



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity
Partner Network

Studies in the Maternal

Book and Exhibition Review

How to Cite: Stephens, J. 2019. Review of *Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract*. *Studies in the Maternal*, 11(1): 10, pp. 1–7. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/sim.280>

Published: 20 December 2019

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Studies in the Maternal*, which is a journal published by the *Open Library of Humanities*.

Copyright:

© 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access:

Studies in the Maternal is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

The Open Library of Humanities is an open access non-profit publisher of scholarly articles and monographs.

BOOK AND EXHIBITION REVIEW

Review of *Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract*

Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract, by Petra Bueskens, London; New York: Routledge, £105, 2018, Hardback, ISBN 978-1-138-67742-5

Julie Stephens

Victoria University, AU

Julie.Stephens@VU.EDU.AU

Julie Stephens reviews Petra Bueskens' book, *Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract* (Routledge, 2018).

Encounters with scholarly work in the hybrid space that has come to be called 'motherhood studies' can be mixed. Empirical research framed within theoretical categories taken from feminism, philosophy, sociology or psychoanalysis is not always an easy fit. While this uneasiness is both a strength and a weakness in an emergent interdisciplinary field of inquiry, the challenge seems to be to develop a different way of theorising the maternal. This would include acknowledging the limits of previous approaches (including feminist ones), building on and extending existing research, traversing disciplinary boundaries and making a distinctive research and theoretical contribution of its own. Petra Bueskens' *Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract* (2018) more than meets these challenges in an ambitious, wide-ranging, deeply historical and philosophical analysis of modernity, the liberal-democratic social contract and the paradoxical category of 'individualised mother'.

Bueskens' book is not simply about the contradictory roles women play as mothers (as the title may suggest), or just about mothers having a dual conflicting identity between the private and public spheres—even though the text covers these issues in detail. The experience of such familiar incompatibilities differs markedly depending on the class and cultural privilege of particular mothers. In the case of middle-class dual-income households, the unequal division of labour is increasingly outsourced, and the illusion of unencumbered individualised subjectivity can be maintained through ever more privatised and intensified forms of mothering. Instead, Bueskens identifies and theorises a different and more foundational structural duality that has produced two discordant modes of self for mothers.

To better understand the origins of this incompatibility, Bueskens takes us on an excursion into the heart of liberal democratic theory and political philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries via Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau. She carefully maps the gender-specific contradictions inherent in the early modern development of women's individualisation. Following Carole Pateman (1988), Bueskens details how individualist liberal rights-based ethics were based upon the subjugation of women, while simultaneously freeing women to become sovereign

individuals. Indeed, one of the many scholarly contributions of this book concerns its discussion of Pateman's enduring and 'astonishingly overlooked' legacy. Bueskens reminds us about Pateman's analysis of the modernisation of patriarchy and two of its most crucial enabling and disabling consequences for women: first, the separation of political and paternal right, with the transformation of paternal right into male right; second, the depoliticization of women's subjection. For Pateman, women's complex status in the modern civil order is due to them being included and excluded because of the very same capacities and attributes: women are both sovereign and subjected. The purportedly-female attributes associated with emotion, nature, sexuality, sentiment and reproduction (and one might say connected to the pre-modern) are in contradistinction to the self-governing, 'free' individual.

Importantly, while Bueskens applies Pateman's theoretical framework to late modernity and further extends it to the conflict between women's individualised selves and their maternal selves, she rejects Pateman's formulation that these contradictions somehow foreclose the category of 'the individual' to women. The book moves from a nuanced and lucid account of the philosophical foundations of modernity to a more material analysis of what Bueskens calls 'the new sexual contract'. In the late modern period and post-second-wave feminism, this new contract further splinters the lives of women further when they become mothers. A structural interdependence comes into play between two dialectical modes of self: one where women can be free as women, and another where women are constrained as mothers. Previous forms of liberalism built on internal contradictions for women have become overlain with other penalties, expectations and conundrums for contemporary mothers. Following Locke, women in the late modern period were constituted as 'unfree free agents' (p.87). However, in what Bueskens calls a 'deregulated patriarchy', women can be 'normatively free and equal citizens', but this freedom becomes contingent when women have children. In one of the highly condensed and compelling phrases in the book, Bueskens contends that '*motherhood has become an individualised risk*' (p.167 emphasis in the original):

The unfinished business of western feminism (and arguably western society) is the *individualised mother*. We have come to accept the independent woman, but the independent mother is still structurally and psychologically constrained. Given the interdependence of the public and private spheres and the historical relegation of women to the private sphere, in combination with women's majority preference to undertake and prioritise mothering, social reorganisation is both necessary and inevitable. (p.178)

Bueskens' discussion of the new sexual contract is one of the masterly moves in this book. It provides a theoretical framework from which a constellation of insights emerges. It offers a less binary notion of duality and brings to the fore different bodies of knowledge, including feminist social theory, political economy, sociology and also psychoanalysis.

