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Mother-Worship/ Mother-Blame: *Politics and Welfare in an Uncertain Age*

“Bad” mothers are all around us: in the news, on sitcoms, and in jail. Judith Scruggs, whose son committed suicide, was convicted of a criminal offense for failing to provide him with proper care (Scarponi, 2003). Andrea Yates, who killed her five children to protect them from the devil’s grasp, was found guilty of murder when a jury rejected the claim that she was mentally ill (“In-Depth Special: The Case of Andrea Yates,” 2001). “Bad” mothers also abound on television comedies; the intrusive Marie on “Everybody Loves Raymond” and “Malcolm in the Middle’s” hysterical mom are always good for a laugh. But where are the “good” mothers in contemporary culture? Except for Lorelei Gilmore, the very un-motherly mother on television’s “Gilmore Girls,” they are very hard to find.

In many ways, the disappearance of the “good” mother is a welcome development. You can’t have a “good mother”—at least the way the dominant culture defines her, as selfless, nurturing, and true—without a bad mother to compare her to. I used to think the opposite was also true: the bad mother was only bad when compared to a mother who was good. But now I’m not so sure.

I was curious about what had happened to the good mothers, so I did an informal survey at my kids’ school. My question—who is a “good” mother (and why)?—provoked a great deal of disagreement. For example, some people said Jane was a good mother because she is so attentive to her children, but others said that is what makes her a bad mother; her children have no space! The only agreement was among my children. When asked who’s a good mother, they all agreed, “Not you, Mom.”

Unable to find any good mothers in the schoolyard, I decided to try a Google search. The internet is full of “bad” mothers: unmarried mothers, teen mothers, mothers on drugs, mothers on welfare. Fortunately, it’s full of their

defenders too. But good mothers (or even, as the psychiatrist D. W. Winnicott [1953] would say, “good-enough” mothers) are a lot more obscure. The “good mothers” I found through Google were almost all tied to Mothers’ Day—or God. “How are mothers and Jesus alike?” one web-published sermon asked. Both are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice and lay down their lives for their children. The only difference is that when a mother dies, she stays dead, and Jesus came back to life (Christ our Savior Church, 2000).

The invisibility of “good” mothers in mainstream politics today is a significant historical change. One hundred fifty years ago, the good mother was an icon of North American political culture. Men did the nasty work of business and war, according to nineteenth-century gender ideology, while mothers stayed home in “woman’s sphere,” bearing and nurturing children and protecting their families from the heartless world outside (Evans, 1989; Prentice et al., 1988).

The maudlin mother-worship of Victorian times reached its peak in 1908, when Mothers’ Day was established in the United States by Anna Jarvis, an unmarried non-mother who apparently found in lobbying for Mother’s Day a way to achieve the public visibility and career her late mother had opposed (Jones, 1980). Women’s groups initially objected to Mothers’ Day as too sappy, but Christian Sunday Schools, politicians, and the flower industry recognized it as a great opportunity. The holiday came into its own during the First World War, when good mothers were defined as those who made the ultimate sacrifice of sending their sons to war. American Mothers’ Day literature claimed to be honouring all mothers, since war was a national project and (as one clergyman explained), “Rich and poor can meet on the common ground of love, reverence and appreciation for the mother” (Jones, 1980: 188). In reality, however, the patriotic, Christian, white, middle-class orientation of Mother’s Day excluded a lot of mothers.

That exclusion is precisely the point: mother-worship is always bound up with mother-blame. This was especially true in the years around the First World War, when industrialization, immigration, changing gender roles, and the twin projects of nation-building and (in the U.S.) empire-building heightened elite concerns about population “quality.” Physicians, clergy, and politicians praised racially fit (white middle-class) mothers who had large families, but worried aloud about the uneducated masses who did the same (Valverde, 1993; Ladd-Taylor, 1994). U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt even coined the term “race suicide” to goad educated white protestants into having more children. Honouring the white mother of a large family as “sacred,” he heaped scorn on her childless counterpart, who “shirks her duty, as wife and mother, [and] earns the right to our contempt” (1908: 174). The eugenics movement exemplifies the interdependence of mother-worship and mother-blame. Eugenecists used propaganda to convince “superior” women to have lots of children, but used the law to prevent the reproduction—and immigration—of the so-called unfit (McLaren, 1990; Paul, 1995).

