

War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother.
Denise Riley. *Essex, 1983.*

In light of the enduring controversy over state-funded day care provision, it is surprising that so few texts have been written examining the social forces which have restricted subsidy to the minority of willing recipients. In Canada in particular, monographs on the subject have been few and far between, with government reports providing the most systematic reviews of the legislative history joined by some feminist articles, often embedded in books about the women's movement or day care in general.¹ Although the latter pieces have been helpful, most have been largely descriptive, with little effort made to examine the issue from a theoretical standpoint.

The silence of the women's movement is particularly conspicuous, as it has traditionally ranked universal day care availability among its most important goals. The low priority given to constructing theories of state day care provision undoubtedly stems in part from social science's relatively undeveloped understanding of caregiving in general, a factor which has also retarded the study of the elderly. Another contributing factor has been the political and strategic salience of presenting the need and demand for day care as straightforward, lest the issue become mired in the type of complexities which have plagued the abortion debate. Any intimation that day care is a multi-faceted issue could create an excuse for unending state-funded research reports and task forces.² These considerations notwithstanding, the argument that the demand for day care is pressing is not easily translated into an analytical framework. Nor is it particularly enlightening as a model of how the state arrives at its conclusions about its relationship to mothers and children.

Beyond the general avoidance of theoretical inquiry into day care provision, there may be elements of the existing feminist critique which actually inhibit the conduct of analysis itself. Indeed, the possibility that feminist ideas about child care may be responsible for clouding the day care issue is suggested by British author Denise Riley in *War in the Nursery*.³ Riley's book is interested in investigating and debunking the socialist-feminist argument that the closure of Britain's day care centers at the end of the Second World War was caused by the influence of psychological theories condemning the separation of mother and child. For nearly two decades feminists have blamed psychological theories for legitimizing the oppressive family-centered values of the 1950s. Although authors such as Juliet Mitchell have sought to repeal the sentence passed against Freudian psychoanalysis,⁴ the belief that

psychology has had a significant effect on state policy has persisted. This has resulted in an idealist analysis of the post-war period, where ideas carry more weight than political and economic forces.

Feminist writings, looking back, have often assumed that the return of women to their homes after the last war was intimately linked with, if not positively engineered by, Bowlby's psychology, whose anti-nursery tenets were in harmony with the government's desire to get shot of its wartime female labour force, and reassert its normal male one.⁵

Riley's research indicated that the reigning historical account of the period is actually quite flawed, as the closure of the day nurseries did not occur in the context of hostile criticism from psychologists, nor did it occasion a mass return to the home by wartime women workers. Indeed, Riley finds that the state had contradictory attitudes about day nurseries. The Ministry of Health recognized their positive effects for mothers and children, yet in those areas where industry no longer needed women, the nurseries constituted an unjustifiable expense. Thus the government was compelled to blame the closure on a lack of demand which really referred to industrial contingencies, implicitly confirming the nurseries' beneficial effects.⁶ Most importantly, however, the closure of the nurseries and the "momism" which followed was supported almost unanimously by groups of all parts of the political spectrum. Women's groups shared the enthusiasm for the new ideology of motherhood which emerged in the context of a nationwide concern for restoring the birthrate.

The account of the period diverges significantly from the "received" history which feminists have used to ground their critique, and leads the author to cast the feminist thesis in a new light. The parameters of Riley's text are set by the feminist theory, yet because of its poor relation to the historical record, Riley sets out to elaborate and critique its main components. Thus, in her examination of the war nurseries she finds that the ideology of pronatalism was far more important than the opinions of psychologists—thus the question becomes why were leftists and feminists so eager to embrace an ideology of motherhood that would obscure the heterogeneous needs and interests of all women, especially those who sought work? One key feature of what Riley considers a self-imposed political defeat by the Fabians and feminists is their failure to understand the way in which dominant ideas of nature/nurture and gender precluded seeing women as more than mothers. Riley contends that although the right and the state had much to gain from an ideology of

pronatalism, the left's inability to counter its rise effectively paved the way for Bowlbyism.

