

Educating Our Children for the Future?

The Shifting Tides of Maternal Pedagogy

With the altering circumstances of an insular American Fordist economy sponsored by big state, big industry and big unions morphing into a global service-oriented economy sponsored by finance capital, corporations and banks, the resultant fragmented and insecure world has produced a corresponding alteration in terms of mothering discourses. This article traces the shifting tides of maternal pedagogy in the western world (primarily amongst middle-class Americans) since the 1970s to reveal the association between maternal discourses and the encompassing political/economic milieu. While there is invariably a gap between discursive frameworks and lived realities, identifying such dominant frameworks helps to create greater holistic understanding of culturally/socially/historically defined processes, thereby enabling the deconstruction of their hegemonic influences.

In *Under Pressure: Rescuing Childhood from the Culture of Hyper-Parenting*, Carl Honoré writes, “The twentieth century saw the rise of the Free-Range Child. Now we have entered the age of the Managed Child” (4). Depression, self-harm, and eating disorders among children are on the rise, with increasing cases of stress-induced illnesses. The World Health Organization estimates that by 2020 mental illness will be one of the top five causes of death or disability in the young (cited in Honoré 8-9). In *Childhood Under Siege: How Big Business Targets Children*, Joel Bakan discusses the dramatic increase since the 1980s in children taking psychotropic drugs, the growing kid marketing industry and the increase in children’s chronic health problems including asthma, cancer, autism, and birth defects (5). And yet, amidst this concern regarding the current “crisis of childhood,” who is invariably the person responsible for the “managed” life of the child? Where does society place all blame for this supposed transition from

the 1970s Free-Range child to the post-1990s Managed child?—the *mother*.

When Amy Chua released her book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, which was *supposed* to be a story about how Chinese parents are better at raising kids than Western ones, the media outcry was deafening.

Choice ... I wonder if that's what it all comes down to... "You have to give your children the freedom to pursue their passion" when it's obvious that the "passion" is just going to turn out to be Facebook for ten hours which is a total waste of time and eating all that disgusting junk food—I'm telling you this country is going to go *straight downhill!*" (Chua 227)

Chua's words struck a deep chord in the American psyche. Obama's 2011 "Winning the Future" campaign prioritizes education as essential to America's future in this precarious global economy. Honoré writes, "As recent as the 1960s and 1970s, many Western schools cleaved to the Rousseauesque ideal of freedom and childcentricity, stressing creativity, spontaneity and nonconformity over discipline, rote learning, and tests. But then came the backlash. In the 1980s, governments across the English-speaking world began imposing heavier workloads, more testing, and longer hours in the classroom. This back-to-basics shift was partly driven by the fear that industrious East Asian children were pulling ahead in international test scores" (115). Chua's words suggest not only are American children failing in the educational department, but the concepts of "freedom" and "choice" so integral to the American societal imagination are apparently producing a generation of slacker children leading to the fall of American global hegemony.

The "Good" Mother

Andrea O'Reilly writes in the "Introduction" to *Mother Outlaws*, "The institution and ideology of good motherhood is rewritten whenever a social reorganization is desired" (5). In *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, Sara Ruddick writes "...preservation, growth, and social acceptability—constitute maternal work; to be a mother is to be committed to meeting these demands by works of preservative love, nurturance, and training" (17). As Ruddick discusses, these aspects of maternal thinking are historically and culturally defined, particularly the "training." "Training" requires that mothers shape their children in "acceptable" ways. The historically contingent dominant values and norms of society determine what is "acceptable," thereby defining the qualities and attributes that are prioritized. Although, "In training their children ... mothers find opportunities to express their own values as well as to challenge and

invigorate dominant creeds” (21). Chua questioned this aspect of “training” in American child-rearing practices, thus questioning the very core of American societal values. However, given the current hyper-competitive globalized world, Americans themselves are beginning to question the “training” of their children, thereby explaining the flurry of debate sparked by Chua’s book. What are the core American values and norms mothers should be imparting to their children? Is it democracy and equality, or is it competition and success?

