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Julie Stephens, *Confronting Postmaternal Thinking: Feminism, Memory and Care* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 208 pp., ISBN: 9780231149211, £19.00 paperback.

In *Confronting Postmaternal Thinking: Feminism, Memory and Care*, Julie Stephens explores the disavowal of maternal thinking in the neoliberal social order of the late 20th century. She traces this disavowal in dominant ideological formations and in the history of feminism and looks to recent feminist activism for a resurgent maternalism that ought to be further explored and promoted.

Sara Ruddick's work, especially *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Beacon, 1989), is a touchstone for Stephen's understanding of maternalism and her analysis of postmaternal thinking. Stephens rightly reminds us that Ruddick intended her analysis of maternal thinking to ground a theory and practice of peacemaking and anti-militarism. So, in looking to revive feminist maternal thinking and practice as a basis for social policy, Stephens returns us to Ruddick's assertion that to claim a maternal identity is not to make an empirical generalization but to engage in a political act (p.17).

By 'postmaternal thinking' Stephens means the 'various ways the maternal and the values associated with maternal forms of care have been largely rejected in the public sphere and marginalized or conflicted in the private domain' (p.2). I take some issue with the notion of *postmaternal* thinking, as if there was ever a time when maternal thinking was a significant component of dominant ideological paradigms. But that may depend on my vantage point in the U.S. where, compared to other nations, maternalist thinking has barely made a dent in social policy making. But Stephens is right that, whatever the acceptance of maternalism, there has been active pushback to reassert the abstract individual – the unencumbered worker and the rational, self-interested consumer – as the model of citizenship in the liberal democracies.

The most innovative element of Stephen's analysis of postmaternal thinking is her use of the concepts of 'cultural memory' and 'active forgetting' to explore the juncture of individual and social memory. Stephens argues that there are recognizable patterns of forgetting and

remembering in cultural memory; patterns we can analyze to explain how individuals' shared memories are driven as much by social and cultural forces as by individual experience. Just as the active forgetting of certain personal memories is often part of forming a new individual identity, the active forgetting of certain cultural moments is part of the formation of new social identities and cultural constructs.

This approach allows Stephens to explain the active forgetting of maternalism not only in social policy making but also in contemporary feminism, or at least feminism as it is represented in the dominant cultural imaginary. While the forgetting of maternalism in social policy making is more straightforwardly analyzed in terms of neoliberalism, feminism's forgetting of the maternal is more complicated. Stephens challenges the widespread perception of feminism as hostile to motherhood by articulating how memories of feminism are not immune to the social and cultural forces that promote active forgetting. She reviews feminist memoirs and histories of the 20th century women's movement to trace both the angry fascination with their own mothers that she says characterized some elements of the women's movement in the second half of the century and the varied responses of feminist women to becoming a mother, including Rebecca Walker's *Baby Love: Choosing Motherhood after a Lifetime of Ambivalence* (Riverhead, 2007), Virginia Haussager's *Wonder Woman: The Myth of Having It All* (Allen & Unwin, 2005) and Naomi Wolf's *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood* (Doubleday, 2001). While these threads of feminism have contributed to the perception of feminism's hostility to motherhood, Stephens argues, this perception is a function of the active forgetting of other elements of late 20th century feminism and she reads the 'maternal confessional writing of the last decade' as representing 'the struggle to superimpose the old neoliberal (or ultraliberal) self onto a new and far less publically valued maternal identity' (p.67).

Crucial to Stephens' undermining of the view that feminism advocates women's individual freedom and career success at the expense of motherhood are a set of oral history interviews with 'well-known feminists who were active in the women's liberation movement and went on to achieve considerable success in the political and executive arena in Australia.' She asserts that embedded in these interviews are 'memories which do not depend on any national context for their meaning or wider significance' (p.74). Interpreting these interviews, she finds a 'buried maternalism' (p.87) and argues that modern feminism has always valued women's experiences of motherhood, the virtues of care in women's relationships with each other and in

feminist activism and the freedom to reject single-minded career success in favour of a more balanced life that includes significant commitment to family and community.

Stephens' resurfacing of the maternalist traces in late 20th century feminism has much to offer the project of resisting neoliberalism and reclaiming the values of care and nurture for social policy making. Like everyone who thinks and writes about motherhood, maternalism and feminism, however, Stephens knows she has to address the problem raised by any invocation of women's difference (which is not the same thing as the problem of essentialism). But, while recognizing the problem, Stephens doesn't give it quite the attention it requires. I note that in the oral histories she quotes, two of the seven interviewees completely disavow career ambition. For example, Sara Dowse, both interviewer and interviewee, and the first head of the Women's Affairs Section of the Australian Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, says about her career, 'I had no ambitions in this area at all. [...] I was surprised to discover what a good bureaucrat I could be, but I had no ambitions there' (p.91). If unearthing the maternalism buried in late 20th feminism requires highly accomplished women to suggest that their career accomplishments occurred 'totally by accident' (p.83), then, I think, we ought to pause longer than Stephens does over the cost to women, especially to women not in a position to reject careerism because they have to support themselves economically, of even a feminist resurfacing of maternalism.

While I would have liked Stephens to consider this problem of difference more thoroughly, it is after all an intractable problem in feminist thinking about motherhood, so I don't expect that Stephens would have solved it. What she has done is provide an excellent overview of the possibilities and the challenges of unearthing the maternalism that much of feminism has actively forgotten and an exemplary approach to engaging in this project despite its risks and that is a very valuable contribution to feminist theory.