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Embedding Mothering at the Heart of Politics: *Mamsie*, Ten Years On

Lynne Segal

Birkbeck College, University of London, GB

l.segal@bbk.ac.uk

Despite an ever-greater interest in mothering over the decade since 2009, it seems clear that accounts of maternal experiences today still routinely express fears of failure and chronic frustration. I connect this with time constraints arising from the long hours of paid work most mothers are now performing, alongside ongoing welfare cuts generally and the privatisation or outsourcing of public resources – especially since 2010. This tells me that caretaking generally, and mothering in particular, can never be decisively separated from the broader political arena. On the contrary, we need to place reproductive politics, and what is now recognised as a general ‘crisis of care’, at the very heart of politics. Thus, I conclude that the only way forward is to replace the long outdated, traditional notion of the male breadwinner, now superseded by the realities of the universal breadwinner, with genuine support for a notion of the universal caregiver. This would ensure policies attempting to provide everyone with the time and resources necessary to care for their own dependent children, if they are parents, or to support others who depend on them for care, alongside possibilities for maintaining community life and engaging in the preservation of the world itself.

I was lucky enough to be at the refreshing launch of *Mamsie*, and I even had the privilege of being interviewed by Lisa for its opening issue. There were certainly signs of generational differences between us, which we wanted to address, as well as points of agreement. At its close, I expressed surprise at Lisa's feeling, shared with fellow academics such as the impressive feminist scholar Griselda Pollock, that neither their colleagues, nor their students, were very interested in the maternal – 'eyes glazed over' when motherhood is mentioned. Lisa felt that this was all the more true back then, given that 'a return to "hard" politics [prioritising class and economic issues] has come to the fore' (Segal & Baraitser, 2009). Always a little 'out of time', perhaps, I felt rather differently that it was precisely at *this* time that I had myself become all the more interested in the complex significance of mothering and the maternal – figuratively, psychically, culturally and politically. Strangely, I felt this had never fully registered in my own years of quotidian mothering, during my son's childhood, or when being mothered as a child by a routinely absent maternal figure. Interestingly, it is the polarisation between reflections on caring work and motherhood, on the one hand, and 'hard politics', on the other, that I believe has changed most of all over the last ten years, which I'll explain.

In the decade years since 2009 the cultural and political landscape has kept changing; mostly for the worse on all indications of personal misery and social disquiet (see Dorling 2016).¹ This has produced a renewed interest in issues of mothering, and caring more generally, given ever-deepening cultural alarm over the expanding crisis of care. Especially since the election of the Cameron government in 2010, talk of a 'care deficit' has grown, along with ongoing welfare cuts and the privatisation or outsourcing of public resources, all speeded up in the name of 'austerity'. Women overall, alongside men, are mostly tightly enmeshed in long hours of paid work, usually outside the home, as well as being overwhelmingly the hardest hit by cuts to benefits. This reflects what Nancy Fraser (2016) calls the 'universal breadwinner' model, which has now largely replaced the earlier paternalistic 'male

¹ Danny Dorling, *A Better Politics: How Government: Can Make Us Happier (Perspectives)*. London: London Publishing Partnership, 2016.

breadwinner' role. Moreover, this has occurred just when longer working hours and resource cutbacks undermine most people's time or capacity to care adequately – whoever may need of their care. I referred to this troubling trend in my interview ten years ago, but it has only intensified ever since, taking on more pernicious forms.

Ironically, it should be clear that politics and mothering can no longer be decisively separated, if only because of all the cultural work now put into suggesting that they should. This is especially evident in rhetoric urging women – women in particular – to find the correct 'work-life' balance. Women are the focus of such talk because mothering is still viewed as the primordial manifestation of caring work. The reality is that people's lack of time or resources has made it difficult for most women to juggle the demands of paid work and caring, especially when they have so-called 'dependents'. This has meant that today it is the inadequacies in care provision, at every level, which is increasingly named as a political problem. Indeed, the American anthropologist Laura Briggs turns any notion of 'hard' politics on its head. In her compelling book *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics* (2017), she concludes, rather dramatically, that 'in the USA ... there is no outside to reproductive politics, even though that fact is sometimes obscured'.² Until governments pay attention to this, offering real support for sustaining all households and communities, the crises of our time will only deepen – and not just in the USA. Like others, Briggs notes that in the West, especially in the USA, it is likely that the parents of young children will both be working vastly long hours in paid employment and increasingly relying upon child-minders imported from other parts of the globe. These migrant care workers usually have children of their own, who will be farmed out to relatives or left uncared for in poorer countries around the world. Many researchers are now busy mapping the personal miseries, economic and political mayhem this generates, which is why we are beginning to hear just a little more about the need to prioritise reproductive politics today (see Meghani, 2018).³

² Laura Briggs, *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics: From Welfare Reform to From Welfare Reform to Foreclosure to Trump*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017, p. 4.