The Rise (and Fall?) of Intensive Mothering

In order to trace shifting maternal pedagogies, we first need to position dominant American societal conceptualizations of the “good mother” within their historical context. 1970s second-wave feminist paradigms initiated an active investigation into universal and biological conceptualizations of both the “family” and “motherhood” (Chodorow; Firestone; Ortner; Rich; Rosaldo and Lamphere). The desire was to repudiate modernist functionalist and Freudian conceptualizations of naturalized motherhood (Ainsworth 1977a, 1977b; Bowlby; Freud; Parsons). Of particular importance was the publication of Nancy Scheper-Hughes’s 1985 article, “Culture, Scarcity, and Maternal Thinking: Maternal Detachment and Infant Survival in a Brazilian Shantytown” and her subsequent 1992 book, *Death without Weeping: Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*. These works were pivotal in deconstructing the previously presumed naturalness of motherhood and maternal love.

It is no coincidence that the 1990s marked a pivotal decade for maternal theorizing and the advent of an increasingly mainstream discourse on motherhood. The 1970s attempts to denaturalize motherhood quickly led to increasingly stringent and regulatory mothering paradigms in the late 1980s and 1990s wherein mothers became the primary focus for reproducing self-reliant neoliberal subjects in the wake of decreasing social support and economic de-regulation. Many theorists have defined the current role of “the mother” as entailing something called Intensive Mothering (Douglas and Michaels; Hays 1996; Horwitz; Maushart; Morris; O’Reilly 2006; Rubenstein; Thurer; Walkerdine and Lucey; Warner 2005). This involves positioning children as social capital to be “invested in.” In “Why Can’t a Mother Be More Like a Businessman?” Sharon Hays defines Intensive Mothering as “child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive” (2007: 414). Emerging from the extravagance and optimism of the 1980s supermom discourse, the 1990s recession coupled with extreme neoliberal policy led to a rapid devaluation of the “glamorous working mom,” a backlash against feminism, and a sudden desired return to the “cult of domesticity” (Warner 2007: 709–711).

However, while Intensive Mothering remains a dominant “good mother” discourse in America, there is an emerging critique. Mothers have been articulating this critique since the height of Intensive Mothering in the mid-1990s through various “bad” mother narratives and increasingly within a social media space (Friedman). Maternal theorizing has been pivotal in identifying the sacrificial mother discourse as a maternal pedagogy that de-legitimizes the mother by only acknowledging the child’s needs (O’Reilly 2006). However, in sharp contrast, the increasing media and political backlash against intensive mothering is *not* to support mothers, but rather to de-legitimize mothers further by placing full blame for the current state of American society on the Intensive Mother. If we are to understand the rise (and fall?) of intensive mothering as a dominant maternal pedagogy, we need to position the central tenets of intensive mothering within the political/economic/historical context.

Democratic Mothering

In *Democracy in the Kitchen: Regulating Mothers and Socialising Daughters*, Valerie Walkerdine and Helen Lucey ask the question, “How are daughters raised, how are mothers made to be ‘proper’ mothers and what does all this have to do with democracy?” (preface). *Democracy in the Kitchen* was published in 1989 and although it refers to post-war parenting, it most clearly reflects parenting practices in the 1970s and early 1980s. Walkerdine and Lucey make the pivotal connection between the political-economic milieu and mothering discourses. They reflect a Cold War time period dominated by political ideologies prioritizing “democracy” and “freedom” where “the kitchen” became the “place in which liberal democracy was to be guaranteed through the management of mothering” (1). In an era of equal-opportunities rhetoric, authoritative working-class mothers were vilified as an affront to democracy. The democratic age required “free thinkers.” Authoritarianism was the basis of oppression. 1970s mothering rhetoric emphasized “no overt regulation . . . no insensitive sanctions as these would interfere with the child’s illusion that she is the source of her wishes, that she has ‘free will’” (24).

Having interviewed my mother, who was a Montessori teacher in Holland and Canada from 1964 to 1971 and proceeded to raise my sister and me during the 1970s and 1980s, her words share remarkable synchronicity. “At home, we had to teach our children right from wrong in a pleasant way, but never being hit and there was no time out. We never did that. It was a loving way of bringing up, a free way.” When I asked my mother about educational concerns, she responded, “There was never anything about going to the best pre-school or the best school. We never talked about anything like that. We

just went to the neighbourhood school where you're supposed to go to. And the cost was not an issue. It was an atmosphere of playing. Those days up to grade six you were really children. There were no worries. There were no big discussions what you're going to do after. All we said to you was that whatever you like to do and what you're good at, that's what you do. We never worried about university. For us, there was time enough for that. Because how can you know if you're going to be really smart in high school? You don't know that ahead yet. We didn't look ahead. For me, a child had to be a child" (Vandenbeld, interview).

