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Can the labor of mothering provide the basis for political action when the success of some who perform mother work depends on the impoverishment or exploitation of others who equally seek to cultivate, nurture, socialize, and care for the children of their family or community but who have fewer resources and more limited power? Can we imagine a mothering movement that is neither maternalist, heteronormative, nor nationalist—or one that transcends class, race, ethnic, and religious interests?

Mothers Unite!, political scientist Jocelyn Elise Crowley’s carefully designed and policy-driven study, envisions an encompassing movement but only by ignoring the structural and material divisions exacerbated by growing inequality between and within nations. It focuses on mothers, rather than parents, in the United States because women are the parents most affected by “role overload” (141), even when temporarily away from the labor force. She finds the “mommy wars”—that media-identified conflict between stay-at-home moms and wage-earning moms—to be overblown, for most “mothers . . . empathize with each mother’s unique situation” (18).

Individualist frameworks go unnamed as Crowley proposes that mothers organize around a platform of workplace flexibility. Her solution to what feminists called “the double day,” which corporate work-life specialists have renamed “work-family balance,” could benefit from the larger political economy context of Mothering in the Age of Neoliberalism, anthropologist and activist Melinda Vandenbeld Giles’s edited collection of essays, which are uneven and often redundant but nevertheless offer a powerful critique of the mantra of flexibility. Arguing that “women and mothers form the productive, reproductive, and consumptive basis to ensure neoliberalism” (5), Vandenbeld Giles and her contributors show that “mothers are still a long way from claiming collective power and material gain for themselves and their children” (5).

After a too-brief survey of historical antecedents, Crowley considers five national mothers’ groups. With membership ranging from 2,800 to
169,000, together they would provide a significant organizing base if they could unite on common objectives. These groups mostly attract women privileged by marriage and income who join for emotional and practical support. They are white except for Mocha Moms, a group of women of color that aids its members in creating “flexible, at-home businesses” (15). For Mothers & More, founded by “sequencing” women, who leave jobs upon childbirth, their valuing of mother work led to engagement with public policies. The National Association of Mothers’ Centers began with peer social work but developed a work and family program to educate employers and to lobby politicians. A network of like-minded activists, the online, explicitly feminist MomsRising, pushes for paid sick leave, equal pay, and other workplace issues; its goals contrast with those of Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS), which promotes conservative Christian family values.

To assess the potential for a larger mothers’ movement, Crowley conducted a random web-based survey of members and a random phone-based sample of other mothers, interviewed activists, and observed meetings. She generates impressive tables and shares powerful ethnographic observations. But her conclusion seems predetermined: mothers’ groups can embrace workplace flexibility and can work for public action because most members agree, excepts for those in MOPS, that “government has a strong role in educating businesses, as well as providing them with awards, grants, and incentives to help promote flexibility” (142). We’re left with a list of family-friendly policies and a guide for building leadership and mobilizing members.

It’s not that Crowley is myopic. She recognizes existing disparities in what kinds of firms offer flexibility and in who can and does take advantage: men, the college-educated, and professional/managerial workers. Her project is to improve the existing system. However, in today’s fissured workplace, where businesses seek to slough off the responsibility that comes with the status of employer through a tangled web of subcontracting and legal maneuvers, flexibility already exists aplenty: it serves business demands for lower wages, just-in-time production, disposable workers, and reduced benefits. To believe that most businesses—especially in a climate of market fundamentalism, financialization, and defunding of social supports—would embrace “flexible work arrangements, time-off options, and career exit, maintenance, and reentry pathways” (4) to retain “the best possible talent to a set of jobs” (5), as Crowley argues, appears more utopian than her desire for a coalition of Christian fundamentalists with left-liberal feminists.
The ethnographers and political economists in *Mothering in the Age of Neoliberalism* know that today’s globalization heightens class-, race-, and nation-based differences between women, shaping self and psyche as well. These scholars show how the devolution of welfare states and the retrenchment of social benefits in the English-speaking West, the imposition of structural adjustment on the global South, and the privatization and commodification of daily life everywhere have pushed mothers, especially single ones, to intensify family-generating as well as income-generating labor just to make ends meet. Vandenbeld Giles squeezes twenty chapters into a single volume that ranges from Canada, the United States, and Britain to the Philippines, the Caribbean, Nigeria, and elsewhere, but the downside is that the essays are too short to fully develop their arguments.

Nonetheless, instructors will find useful the book’s categories of labor, state policy, the nuclear family, and maternal activism. The research is uniformly good, even if some of the findings merely reinforce existing literature. We learn about the practice of care work through new technologies among extended networks of Filipinas, the disproportionate impact of cuts on women working in the British public sector, and the negative consequences of the “feminist child support movement” (255) for women on public assistance during 1990s welfare reform in the United States.

Some contributions introduce new topics, especially essays on “mompreneurs” (vi); others are provocative. Exploring “yummy mummy” (95) narratives about doing everything effortlessly and simultaneously—that is, working out, earning income, and mothering—Gillian Anderson and Joseph Moore critique a reconfiguration of the boundaries between home and work, so that “work-like principles” enter “familial space(s)” (110). However, separate spheres never really existed for poor and racialized mothers, subjected to policing and disciplining by states and other women, as Vandenbeld Giles suggests in her own chapter on homelessness. Chikako Takeshita offers a truculent critique of “Eco-Diapers” (117) and “green mothering” (121), the embrace of which confuses “an individualistic ‘do-your-part’ scenario” with the fight against “unsustainable motherhood” (129). Similarly, Lynn O’Brien Hallstein exposes the contradictions of equality and choice discourses within second-wave feminism. Jesook Song and Yoonhee Lee, as well as Sevi Bayraktar, illuminate the use of media to educate mothers to desire and consume modern products and lifestyles in South Korea and Turkey, while Andrew Wilkins presents a stunning analysis of the affective labor involved in choice when British mothers must select a school for their children.
These essays underscore the conflicting interests blocking any united mothers’ movement. Mothers against Illegal Aliens, the US anti-immigration subject of Katrina Bloch and Tiffany Taylor’s “Welfare Queens and Anchor Babies,” and REAL Women of Canada, the fundamentalist Christian opponent of homosexuality, feminism, and public child care in Vanessa Reimer’s “Who Is in Charge of the Family?,” stand apart from low-income Ontario mothers whose organizing Katheryne Schulz found to be hampered by the imposition of forced work requirements. They are worlds apart from Reena Shadaan’s Indian mothers against Bhopal or Grace Adeniyi Ogunyankin’s Nigerian market activists. But, when mothering as a learned act becomes conflated with mothers as a gendered entity, then the political possibilities for change become narrowed. These two books show how difficult it is to sustain that distinction, whether the goal is reform or resistance.


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The three books under review seek to rethink the contributions of three influential and controversial researchers—the biologist Alfred Kinsey, the psychologist Lewis Terman, and the pediatric psychoendocrinologist John Money—to the human sciences and to current conversations about the politics and ethics of scientific efforts to measure human attributes and differences. Influenced by the rising enthusiasm for eugenics in turn-of-the-century evolutionary theory, Kinsey, Terman, and Money are considered founding fathers of modern American sexology, the scientific study of sexual difference and sexual behavior. While Kinsey’s, Terman’s, and Money’s oeuvres vary in many respects, their contemporary reception shares a strik-