³ Zahra Meghani (ed) *Women Migrant Workers: Ethical, Political and Legal Problems*. London: Routledge, 2015.

This is far from the first time that mothering and politics have been closely entwined. And it was not just at the inception of second-wave feminism that women began pondering the mismatch between young mothers' sense of isolation and irrelevance while confined to the home and their desire for greater participation in the wider world. The need to rethink women's domestic lives surfaces whenever women organise collectively on any front, although this is routinely soon forgotten (See Wortis 1974; Oakley 1972).⁴ Women's suffrage demands enter our history books, but organisations such as the National Homemakers Union, formed in the wake of first-wave feminism, disappear from the records—along with all the other movements for rethinking personal life as a way of fighting for radical political transformation. Few document this erasure of women's struggles around personal and domestic life better than the feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham in *Dreamers of a New Day* (2010). In her book, Rowbotham concludes that despite all of women's earlier battles to reconcile the personal and the political, to translate their private experiences and desires into the public sphere of politics, 'there is no automatic accretion of improvement', but rather the need for reinvention in each new era (Rowbotham, 2010, p. 240; Segal 2017, chapter 6.) This observation helps explain why so much remains so unresolved in women's personal lives some fifty years after second-wave feminism not only kicked off highlighting the extent of women's personal domestic miseries, but also succeeded in securing many significant reforms relating to reproductive issues and family life.

Today, we are deluged with books about mothering, mostly suggesting that the experience is getting harder and more treacherous. Fear, failure, frustration, and a chronic sense of foreboding, are the emotions these books convey, quite as much, no, more strongly, than desire, delight and celebration. Such apprehension is not something I recall from my days of mothering. 'Apologies all round', is how the eminent Irish novelist Anne Enright begins her own reflection on the matter in *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* (2004). Her book, unlike many others from

⁴ Rochelle P. Wortis, Child-rearing and women's liberation. In Michelene Wandor, *The Body Politic: Writings from the Women's Liberation in Britain*. London: Stage 1, 1969–1972; Ann Oakley. *Housewife*. London: Allen Lane, 1974.

successful women writers, was well received. Although Enright is a high-achieving, now affluent celebrity, I'd suggest the success of the book was because it is thick with apology; self-mockery and confusion. Like most literary mothers nowadays, Enright rejects the idea of the selfless mother. She notes that in her experience, the mother's all-consuming love for babies and families can vanish with a 'single crying jag'. She writes of wondering whom she hates the most, 'her baby, her husband or herself?' (Enright 2004, p. 136).

Such self-mockery and confusion are hardly surprising when the contradictions surrounding motherhood mount by the day: our token idealisation of motherhood (still emblematic of womanhood) barely conceals widespread ambivalence, many would say genuine antipathy, towards the maternal. I would suggest that this is because motherhood, and caring work generally, is more at odds than ever with success in a neoliberal climate. This is a climate in which resilience, autonomy, choice, productivity and success are today valued above all else: necessary to save us from all we hear about the 'pathologies' of 'dependency', poverty, 'failure'. As other feminists have been analysing, nowadays we rarely find ourselves outside market metrics. We are encouraged to be forever self-monitoring to raise our own personal value: nowadays all must strive to be winners and, if mothers, succeed in raising our children to fit this zeitgeist if they are to flourish (see Brown, 2015; Rottenberg, 2018). This implants an uncaring disavowal of fragility, dependency or any persisting engagement in the work of care, unless that work serves our own immediate interests, or we are outsourcing it to others as paid labour. Such labour is precisely the low-waged, precarious employment that has been exploding in recent decades.

Meanwhile, in or out of the workforce, we must all now speed up, network, keep 'growing' our skill sets, just to stay in the job market or advance our careers or social status generally, whatever our caring or maternal commitments. Straining to stay forever buoyant, thrusting and ambitious, or at least striving to give that impression, further entrenches the disdain for 'dependency' and the difficulties of developing any habits of care. For we know that caring work, done well, requires the time to slow down, stop simply prioritizing ourselves and maintain relational continuity and temporal elasticity, taking stock of the person being cared for, child or adult. Adequate

caring needs to be done as patiently and attentively as possible, providing safety and security to enable others to use or develop what capacities they have (see Tronto 2013). This is why the market has few ways of valuing either reproduction or care work: caring time is the antithesis of commodified time, at least on the production line. Here is the origin of talk of 'work-life' balance, but with all value placed on one side, mocking any genuine concern with 'balance'.