Of course, Walkerdine and Lucey make the crucial point that "democracy" was a rhetoric utilized to regulate the population. As post-structural third-wave feminist theorists have illustrated, the concepts of "choice," "equality" and "freedom" are carefully fabricated illusions utilized to push societal agendas of complicity consistent with the current economic/political needs (Butler; Collins; Haraway; hooks; Spivak). As Philippe Ariès reveals in *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, the space of childhood and the "family" as an idealized construct has been the place of regulation ever since the emergence of liberal democracy in the Western world. Arguing from a historical demographic perspective, Ariès writes, "...the family occupied a tremendous place in our industrial societies, and that it had perhaps never before exercised so much influence over the human condition" (10). Ariès goes on to identify the nineteenth century as the Century of the Child. As Bakan describes in *Childhood Under Siege*, "A broad-based child-saving movement began to emerge during the nineteenth century. By the twentieth century ... most modern nations had committed to the notion, historically rooted in the common law principle of *parens patriae*, that societies, through their governments, are obliged to protect children and promote their interests.... The century's progressive momentum came to a sudden halt, however, near its end—in 1980 to be exact" (8-9).

As Walkerdine and Lucey illustrate, the discourse of "liberty" and "freedom" so essential to the democratic age produced only the illusion of the autonomous child. And yet these concepts of "freedom" and "choice" are integral to Intensive Mothering. Instead of seeing Intensive Mothering as a maternal pedagogy that suddenly arose in the 1990s, it is better to consider it an amplification of democratic mothering. In other words, democratic mothering as the dominant maternal pedagogy in the 1970s was part of the larger global political/economic narrative of America rising, intricately connected to globalization and the hegemony of American democracy. However, the 1970s Free-Range child was also a continuance of earlier maternal pedagogic trajectories.

A brief foray into Benjamin Spock reveals how his seminal book, *Baby and*

Child Care—first printed in 1945 as *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*—reflects a maternal pedagogic shift from one of authoritative to that of democratic mothering in the second half of the twentieth century reflecting a historical transition from feudalistic to democratic societies in Euro-America. As Spock writes,

During the first half of this century in this country, babies were usually kept on very strict, regular schedules.... Strictness was preached and practiced everywhere—on the dairy farm, in the commercial dairy, and in the home. Doctors and nurses feared irregular feeding so strongly that they came to disapprove of it psychologically, too, and taught mothers that it would lead to spoiling the child... I think, though, that there has been a certain amount of misunderstanding. Some young parents, eager to be progressive, have assumed that if they wanted to get away from the rigid scheduling of the past they must go all the way in the opposite direction, feed their baby any time he woke and never wake him for a feeding, just as if they were conducting a scientific experiment, or as if there were a fundamental superiority in irregularity. This may work out well enough if the baby is a peaceful one with a good digestion...but if the baby happens to be a ...fretful one, it can lead to a great many feedings and very little rest for the parents.... (52-53)

Spock's book was so successful because he represented a transitional historical moment. He was able to speak to an earlier authoritative regime while also incorporating a more democratic maternal pedagogy. If we view Intensive Mothering in much the same way, we can see how Intensive Mothering enfolded the democratic elements of the 1970s maternal pedagogy while simultaneously adopting more authoritarian aspects. Hence, the "managed child" of whom Honoré speaks is presumably "managed" by the Intensive Mother organizing the child's play dates on her Blackberry while driving her child to various "enhancing" activities and negotiating with said child the "joys" of such activities so the child believes it is her "choice" to participate. In this way, Intensive Mothering embraces the most sacrificial elements of the democratic mothering discourse to such an extent, the mother no longer exists within the paradigm except as the child's "manager." Until, of course, the mother becomes pivotal when American society requires a scapegoat for the failure of the current "me-generation" to achieve success. Despite record unemployment and global recession, it is presumably the Intensive Mother who has produced these slacker children that seem unable to maintain America's presumed "rightful" global hegemony.

The Authoritative Mother

This leads us to the positioning of Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* book and its symbolic significance within these shifting frameworks of maternal pedagogy. If a maternal pedagogy advocating "equality" and "democracy" regulates mothers to position themselves as "naturally" enabling their children's "free will" to flourish, what does the Tiger Mother represent? During the 1970s, authoritative working-class mothers were vilified. The media sensation resulting from Chua's book release reflected both vilification *and* valorization of the Tiger Mother symbol, thereby exemplifying this shifting space of maternal pedagogy.