This is the context in which women activists forged powerful “mothers” movements in the United States, Western Europe, and throughout the British Commonwealth. Maternalism, or maternal feminism as it is often called in Canada, was especially influential in shaping public policy in the United States, where working-class organizations were weak and efforts to enact class-based welfare legislation, such as health insurance, had failed (Kealey, 1979; Michel and Koven, 1993). Women who did not have the right to vote claimed political authority as mothers. “Woman’s Place is Home,” one suffragist declared, “But Home is not contained within the four walls of an individual house. Home is the community. The city full of people is the Family.... And badly do the Home and Family need their mother” (Dorr, 1919: 327). They hoped the message was clear: women could not fulfill their maternal obligations unless they had political power.

Activists from a variety of political perspectives drew on the image of the good mother to press their demands for higher education, better treatment of wage-earning women, and the vote. The American reformer Jane Addams, Canada’s Nellie McClung, and numerous colleagues in women’s clubs and social settlements used the metaphor of the selfless mother, who like a soldier literally risked her life bearing children for the nation, to convince male politician-voters that publicly-funded kindergartens, health clinics, playgrounds, day nurseries, and welfare services would not undermine a mother’s love for her child. After all, they said, nothing could weaken that essential mother-child bond. Birth controller Margaret Sanger and anarchist Emma Goldman tied their radical demands for birth control and female emancipation to the needs of working-class mothers. Even never-married women, such as Addams, cast themselves as “social mothers” so their femininity was never in doubt (Berg, 2002; Ladd-Taylor, 1994).

In the United States, mothers’ movements were generally middle class and racially segregated, but they were not only white. African-American activists often described themselves as the “civic mothers” of the race and established health and educational services within their communities. They also used “good mother” rhetoric to get white women to face their own racism and privilege. At an 1899 meeting of the National Congress of Mothers, Mary Church Terrell urged white women to “put yourselves for one minute” in the place of a black mother—“(you could not endure the strain any longer) and imagine if you can, how you would feel if situated similarly.... [I]nstead of thrilling with the joy which you feel as you clasp your little ones to your breast, [you would tremble] with apprehension and despair” (Terrell, 1899: 407).

As Terrell’s eloquence and a number of recent scholars have shown, the white middle-class mothers’ movement left many women behind. Maternalists never questioned women’s “natural” responsibility for homemaking, they took for granted the superiority of English protestant middle-class culture, and they truly believed that every child needed two heterosexual parents and a mother who stayed home full-time. As a result, they supported programs, like mothers’

pensions, which provided a small amount of support for single mothers and children in so-called “suitable” homes (e.g., where single mothers didn’t have sex or work long hours outside the home), rather than childcare or better-paying jobs. In the United States, mothers’ pensions evolved into Aid to Dependent Children, or welfare; in Canada, they formed the basis of the 1944 *Family Allowance Act*, a universal child benefit. Both programs were discontinued in the 1990s, but maternalist thinking about children’s need for a suitable, stay-at-home mother still reverberates in American and—to a lesser extent—Canadian welfare politics (Christie, 2000; Mink, 1995; Strong-Boag, 1979).

The most progressive reformers, like Jane Addams, defended disadvantaged mothers on the grounds that if they were bad mothers, it was because of conditions, like poverty or poor housing, that were beyond their control. But others were not so forgiving. Maternal feminists had always cast a suspicious eye at low-income mothers, but the presumption that motherhood united women across the boundaries of class, race, and nation was also inclusive. As a result, when maternal feminism disappeared from the political landscape in the 1920s, mother-blaming grew more vicious. It also reached into the middle class. Childrearing advice, which had once idealized mother-love, now characterized it as a “dangerous instrument” and “stumbling block” to child development. Mothers’ pensions, which at least had acknowledged mothers’ contribution to society, became Aid to Dependent Children or (in Canada) family allowances. Although women continued to be influential in the child welfare field, they considered themselves professionals first. Claiming political authority on the basis of motherhood was no longer a winning strategy (Ladd-Taylor, 1994; Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 1998).