It would be difficult to find similar research that matches the richness and breadth of the scholarship Bueskens introduces and employs to support her argument. Unlike some of the work classified under the designation 'motherhood studies', there is no over-reach in the claims made in this book. Alongside the detail provided about the 'gender-poverty gap' for significant numbers of mothers, and the discussion of the psychosocial effects of intensive mothering ideologies and practices, the book is founded on solid and innovative empirical research. Of note, Bueskens records and analyses the conversational testimony of a particular group of contemporary mothers, whom she calls (somewhat idiosyncratically) 'revolving mothers'. These women adopted a strategy to reduce the conflict between their 'free' individualised selves and their 'unfree' maternal selves. In what is a small but not insignificant sample, these women (in consultation with their partners, where relevant, and with their children) instituted strategic, periodic 'maternal absence' (from several days to several months) as a way to reduce the conflict in their otherwise bifurcated lives. Spending time away from their children to concentrate on projects, whether they be academic, artistic or professional, also addressed some of the inequalities they experienced in domestic labour and care-work, as their partners 'revolved in' to take over the care-based responsibilities. Bueskens contends that

these periods of maternal absence disrupted the gendered dynamics of care. This minority of women were, in effect, rewriting the sexual contract.

This empirical research functions as a sensitive and engaging case study of one possibility of resistance and change. It illuminates the common strains, tensions and inequalities experienced by this group of well-educated, partnered women once they became mothers. One of the key research problematics comes to the fore in the interviews:

In late modernity, women are free as individuals but not as mothers. Their legally and socially recognised status as 'individuals' does not carry over into their position as mothers, because the category of 'the individual' presupposes specifically the existence of a reserve of flexible domestic and emotional labour traditionally and contemporaneously carried out by women. With few exceptions, women cannot call upon such a reserve because they *are* that reserve. (p.279)

While the 'revolving mothers' tell us much about contemporary maternal subjectivity and the pleasures of brief periods of unencumbered autonomy, their testimony is less useful as a model or as a more general emancipatory path beyond the sexual contract. This is where a class analysis would have been valuable. For instance, many dual-income families in Australia struggle to pay for rent, services and food, and the mother's partner is likely caught in an equally conflictual relationship between family and paid work. Hence, I think a detailed section on the limitations of the empirical research would have better contextualised the study.

For me, the case study of the 'revolving mothers' works more on a metaphoric level, much like Virginia Woolf's call in 1929 for women to have a room of their own in her famous essay 'A Room of One's Own'. Woolf wanted women to have leisure, education, privacy and a level of financial independence that would only have been in reach to the privileged few (either men or women) in 1929. Woolf's £500, translated into today's currency, would still be completely unattainable for many contemporary women. This does not detract from this essay's importance in the history of

feminist thought. The radicalism of the idea of women being able to have freedom and financial security is underpinned by the metaphoric significance of having 'one's own room'. The notion of mothers 'revolving' perhaps serves a similar purpose.

Despite the limitations of the interview data, Bueskens ensures that her empirical and theoretical research functions to illustrate in concrete, material ways how the conditions of its transgression underpin the sexual contract. This is a crucial, dialectical, feminist insight. As such, *Modern Motherhood* stands in contrast to the other literature in the field that focuses solely on the exclusion of women that was ushered in by the early modern differentiation of public and private and their relegation to a form of civil 'non-existence'. Rather than straightforward exclusion, Bueskens draws our attention both to the doors that have been opened and those that have been closed in the transition to modernity. Notably, this book theorises an *interrelation*, a mutually constitutive duality rather than a simple binary one in which mothers with dependent children are caught. Bueskens' analysis is less totalising than Pateman's and its liberatory politics much more open-ended. In identifying the cracks and fissures in the sexual contract, the book signals, among other things, alternative social, political and domestic arrangements whereby motherhood could be transformed from an individualised liability to a remunerated social good, with all the freedom and equality that modernity was supposed to bequeath to women in the first place. *Modern Motherhood* makes an enormous contribution to feminist social theory. It is poised to become one of the definitive texts in the maternal studies field.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

Pateman, C. 1988. *The Sexual Contract*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Woolf, V. 1935 [1929]. *A Room of One's Own*. London: Hogarth Press.

How to cite this article: Stephens, J. 2019. Review of *Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract*. *Studies in the Maternal*, 11(1): 10, pp.1-7. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/sim.280>

Published: 20 December 2019

Copyright: © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Studies in the Maternal is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

OPEN ACCESS The Open Access icon, which is a stylized 'A' inside a circle.