In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey writes, "Future historians may well look upon the years 1978-80 as a revolutionary turning-point in the world's social and economic history" (1). Harvey defines this transition in terms of an emerging social/economic/political ethos called neoliberalism. Harvey defines neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade... It holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market" (2-3). For the purposes of this paper, "neoliberal" is to be regarded as a hegemonic social ethos wherein the prioritization of financialization has resulted in the infiltration and dominance of the economic within all spheres of political and social life, transforming the consciousness of society. In "Financialised Capitalism: Crisis and Financial Expropriation," Costas Lapavistas describes financialization as the process whereby speculative investment moved from the zone of investment banks, corporations and states to the everyday zone of personal income (115). "Financialisation ... has allowed the ethics, morality and mindset of finance to penetrate social and individual life" (116).

In much the same way discourses of "democracy" and "equality" were utilized as tools of regulation during the politicized Cold War era, in the current (post-1980s) economic, globalized era, discourses of "difference" and "scarcity" form the primary theoretical justifications. The ideology of "freedom" remains integral, but the way in which "freedom" is defined has been altered within an economic rather than political framework. From 1945 until the early 1970s, Keynesian fiscal and monetary policies created a state-defined social and moral economy producing high rates of economic growth in the advanced capitalist countries. The political discourse of abundance juxtaposed against the Cold War anti-communist sentiments established "democracy" and "equality" as the primary discursive framework of maternal pedagogy. It is not a coincidence

that Spock's book was published in 1945 and continued to be a bestseller well into the 1970s. As Walkerdine and Lucey write in *Democracy in the Kitchen*, mothers were to ensure their children would become properly enculturated "free thinking" citizens for the democratic age. Abundance enables a discursive framework of equality. If there is enough for all, then everyone can theoretically have a piece of the pie. The reality and the discursive ideologies often share no resemblance; however, it is necessary to understand why particular discursive frameworks become dominant in particular social/cultural/historical moments.

The 1970s and early 1980s remained dominated by a "democratic" maternal pedagogy even though the 1970s mark a pivotal moment of historical change. It is in the mid-1980s when the neoliberal ethos begins to penetrate mainstream discourse that maternal pedagogy begins to shift. This can be witnessed in the altering educational focus. In sharp contrast to the "play-based" 1970s educational approach, since the mid-1980s, the educational focus has become increasingly exam-centric, regimented and competitive. As Obama's 2011 "Winning the Future" campaign illustrates, in the new innovation economy, education is being positioned as key to economic success. Since neoliberalism frames everything within an economic paradigm, quantifiable economic success becomes the only worthy goal. Even the "pursuit of happiness" becomes an empty platitude unless "happiness" can be proven to have measurable economic results in increased productivity. The 1970s concept of "letting children be children" can only be viable if such a laissez-faire approach can be shown to have measurable results in higher test scores. As Honoré reveals, educational competition becomes paramount in a global world governed by a discourse of scarcity. Unlike the previous ideology of abundance that enabled a discursive framework of "equality," maternal pedagogy is now dominated by a discourse of "scarcity" that heightens competition and anxiety. If only one child can rise to the top, it better be mine.

A discourse of scarcity necessarily exemplifies difference. In a globalized world governed by 1 percent haves and 99 percent have-nots (as exemplified in the Occupy Wall Street movement), the "training" role of the mother is not to ensure her child becomes a participating member of society, but rather to ensure her child will be the one who becomes part of the one-percent haves. To ensure her child is the gifted one. This necessitates a very different maternal pedagogy focused on competition, scarcity, and even authoritarianism. Her child must "stand out" and "be different" so she/he will not become part of the 99 percent have-nots. And yet the more individuals strive to differentiate themselves, the more such differentiation becomes homogenized. Only certain forms of "difference" are acceptable within such a paradigm. Such neoliberal logic suggests children cannot have the "luxury" of figuring out who they want to be or what they want to do with their lives on their own because then they'll

end up being part of the mainstream working at McJobs.

For the American middle-class, mothering has become a race to ensure their child's future as early as possible leaving no margin for error or happenstance. Between the late 1970s and 1997, American children lost twelve hours a week of free time (Honoré 164). Ever since the 1990s, private tutoring has swelled into a booming global industry (155). Homework across the West waned in the 1960s/70s before rebounding in the 1980s (147). Honoré discusses the commodification of children and the need for parents to see a "return on their investment." "One of the central nostrums of modern parenting is that the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is winning entry to an elite university" (133). He also reveals some of the costs of a maternal pedagogy that emphasizes competition and constant pressure to win.