In the 1920s and 1930s, politicians rarely talked about the need to dignify motherhood or protect maternal welfare. They did, however, talk a great deal about protecting society from “bad” mothers and their imperfect children. The “bad mother” discourse of the interwar years reached its peak—and did its greatest damage—in the campaign for eugenic sterilization. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of compulsory sterilization in 1927, and eventually 33 states and two Canadian provinces enacted sterilization laws. More than 60,000 North Americans, mostly women, were forcibly sterilized (McLaren, 1990; Reilly, 1991).

Public support for eugenics waned in the 1930s and 1940s, but political mother-blaming thrived. In striking contrast to the First World War, when good-mother imagery was pervasive, pundits of the World War II era were obsessed by the evils of “America’s traditional sweet, doting, self-sacrificing Mom” (“Moms’ denounced as peril to nation,” 1945: 11). The positive image of the virtuous mother who made the supreme sacrifice by sending her sons off to war was displaced by the domineering “Mom,” who kept them tied to her apron strings and—according to the U.S. Army psychiatrist Edward Strecker—caused the alarming instance of psychoneurosis in servicemen (cited in Terry, 1998). In their popular but bizarre diatribe on *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*,

Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham (1947) catalogued the unspeakable harm that rejecting, over-solicitous, dominating, and over-affectionate mothers did to their children—and society. In their view, most mothers needed psychotherapy to learn to accept their passive feminine role and yield to male authority in the family.

Although the 1950s are often associated with the archetypal good mother June Cleaver and (if you believe conservatives) the golden age of the family, Cold War anxieties accelerated the mother-bashing frenzy. Smothering stay-at-home moms were accused of turning their sons into homosexuals or communists, working mothers of neglecting their kids and producing juvenile delinquents, and black “matriarchs” of causing black men’s unemployment and poverty (Feldstein, 2000; Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 1998).

Today, we live in another uncertain age, when war, terrorism, and an economic downturn are leading people back to the perceived security of the home. Yet with the majority of mothers in the workforce, the home no longer seems as safe as it once did. Smothering or neglectful “bad” mothers are still blamed for youth violence, drug abuse, and dangerous sexual practices. In contrast to the past, however, the “good” mother is nowhere to be found.

Hoping to restore the “good mother” to American political culture, the Motherhood Project of the Institute for American Values recently launched a pro-family campaign based on the “maternal feminist” values of Jane Addams. Led by prominent neo-liberals like Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Jean Bethke Elshtain, the project promotes the Victorian concept of the home as a safe and “separate” sphere. It draws a distinction between the “values of the motherworld,” such as “sacrifice, humility, and forbearance,” and the grasping values of the moneyworld (Institute for American Values, 2000). It preaches the universality of mothering and mother-values, where class, race, and cultural background become irrelevant in the face of a common motherhood. And, like its early twentieth-century counterpart, the Motherhood Project emphasizes children’s need for a two-parent, heterosexual married family. The Institute for American Values advocates a number of “family-friendly” policies, including tax reform, paid parental leave, flextime in the workplace, restrictions on advertisements, marriage education for welfare recipients, and legislation making it more difficult to obtain a divorce. Like its early-twentieth century counterpart, the new “maternal feminism” effectively encourages reproduction among the elite, but discourages it among the young, unmarried, and poor. For example, Hewlett’s (2002) highly publicized *Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children* laments what she sees as the tragic childlessness of high-achieving women, while *The War Against Parents: What Can We Do For America’s Beleaguered Moms and Dads*, which she co-authored with Cornel West (1998), proposes restructuring welfare benefits to privilege married two-parent families, and reconfiguring the legal system to make it easier to adopt a child. As feminist historian Rickie Solinger (2001) shows, the simplification of adoption procedures would serve mainly to facilitate the transfer of babies from

poor and unmarried “bad” mothers to more affluent (and therefore “better”) ones.

