Motherhood in the U.S., 1930-present

Monday, 7-9 p.m.
King 335

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Office hours: Tues. & Wed., 2-3 p.m., Fri. 11a.m.-12 p.m., or by appointment.

Course Description: Issues of motherhood and reproduction shape society’s expectations of women and the opportunities available to women, whether or not they have children. The social and cultural meanings of motherhood in the U.S., as well as women’s personal experiences of childbirth and child-rearing, have changed dramatically over the past 70 years in response to political, social, and economic changes as well as medical and technological developments. In this course, we will look at how the Depression, World War II, the growth of suburbia, the Cold War, Second Wave Feminism and the ensuing backlash against it, the rise in the number of mothers who work outside the home, and wider access to birth control, abortion, fertility treatments and in-vitro fertilization have shaped women’s experiences of motherhood as well as debates about the role of the mother in the family and society and ideas about “good” and “bad” mothers. We’ll also look at issues relating to adoption, surrogate motherhood, and lesbian mothers. We’ll analyze how expectations and criticisms of maternal behavior vary depending on women’s race, class, religion, and sexual identity. We’ll also look at motherhood as a political identity, focusing on mothers’ activism around issues of welfare rights, racial equality and economic justice, peace, gun control, education, and reproductive rights.

Required Texts (available at Oberlin Bookstore):
Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*
Johanna Sochen, *Choice and Coercion*
Rickie Solinger, *Wake Up, Little Susie*
Jane Lazarre, *The Mother Knot*
Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, *The Mommy Myth*
Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep*
Liza Mundy, *Everything Conceivable*

On days when we have assigned reading in one of the required books, bring your copy of the book to class.
Other Required Sources:
A number of additional readings have been placed on ERES. Please print out copies of these readings and bring them to class on the days we’re scheduled to discuss them. If you have trouble finding or reading an ERES text, let me know ASAP so I can correct the problem. Hard copies of the ERES texts have been placed on regular reserve, so use those if you have problems accessing or downloading the ERES versions.

Course Assignments and Grading:

Attendance and Participation (1/3 course grade): This class is a discussion-based seminar—student participation is crucial to the success of this course. You should come to class having carefully read the assigned texts and ready to play an active role in class discussions. In addition, students will lead discussion of an assigned text once or twice over the course of the semester, singly or in small groups. Since the class only meets once a week, it is important that you attend every session.

Analytical Papers (1/3 course grade): As preparation for your final research project, you will be assigned three short analytical papers that will require you to interpret the significance of different types of historical sources. These will be due in class on the following dates: September 24, October 8, and November 5.

Research Project (1/3 course grade): In addition to being a discussion seminar, this is a research seminar. Over the course of the semester, you will formulate a historical question related to the themes of the course, which you will investigate through original research in primary documents. Potential sources include newspapers and popular magazines; autobiographies, memoirs, and oral histories; archival collections of personal papers and/or organizational records; and government reports. A 12-15 page paper based on your research will be due by 11 a.m. on December 21. Interim deadlines and opportunities for progress reports will be scheduled throughout the semester—responding to those in a timely fashion will count towards your grade on the final project.

Academic Integrity: All course work is governed by the Oberlin Honor Code. You will be expected to attach a signed statement of the Honor Pledge to every written assignment.
Class Schedule

Sept. 10  Introduction to Class: Motherhood as Institution and Experience

Sept. 17  Mothering During the Depression
Reading: Lois Rita Helmbold, “Beyond the Family Economy,” Annelise Orleck, “We Are That Mythical Thing Called the Public,” Tillie Olsen, “I Stand Here Ironing.” (all in ERES)

**Short Paper Due (2-3 pp.):** Pick either the Helmbold or Orleck article and write a brief analysis of its contribution to women’s historiography: What is the author’s central argument? What kinds of sources does she rely on for evidence? How does she define the significance of the identity/category of mother and/or housewife? (Is it private, public, or both? What does it contribute to family, community, society?) How convincing is the argument? How does it add to or enhance your understanding of the period? What kind of history is it?

Sept. 24  “Should We Draft Mothers?”
Reading: Walker, Women’s Magazines, Chapters 5-8.
Film: *Mildred Pierce* (in class)  [Meet until 10]

Oct. 1  Who Should (and Shouldn’t) Be a Mother? Who Decides? Part I

**Short Response Paper Due re: *Mildred Pierce* (3-5 pp.):** What does the film tell us about WWII era debates re: social expectations of mothers and the challenges facing them (ideology v. experience/agency)? How does motherhood intersect other aspects of a woman’s life/identity? (Marriage, sexuality, career, friendship, overall sense of self.) Are we supposed to think Mildred is a “good” mother or a “bad” mother? Why? What is the overall message of the film re: motherhood, marriage, mother-child relationships, and American family values? Be sure to refer to (and interpret!) specific images and scenes.

**Sign Up for Individual Meetings to Discuss Research Projects This Week!**

Oct. 8  Who Should (and Shouldn’t) Be a Mother? Who Decides? Part II
Johanna Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare*
Oct. 15  Motherhood, Race, and Civil Rights  
**Everyone reads:** Feldstein, “I Wanted the Whole World to See,” Blumberg, “White Mothers as Civil Rights Activists,” Tornabene, “Murder in Alabama.”  
**Choose ONE:** Roberts, “Race, Gender, and Mothers’ Work” OR Thornton, “The Means to Put My Children Through.”

Oct. 22  NO CLASS: FALL RECESS  
(Work on proposal for your research project!)

Oct. 29  Re-thinking the Mother-Child Bond  
Jane Lazarre, *The Mother Knot*; Lynn Wiener, “Reconstructing Motherhood: The La Leche League in Postwar America” (ERES)  
**Research Project Abstract and Preliminary Bibliography Due**—bring enough copies to share with class.

Nov. 5  Feminist Visions of Family Life  
**Short Response Paper re: Primary Documents Due (3-5 pp.):** Based on the short primary documents (Valeska, Shulman, Pollard, Gross), what would you say are the main points of the Second Wave feminist critique of American motherhood? What are their biases? Is motherhood compatible with liberation in their view? What would they change to make it so?  
Film: *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (in class) [Meet until 10]

Nov. 12  Single Mothers, Welfare “Queens,” and the Myth of the Black Matriarchy  
**Choose ONE:** *Mommy Myth*, Chapter 6 OR Premila Nadasen, “Black Feminism and Welfare Rights” (ERES)

Nov. 19  Fetal Rights v. Women’s Rights  
**Research Paper Outline and Final Annotated Bibliography Due**
Nov. 26  Will the Real Mother Please Stand Up?
  **Everyone reads:** Mundy, *Everything Conceivable*
  **Choose ONE:** Sara Ruddick, “Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth,” OR
  Sarah-Vaughan Brakman & Sally Scholz, “Adoption, ART, and a
  Reconception of the Maternal Body” OR Shelley M. Park, “Adoptive
  Maternal Bodies,” OR Polly Pagenhart, “Confessions of a Lesbian Dad”
  (ALL IN ERES)

Dec. 3  The New Momism
  *Mommy Myth*, chapters 4, 5, 7, 9-end; Belkin, “The Opt-Out Revolution” (ERES)

Dec. 10  Last Class: Discuss Research Projects

**Research Papers Due by Friday, Dec. 21 at 11 a.m. in my office or mailbox.**