, that nearly all contemporary American mothers are gripped by what she calls "the ideology of intensive

mothering.”¹⁸ According to this logic, mothers are responsible for “nurturing, listening, responding, explaining, negotiating, distracting, and searching for appropriate alternative care,” practices which are “so labor-intensive, so time-consuming, so energy-absorbing” because mothers “understand themselves as largely responsible for the way their children turn out.”¹⁹ Also importantly, mothers are held responsible by others for their children’s well-being, which means that rejecting this ideology requires a defense — which is often made in terms of the ideology itself. Critics dismiss this approach as “attachment parenting” run amok, but Hays offers a deeper interpretation that manages to combine sensitivity to mothers with criticism of the socioeconomic context. Hays rejects four common explanations of why mothers adopt an ideology that seems to run counter to their interests: mothers’ natural propensity to love and nurture their children; the notion that intensive mothering *is* a rational utility-maximizing choice for women; women’s subjection and relative disempowerment in the face of capitalism, the modern state, and patriarchy; and the possibility that intensive mothering is a means of fighting back against the opposed logic of rational pursuit of self-interest. Although all these arguments have their force, she argues that none is conclusive. Instead, she argues, motherhood contains, but has not managed to resolve, the contradictory tugs of late-capitalist culture. Market logic calls us to be utility maximizers, and yet we are saddened by the loss of, and unwilling to give up entirely, other-regarding bonds. Deep human relationship has been relegated to mothers and children, but it exists there in uneasy tension with the otherwise overwhelming ideology of modern market society.

As for public policy, Warner’s interviews with middle-class mothers led her to compare them to Betty Friedan’s repressed housewives, with a twist: contemporary mothers were raised to believe that paid employment was open to them as a fulfilling option. The lack of adequate maternity leave, of professional workplaces flexible enough to accommodate part-time workers, of high-quality affordable daycare, and other policies disadvantaging working mothers makes it somewhere between difficult and impossible for mothers to meet the demands of both work and home, depending on circumstances and an individual mother’s relative tolerance for guilt and exhaustion.

Theorizing this recent history of capitalism, public policy, and the family, Julie Stephens argues that we are gripped by a “cultural logic” she calls “postmaternal thinking,” which props up the cultural logic of neoliberalism.²⁰ “Postmaternal thinking,” says Stephens, “refers to a process where the ideals intimately bound up with the practices of mothering are disavowed in the public sphere, and conflicted in the private.”²¹ Stephens contrasts postmaternal thinking with feminist philosophers’ recognition of human selves as interdependent and encumbered, of the importance of care, and of the rich political implications of mothering. Through a process of active forgetting, she argues, that feminist insight has been replaced with a “cultural memory” that emphasizes feminism’s role in moving women into the market. This reconfigured story, of course, serves the market, which depends on female workers both in the workplace and as educators of future workers at home,

but does not serve children and others in a state of dependency. “Postmaternal thinking,” she argues, “reinforces the dominant neoliberal claim that recognition and support should only flow to those who are economically active. It also assists in further marginalizing unpaid caregivers, thereby reinforcing unjust social relations and hiding the true gendered aspects of care.”²² While Hays theorizes the logic guiding mothers, Stephens explores the logic that structures the situation in which those mothers find themselves. Both accounts grapple with the ideological structures that make sense of American mothers’ *prima facie* irrational choice to accept, simultaneously, an all-consuming model of motherhood *and* a vision of personal fulfillment through workplace success.

My point here is that the mothers who told me, “I just have to do what’s best for my own child,” were not deluded by self-interest, unusually anxious, or irrational. They were defending a position they felt compelled to take in sociopolitical circumstances that constrained their options, neglected their children’s welfare, framed their children’s education as an arms race and made that battle their responsibility, and pressured them to achieve high results with limited resources.²³ Although they may have been wrong in some particulars, their perception of the larger picture was generally accurate. Asking them to bracket the interests of their own children in order to deliberate about principled outcomes would be tantamount to asking them to open the barricades in the face of a hostile onslaught. Inasmuch as neoliberalism has reframed autonomy as the curtailment of deep attachments, as the calculating stance of *homo economicus*, and thereby as counter to the needs and interests of families, it would be profoundly irrational for mothers to transcend particulars and think only, or even first, as autonomous citizens.