A major problem with the Motherhood Project’s implicit opposition of “good” and “bad” mother is that, especially in the United States, the “bad” mother has so much greater symbolic power. Since the 1980s, the “bad” mother (who in recent years is almost always black and a crack addict or “welfare queen”) has become a central icon of U.S. political culture. According to Solinger (2001), such shrill “bad” mother rhetoric, along with 20 years of attacks on welfare, abortion rights, and women’s health services, is making motherhood a “class privilege” in the United States. She suggests that this is partly because U.S. feminists employed the rhetoric of choice, rather than rights, in asserting the right to legal abortion. If the decision to have (or not have) a baby is seen as a choice, not a right, women who are young, poor, disabled, or on welfare but still “choose” motherhood can be criticized for making a bad choice.

Political mother-blaming exists in Canada, of course, but it is nowhere near as vindictive and mean-spirited as it is in the United States, and it has not set such deep roots in welfare policy and the courts. A brief comparison of two highly publicized “bad mother” cases in the mid-1990s is illustrative. In 1995, Tabitha Pollock’s three-year old daughter was found beaten to death at her home in Illinois, and Tabitha’s live-in boyfriend admitted to the beating. Forensics found evidence of considerable abuse, but Tabitha denied any knowledge that her children were mistreated. The other adults in the household—her boyfriend’s parents and his brother’s girlfriend—claimed ignorance too (*People v. Pollock*, 1999).

Tabitha Pollock, but not her boyfriend’s parents, was charged with first-degree murder. Although not present when the crime was committed, she was a parent who had failed to protect her child from an abuser, and the law of accountability applied. Witnesses for the prosecution criticized Tabitha’s mothering and testified to her prior bad acts: she once let the little girl climb on a bookcase, which almost fell on top of her, and she failed to keep her children or their clothes sufficiently clean. The Department of Children and Family Services had been called in to investigate, but found no evidence of abuse. Nevertheless, a jury concluded that Tabitha Pollock was not merely a “bad” mother, but a murderer as well. She was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to 36 years in jail. She served seven years before her conviction was overturned by the Illinois Supreme Court (*People v. Pollock*, 1999; Liptak, 2002).

Renee Heikamp was 19 years old and homeless when her first child Jordan was born in Toronto in 1997. As a young mother at risk, she was put under the care of the Catholic Children’s Aid Society, which placed her in a women’s shelter. There, surrounded by lots of people, her baby starved to death when only five weeks old. Heikamp admitted to feeding her baby water, instead of formula, but blamed social workers and her lack of education. The social

workers said Renee had deliberately misled them. Although Renee and her social worker were both charged with criminal negligence causing death, in a controversial ruling after several months of testimony, a judge threw out the charges. In 2001 a coroner's jury ruled baby Jordan's death a homicide—a finding that had no legal bearing on the mother—and issued 44 recommendations focused mainly on improving services for mothers on the streets (“Jury rules baby's starvation a homicide,” 2001).

Both cases involved a tragic and preventable death, a malfunctioning child protection system, bad mothering, criminal charges, and intense media attention. But while Pollock spent several years in jail, the judicial proceedings surrounding the Heikamp case focused more on the appalling failure of the child protection system than on the mother's crime (Blatchford, 2001).

Why the difference? It is not, as some would like to think, that Canadians are more caring. It is because Canada established a welfare state in the decades after World War II, and a welfare state offers considerable protection from mother-blaming. It is much easier to be a not-bad mother when one has health insurance, paid parental leave, the possibility of affordable childcare, a reasonably safe environment—and lives in a society where “welfare” is not (not yet?) a dirty word.

Singing the praises of a welfare state is not a policy prescription, and right now it seems far more likely that Canada will lose its welfare state than that the United States will acquire one. Still, the divergent histories of the U.S. and Canadian welfare systems, considered alongside the mother-blaming culture both countries share, should lead us to approach any attempt to revive maternal feminism with caution. Early twentieth-century maternalists tried to build support for child welfare programs by appealing to mother-love and mother-values, but their policies did not empower all mothers and children, and they did not lead to a fair, comprehensive welfare system. Instead, they led to programs that assisted some “good” mothers, but demeaned mothers considered bad. We should leave mother-worship back in the twentieth century and set our sights in the twenty-first century on expanding mothers' rights and eliminating mother-blame.

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