

Book Reviews

MOTHERHOOD RECONCEIVED: FEMINISM AND THE LEGACIES OF THE SIXTIES

Laura Umansky. New York and London: New York University Press, 1996.

BY MARIA BONANNO

The 1960s heralded the birth of a number of forces that threatened to permanently change the face of the existing post-Freudian, Cold War social order; not the least of these forces was the Second Wave of the women's movement. Many feminists were attracted to the ranks of the burgeoning New Left and counterculture movements because of their emphasis on dismantling the nuclear family, promoting a greater sense of community, and rediscovering a "back-to-basics" natural lifestyle. However, according to Umansky, the New Left and counterculture movements (spear-headed mainly by white middle-class men) failed to adequately consider gender issues in their critique and participating women soon became disillusioned with the results. In other words, women on communes were still having babies (because birth control was considered unnatural) but they now found themselves with very little, if any, male support (because the young men had been "liberated" from the responsibilities of sexual fidelity and fatherhood).

However, a much more positive attitude towards motherhood emerged from the counterculture experiments. "Unashamed of her body, with milk flowing from her breasts and long hair flowing down her back, both nurturant and sexual, the hippie mother represented the quintessence

of the counterculture." According to Umansky, these women began to shed the sexual inhibitions of the previous generation and developed pride in their natural bodies and procreative abilities. "Particularly in rural areas, hippie women began to court local midwives, and began also to train women in their own communities to assist in childbirth. Many counterculturalists also became avid breastfeeders and advocates of a 'natural' approach to childrearing." This tendency to reject the mainstream medical establishment and create a women's health community was similarly echoed by women in the free clinic movement. Among the revolutionary advances made during this time were the creation of women's health clinics and the re-claiming of women's health issues from the predominantly male medical profession. The feminist imperative to use biology as a force of strength resulted in significant inroads in gaining control over the politics of medicine. "According to feminist theorists, the rationalization and medicalization of birth netted the same results that capitalism and patriarchy effected in society at large, here writ indelibly on the bodies and minds of women. Childbirth, as currently practiced, was dehumanizing."

In the meantime, feminists were trying to respond to criticism that the movement did not adequately address issues of race and class. African-American women felt unconnected to the predominantly white, middle-class feminist movement and were therefore torn between loyalty to the civil rights movement and fighting their own particular feminist battles. The Black Power movement, the Nation of Islam, and the Black Unity Party (among others) were warning of the possible "racial genocide" of the African-American people and black women were called on to sup-

ply children as future soldiers for the struggle. "If blacks were to constitute a nation, they would need first to secure their ranks. However, as a few black women within the movement pointed out by the late 1960s, black nationalist pronatalism contained within it a starkly sexist and traditionalist message about black family and sexual politics." Within the black feminist movement, therefore, was a growing movement towards the re-claiming of motherhood in a positive, feminist light.

With both black and white feminists moving towards developing a positive, woman-centred approach to motherhood, it was hoped that this issue could be a uniting force among women. "In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many feminists had already invested motherhood with the power to bring women closer to some of those countercultural ideals; mothers, they claimed, were closer to nature, more likely to endorse peace and ecology, and inclined towards acts of protective love for their own, or the human, race." The feminist imperative had led to maternal political activism and ecofeminism. In other words, feminists had given birth to eco-mothering.

Motherhood Reconceived is an excellent guide to the Second Wave of the feminist movement as it relates to motherhood issues. Although it is clear in 1998 that motherhood has not overcome race and class issues within the feminist movement, nor has it resolved our ecological crisis, Umansky's work provides clear insights into how mother-centred arguments have helped bring these issues to the fore. Her work not only covers all the major milestones during several turbulent decades in the United States, it is also structured in a logical, clear, and concise manner with extensive explanatory notes and references.