Studying the literature on mothering over the last decade reveals most mothers expressing some sense of maternal inadequacy, most often feelings of guilt at the lack of time, energy and capacity for enjoyment left over for childcare and family life. Those books written and consumed by mothers themselves ('Mums-lit') suggest anxious, envious sentiments, with other mothers the target of satire and ridicule, even when apparently rejecting notions of maternal perfectionism (Garrett, 2013). They appear to illustrate Angela McRobbie's description of the 'intensification of mothering' in which aspiring, sexually confident middle-class motherhood is consistently pitched against 'an image of the abject, slovenly and benefit-dependent "underclass" single mother, the UK equivalent of the US "welfare queen"' (McRobbie, 2013).

Certainly, the last ten years have ramped up the shocking media vilification of poorer mothers, especially of single mothers on benefits, in rhetoric that works politically to divert attention away from structural inequality into the shaming of supposedly failing mothers. (Skeggs & Woods, 2011) This process reached its apotheosis in documentary programmes such as *Benefit Streets*. Here working-class mothers on benefits are filmed in ways deliberately designed to provoke moral outrage, not at the poverty or restrictions women endured on benefits, but instead on intimations of women's greedy, lazy, unhealthy lifestyles. As Tracey Jensen notes, *Benefit Streets* was Channel 4's most popular programme in 2014, with any notion of social injustice transformed into opportunities to scrutinise the habits of the poor and their errant ways (Jensen, 2018). Programmes like this confirm how easily mothers can still be targeted, scapegoated for personal and social problems alike (see Rose, 2018).⁵

⁵ See Jacqueline Rose *Mother: an Essay on Love and Cruelty*. London: Faber and Faber, 2018.

Such 'poverty voyeurism' is perhaps all the more cathartic when, at the other end of the class division, we also find heightened levels of anxiety and resentment. In her book *Heading Home* (2018), Shani Orgad interviews highly educated professional women who have apparently 'chosen' to leave their former well-paid jobs for full-time mothering. Despite access to private resources, Orgad discovers these mothers suffering from many of the symptoms of that 1950s housewife, the distress that once had no name. These 'privileged' women usually insist that they know they have made the right decision, yet report the same old unease about now feeling dependent on and subordinate to their husbands, while often expressing similar experiences of loneliness and isolation that women's liberationists uncovered half a century ago: 'it's quite lonely for a woman to be at home all the time', these full-time mothers confide in Orgad; one referring openly to the 'emotional and psychological trauma' of 'leaving her life behind'. Thus, even as these mothers extol the virtues of their choice, there is anger and resentment underneath, as they also sense what they barely dare to confront, which is that it was the huge demands of their former working lives combined with the inflexibilities of their husbands careers that lay behind their 'heading home' (Orgad, 192; 255).⁶

Unsurprisingly, these particular, predominantly white homemakers were mostly sarcastic and cynical about the possibilities for overcoming gender inequality, which their own choices were helping to uphold. This is the real victory of these neoliberal times: that most women feel it simply impossible to believe, or even envisage, that there could be alternatives to existing gender inequality, since that would mean both the struggle to transform workplaces as well as hold out for genuine equality within the home. At the very least, a decade after *Mamsie's* launch, we can see that the need for it is stronger than ever. None of the old problems that feminists identified around mothering have been solved. Many have worsened along with the shrivelling of community life, leaving family life more under pressure and segregated. This could indeed lead many to the resigned conclusion that motherhood necessarily

⁶ Shani Orgad, *Heading Home: Motherhood, Work, and the Failed Promise of Equality*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, p. 192; 255.

involves sacrifice and loss. However, if still slightly 'out of time', I refuse to accept this. Fortunately, I am not alone.

As the psychoanalytic theorist Lynne Layton suggests, neoliberalism has produced the systematic failure of any caretaking environment, and it is not beyond our imaginations to see how it might be otherwise (see Layton 2010, p. 308).⁷ Marching in step with Layton, the much acclaimed, recent historian of motherhood, Sarah Knott, concludes her magnificent overview of her sense of maternal affinity with the silenced voices of mothers over the centuries with a call to action: 'A defence of caring under late capitalism, uttered by caregivers of every persuasion – adoptive, biological and employed; female, male, lesbian, gay, trans and the rest – could be a wide coalition indeed' (Knott 2019, p. 258).⁸ I can only agree. How, why, whether and which of us feel able to undertake the essential work of caring for those in need of care at any age, must be embedded, finally, at the very heart of politics – however uniquely challenging or rewarding, distinctly confusing or contradictory, our ways of caring might be. Once we factor in planetary concerns, it is even more obvious that empowering the universal caregiver, who is not necessarily a mother, is the only way forward.

Editor's Note

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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⁷ Lynne Layton, Irrational exuberance: Neoliberal subjectivity and the perversion of truth. *Subjectivity*, 2010, 3, p. 308.

⁸ Sarah Knott, *Mother: An Unconventional History*. London: Viking, 2019, p. 258.

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