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5. Baby Talk (1992)

Diana Leonard

I am writing in response to Dena Attar's article on motherhood, childcare and women's liberation.¹

Since I was active around childcare, trying to get a nursery at the university where I was a research student and creches at conferences when I had kids, I guess I've become one of the feminists she mentions. I fail to campaign for childcare anymore because I personally don't need it and don't have the motivation; and I may even appear hostile since nowadays I won't organise a creche at conferences I'm involved with.

But this isn't just indifference. My gut response is that I veer away from work on childcare because it feels like a bottomless pit — witness Dena's account of how little was achieved with the seemingly large sum of money given to the National Childcare Campaign in the mid-80s. And the reason I will no longer organise creches for conferences is because I know from bitter experience that (a) it triples the work and the cost; (b) women say they need one — and then don't come/don't bring the child, so one is left with a pissed off nursery worker who has given up a Saturday for nothing; and (c) kids don't like them.

But this is obviously not the whole story, and musing on this, and on Dena's account of being ignored when she visited a women's centre with her children, together with her remarks on early 80s feminist arguments that having children was a betrayal (of a feminist ideal or other women), leads me to some questions. These all relate to aspects of motherhood which I think mothers have to change if feminism is to progress.

In the women's centre, why did none of the other women help look after her kids? Dena suggests the reason she could not participate in a meeting was because she had her children with her, because the creche was shut. Either there is a creche or the mother is responsible for keeping the children amused/quiet — certain people care for children (mothers, creche workers, fathers) and the rest of the world doesn't and shouldn't have to. If all those present at the meeting had kept an eye on and entertained the children and tolerated their activities and chatter, there'd have been no need for a creche.

But as Ruth Wallsgrove (ch. 3) makes clear, although many mothers want other women to help with childcare and say they welcome support from others, they

never want to lose control of ‘their’ children. We can actually be very ‘hands-offish’ if other people try to help, let alone to establish a close relationship with a child. Mothers *own* — and intend to continue to own — their children. The trend in feminism seems to be towards an intensification of this ‘mother right’ (Christine Delphy, ch. 6).

Why don't children like conference creches? Or to put it another way, why is the childcare which kids routinely get (and expect) so difficult to reproduce elsewhere? Dena’s article takes as given the very high quality of childcare provided (in most cases) in the UK today. Children (and husbands) expect to be comfortable in their own homes with their own toys and food, looked after by an adult on a one to two or three basis. It is incredibly expensive to substitute for this — and anyway, the location and the personalised nature of the servicing is absolutely integral to the job.

This is why socialist feminists’ suggestions that ‘socialised’ (state or commercial) services (restaurants, laundries — and nurseries) could substitute for women’s domestic work have always been so way off-beam. They have never recognised what husbands/fathers get personally from women. It is also why the early WLM demand for twenty-four hour nurseries was embarrassing. Childcare and other domestic work is not as ‘good’ when done elsewhere. It has to be done for children and men in their own homes, at exactly the times and in the form they want. To get something approaching the same quality universally provided by the state, or to buy it, would be prohibitively expensive — so it is exploited, taken free, from women. We shall not get out of this impasse unless and until feminists/mothers are prepared to problematise the content of childcare: to stop taking what are in fact middle class, western, late twentieth century standards of childcare as a given or as desirable.

Why are some women/feminists hostile to mothers? While I sympathise with a lot of what is in Dena’s article, and don’t (as she would say) minimise the pleasures of motherhood, I think we do have to go on ‘querying biological motherhood as a reasonable choice’. I have never tolerated a women’s movement which required women not to be mothers (or indeed not to be heterosexuals); but I have more sympathy with non-mothers than Dena.

Women without children are heavily policed, and where else except in the women’s movement do they get any support for their choice? To me, the oppression of mothers and non-mothers are two sides of one coin.

There is not only heterosexual privilege, but also maternal privilege. Women do get praised for being so clever and normal as to have managed to get pregnant; and some of us, even feminists, put down childless women. Mothers do say to me

‘You’ll understand because you’re a mother too’, or ‘You have to be a mother to understand what it (equalling virtually the whole of life) is all about’.

Motherhood divides women, and hard as a mother’s lot may be (at times), mothers are the socially acceptable group — and often very unreflexive on our own situation and motivation. We need to think hard before appearing to attack other women.

Note

1. This piece originally appeared on the letters page.