While Honoré and Bakan illustrate some very real consequences of a neoliberal maternal pedagogy that prioritizes competition, their analysis also represents the current dominant child-centric societal narrative that excludes the subjectivity of mothers. Honoré uses the term "hyper-parenting," which is another term for Intensive Mothering. Gender-neutral terms provide the illusion of equity yet in reality take away the very real differences between the lived experiences of mothers and fathers in America. Presented as a "crisis" in which children must be "rescued" from their hyper-parents (intensive mothers), this suggests a sudden and catastrophic historical moment. There can be no denying that Euro-American society has been undergoing a transition over the past thirty years. In "*Complexio Oppositorum: Notes on the Left in Neoliberal Italy*" Andrea Muehlebach writes "Neoliberalism is often better understood as a form that can contain the oppositional ... and fold them into a single moral order" (495). Just as neoliberalism can be better understood as an enfolding of dichotomous narratives amplifying the tenets of liberalism, so, too, should Intensive Mothering be seen in terms of enfolding dichotomous narratives amplified by existent maternal pedagogies. As Immanuel Wallerstein illustrates in *Historical Capitalism* where he reviews 500 years of capitalist history, while history may be cyclical, transitions never occur in "crisis" moments but are rather a slow building of almost imperceptible change until it appears as if "suddenly" a new mode has emerged.

The discourse of "Asia Rising" has created a fundamental shift in the American psyche, as reflected in Chua's book *Tiger Mother*. The fundamental association between democracy and capitalism has been torn apart. Therefore, while neoliberalism is an amplification of existent liberal tenets of "liberty" and "freedom," it can equally enfold the possibility for capitalism and communism to co-exist, thereby creating a fundamental disjuncture within the core of the American liberal value system. According to this logic, if democracy and capitalism are not necessarily wed, can we re-think our vilification of authoritarianism? As

mentioned, working-class mothers were vilified for their “authoritative” parenting style during the Cold War era in which democracy and capitalism were an assumed given. Could “Asia Rising” force us to reconceptualise our very understandings of democracy? The fact that “democracy” and “capitalism” are even being questioned suggests a fundamental societal shift. And this larger societal shift is now being felt in terms of maternal pedagogy as reflected by the vilification of the Intensive Mother.

This shifting space of maternal pedagogy is also reflected in popular maternal literature such as Pamela Druckerman’s *Bringing Up Bébé* and Elisabeth Badinter’s *The Conflict*. As Druckerman writes, “I’m hardly the first to point out that middle-class America has a parenting problem. In hundreds of books and articles this problem has been painstakingly diagnosed, critiqued, and named: overparenting, hyperparenting, helicopter-parenting, and my personal favorite, the kindergarchy.... But now, in France, I’ve glimpsed another way” (4-5). As Druckerman explains, this different way of parenting (emphasis on *parenting* even though she is talking about *mothering*) seems to “vacillate between being extremely strict and shockingly permissive” (5). Badinter discusses how with the rise of what she terms “naturalism” there has been corresponding baby orthodoxy consistent with the child-centric societal focus in America. However, Badinter includes an entire chapter titled “French Women: A Special Case” specifying how in sharp contrast to the baby-centric approach in America, in France—where bottle-feeding statistics for newborns is at 40 percent—the sacrificial Intensive Mother has not become the dominant “good mother” paradigm (88). It is not coincidental that “French mothers”—previously maligned for their “absent” mothering approach—are now being applauded for providing “another way” to mother.

Conclusion

Returning to Ruddick, the dominant discursive framework identifying how mothers should “train” their children is always politically/economically/historically situated. In this paper, I have traced the shifting tides of maternal pedagogy in the western world (primarily amongst middle-class Americans since the 1970s) to reveal the association between maternal discourses and the encompassing political/economic milieu. Whether “democracy” and “equality,” or “scarcity” and “difference” form the primary framework for dominant maternal pedagogy, relationships of power and regulation can never be superseded. However the “good mother” is defined, there will be a corresponding “bad mother.” The shift from Intensive Mothering as representing the epitome of “good mothering” to the Intensive Mother becoming the scapegoat of America is indicative of larger political/economic/societal shifts in which the inherent

American values of “democracy” and “capitalism” are no longer a naturalized given. While there is invariably a gap between discursive frameworks and lived realities, identifying such dominant frameworks helps to create greater holistic understanding of culturally/socially/historically defined processes, thereby enabling the breaking down of their hegemonic influences.

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