THE MATERNAL AND THE CIVIC

One response to this disjuncture between impartial civic and partial maternal thinking has been to defend maternal particularity as leading to *the same or better* results. Nel Noddings makes such a case in *Caring*, which invokes the mother/child relation as the source of genuine ethical commitment and action. Noddings makes clear that she by no means intends to restrict ethical caring to mothers, but she expressly “locate(s) the very wellspring of ethical behavior in human affective response,” which she calls a “feminine view,” and contrasts with the “approach through law and principle ... the approach of the father.”²⁴ Although not all human beings become mothers, our experience as recipients of nurture makes us all capable of understanding the potentiality of care, says Noddings. Throughout *Caring*, Noddings uses the mother/child relationship to provide examples of dilemmas and their ethical resolution that illustrate and clarify what she means by ethical caring. In *The Maternal Factor*, Noddings is even more explicit in her connection of ethical care and mothers. “It may well be,” she says, that “care ethics ... can be traced to maternal instinct.”²⁵

Noddings portrays the mother-child relation as intensely dyadic. This raises two problems for her theory. First, this dyadic relation is a problematic grounds for extending care from those with resources toward non-proximate others in need — that is, for doing the redistributive work that justice does.²⁶ It leads Noddings to the

conclusion that we can only care for proximate others and that our care reaches outward in “concentric circles,” which are connected into “chains” of care. Those chains include the prospect of future intimacy: we must meet the other “prepared to care,” says Noddings.²⁷ There is, however, no effective limitation to racism and xenophobia in Noddings’s account, and no guarantee that the resources for providing care will not be monopolized by the powerful. That these circles will incorporate everyone is never assured, nor that the chains will connect the powerful to the disempowered.

Second, in nurturing a child’s growth, a mother is never turned entirely toward that child in the way that Noddings depicts. In *Two Paths to Morality*, Noddings cites anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy in support of her claim that evolution has supported women’s caring instincts. Hrdy’s work, however, provides a far more complex interpretation of mothering and “maternal instinct” than Noddings reports. Hrdy’s research on mothering among primates portrays primate mothers as zealous political strategists.²⁸ Because we are social animals, whose survival requires interdependence, she argues, reproductive success necessitates that mothers attend to the wellbeing of their offspring *within the context of social relations that must be utilized to advantage*. To raise their children, Hrdy documents, human mothers have always relied on “allomothers” — literally “other mothers” — who can be enlisted to help nurture and care for a dependent child.²⁹ That mothers require the collaboration of allomothers tells us little about what they will actually do, however, as political strategizing can lead to aggressive exploitation as well as friendly cooperation. Hrdy’s nuanced research resists simplification into algorithms, but generally it supports the premise that when they are in hierarchical social settings, mothers dedicate their energies to helping their children climb the hierarchy. “A female’s quest for status,” notes Hrdy, “has become inseparable from her ability to keep her offspring and grand-offspring alive. Far from conflicting with maternity, such a female’s ‘ambitious’ tendencies are part and parcel of maternal success.”³⁰ Given that this explanation of female ambition follows an account of chimpanzee infanticide, it might be read as the *coup de grace* for any argument that good mothers can also be good citizens. In egalitarian social settings, however, mothers are more likely to cooperate to mutual advantage, and this opens up possibilities for an argument that *sometimes*, though not always, thinking like a mother does support civic thinking about the shared interests of the wider community. In Hrdy’s account, what is invariable is that successful mothers attend to the sociopolitical context in which they are raising their children. Mothers are inevitably political agents, for better or for worse, inasmuch as they negotiate the possibility of human flourishing within specific sociopolitical environments.

It might be concluded that, in our contemporary context of sharply stratified wealth and privatized child-raising, mothers are likely to vie for status rather than collaborate, and therefore there is no hope of mothers being *good* citizens in a neoliberal society. They are neither likely to be principled and fair, nor beneficent beyond a limited circle of concern. In response, I would argue that because mothers attend to sociopolitical context and are motivated to affect it for their children’s

welfare, maternal politics may be one of the most promising avenues toward establishing a better state of affairs, a democratic state of education, a sociopolitical regime in which citizens collaborate for mutual advantage. It should not be assumed that citizens without particular attachments are, by default, civic-minded. And although this essay has been somewhat critical of actual mothers, those who do not consider the raising of children to be an important concern are subject to criticism on different grounds. I mean not to claim that mothers can be relied upon to build a better world for all children, but to make the more modest suggestion that those who think like mothers are *more likely than those for whom raising a child is not a primary commitment* to do so.

If this is to happen, however, those privileged mothers who want to do what is best for their own children will need to recognize the full implications of that statement. To do what is best for one's own child means, as it always has, that a mother needs to attend both to her own child's growth and to the social world in which that child is growing up. As effective mothers recognize, a child can only flourish in a social environment that makes flourishing possible. For privileged mothers, this requires attending carefully to the negative impact on children of competitive striving, of stratification of resources, of the market's assault on family and community bonds — and mobilizing political resources to push back. Rather than condemn mothers as improperly civic-minded, therefore, advocates of a public school system that supports the growth of all children ought to encourage mothers to recognize and act upon the *full* implications of their commitments to their own children. Because it potentially unlocks aggression and exploitation, real mothering is no guarantee of good citizenship, but at the same time, mothering's 'better half' of network building, sociopolitical attentiveness, and active pursuit of a world in which children can flourish means that thinking like a mother remains a powerful resource for citizens concerned about our shared welfare.

1. On maternal ethics, see Nel Noddings, *Caring* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1984); Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and Virginia Held, *Feminist Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and Joyce Trebilcock, *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1984).

2. Compare Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, "Legitimate Parental Partiality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 37, no. 1 (2009): 43–80; Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift "Parents' Rights and the Value of the Family," *Ethics* 117, no. 1 (2006): 80–108; and Adam Swift, "The Morality of School Choice," *Theory and Research in Education* 2, no. 1 (2006): 7–21.

3. For recent work on parenting in educational philosophy, see *Educational Theory* 60, no. 3 (2009), which presents the work of scholars who contributed to the Educational Theory Summer Institute 2009 on the topic of "State Intervention and the Regulation of Parenting"; and the work of Harry Brighouse, Adam Swift, and Stefan Ramaekers, and Judith Suissa cited in these notes.

4. Sociologists debate the extent to which fathers and mothers share housework, childcare, and total work time. The preponderance of evidence shows that mothers dedicate more personal resources to childcare than do fathers, even when fathers perceive their contributions as equal. That societal *expectations* of mothers and fathers remain gendered is, appropriately, unquestioned. See Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 2012). On men and women at work, see Joan Williams, *Unbending Gender* (New York: Oxford, 2001).

5. Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 40.
6. Compare Judith Suissa, "Untangling the Mother Knot," *Ethics and Education* 1, no. 1 (2006): 65–77; and Judith Suissa, "Constructions of Parents and Languages of Parenting," *Philosophy of Education 2009*, ed. Deborah Kerdeman (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2010).
7. Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 13–14.
8. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 23.
9. *Ibid.*, 39.
10. *Ibid.*, 127.
11. Stefan Ramaeker and Judith Suissa, *The Claims of Parenting* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2011).
12. Joyce Martin, et al., "Births: Final Data for 2010," *National Vital Statistics Report* 61, no. 1 (2012).
13. Ann Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood* (New York: Picador, 2010).
14. Sharon Hays, *Flat Broke with Children* (New York: Oxford, 2004).
15. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild, *Global Woman* (New York: Holt, 2002).
16. For a recent example, see Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2012).
17. Judith Warner, *Perfect Madness* (New York: Riverhead, 2006).
18. Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).
19. *Ibid.*, 120. Compare Arlie Hochschild, *The Outsourced Self* (New York: Metropolitan, 2012). While this essay focuses on dilemmas of mothering and citizenship within a democratic state, a fuller account would have to reckon with American imperialism as well.
20. Julie Stephens, *Confronting Post-Maternal Thinking* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). Compare Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).
21. *Ibid.*, x.
22. *Ibid.*, 22.
23. Compare Adam Swift, *How Not To Be a Hypocrite* (London: Routledge, 2003).
24. Noddings, *Caring*, 2–3.
25. Nel Noddings, *The Maternal Factor: Two Paths to Morality* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 1.
26. Claudia Card, "Caring and Evil," *Hypatia* 5, no. 1 (1990): 101–108.
27. Noddings, *Caring*, 46–47.
28. Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mother Nature* (New York, Random House, 1999); and Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mothers and Others* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). The reader's hackles may be raised by the suggestion that biology has anything to do with either philosophy or mothers, but biology need not be crudely deterministic. Hrdy's work aligns with developmental systems theory, which explores the intertwined nature of the biological and social and has garnered credible support from gender theorists and philosophers, including Susan Oyama, Donna Haraway, Elizabeth Wilson, and Anne Fausto-Sterling. In any case, Hrdy is a physical anthropologist, and acutely sensitive to human and cultural plasticity.
29. The phrase evokes bell hooks, for whom the "othermothers" characteristic of Black child-raising challenges the normative visions of dyadic intimacy portrayed by White feminists. Compare bell hooks, *Feminist Theory* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000).
30. Hrdy, *Mother Nature*, 52.