This deconstruction of the official received history of the post-war social history, as well as the feminist understanding of it, leads the text into an unfortunate quandry. Despite Riley's admirable skill in revealing the historical factors which contradict the feminist thesis, the structure of the text is actually dictated by components of the rejected argument. Thus, Chapters 3 and 4 concentrate on the rise of child studies and psychoanalysis in the United States and Britain, a discussion prompted by the current popularity of psychoanalysis in socialist feminist theory. Although these chapters are interesting, the following chapters on the day nurseries and pronatalism render them anti-climatic due to her conclusion that psychology had little to do with wartime events. Similarly, the author's conviction, that the inability of the left and feminists to fight pronatalism was based on their poorly developed critique of psychological theory, leads her to spend two chapters contributing to the modern debate among socialist feminists. This section is interesting, but it is placed at the beginning of the text, and it is not until the discussion of day nurseries that its political salience becomes evident.

As a consequence, the text appears to jump from one topic to the next, since her critique has ruptured the original logic which tied the components of the feminist argument together. Adherence to the feminist perspective, if only in structure, not only renders the argument episodic and disjointed, but also serves to obscure and compromise the logic of her own thesis. This feature of the book is most evident with respect to its understanding of psychology. Had Riley been solely concerned with overturning the feminist thesis through a judicious application of historical investigation, she might have been able to omit any more than a cursory discussion of psychology due to its negligible influence on the closure of the nurseries. Instead, the first four chapters are almost exclusively concerned with psychology. In the first two chapters Riley examines current debates about the nature of gender and sexuality, with particular emphasis on the nature/nurture question. Riley clearly feels that it is imperative that the feminist-left refine its notions of the nature/nurture question for, in view of the recent popularity of reactionary theories such as sociobiology, "an incomplete challenge here is worse than none at all."⁷ This is a discussion of the *content* of a particular debate within the field of psychology, one which she feels has distinct political ramifications. In the following two chapters, however, the text offers an intellectual history of the rise of theories of the

child in the United States and Britain prior to the Second World War. Presumably this section is meant to provide the background for understanding the theoretical roots of Bowlbyism, and to prepare the reader for her comments on the nature of popularization. Yet the final chapters almost completely ignore psychology as a causal force in the decision to close the nurseries. Here the emphasis is placed on the political-economic factors which were condensed in the rhetoric of the Mother which pervaded political discourse during the immediate post-war period.

Riley's discussion of ideology and its ability to both facilitate and frustrate political expression and organization constitutes a highly sophisticated understanding of how ideology mediates the construction of social policy and interest group constitution. The difficulty, however, is that the analytical standards of this section are not applied evenly throughout the argument. Thus, during the previous two chapters examining the rise of child psychology, the author provides a reasonably satisfying description of the social context which attended the establishment of American ego psychology, yet fails to provide a comparable analysis of the British case, which is far more important to the book's subject. Indeed, the contrast between ego psychology and Britain's adherence to Kleinian psychoanalysis begs the question of why two well industrialized countries could adopt such different attitudes to child raising. This is particularly striking in the British case where Kleinian theory virtually precluded maternal or professional intervention to regulate the child's progress; the subsequent re-interpretations of Klein sought to expand the pedagogical potential of the theory, yet there is no analysis of why psychologists would initially accept a theory that denied them any useful interventionalist role, or why psychologists such as Winnicott tried to rectify the situation.⁸ Describing the content of Winnicott's innovations is not sufficient—one must also explain why they arose and were welcomed. Without an account of the social context surrounding Kleinianism, the reader is left with the unlikely explanation that the sheer force of Klein's ideas carried the day, a conclusion which is further derided by Riley's own analysis of popularization after the War.⁹

A further inconsistency in the argument lies in the refusal to explain how twenty years of psychological theory was completely impotent during the war period. It is entirely conceivable that psychologists were not a political force during this period—what is less likely is that Kleinian ideas had no influence in the construction of the pronatalist ideology which revered the non-working mother. Riley's account of the actions of the Fabians and rhe-

torical resonance of the category of Mother virtually precluded any consideration of the needs of employed women, whether mothers or not. This served to obscure half of the constituency which the women's movement sought to protect. However, the nearly atmospheric quality of Motherhood suggests that a biologicistic view of women had gained such prominence in society as to become nearly pre-conscious. It seems incumbent on Riley to relate how this state of affairs was connected to Klienianism, or, failing a direct link, explain why this psychology did not penetrate the popular imagination.

Equally frustrating is the text's refusal to relate the state of psychological theories about the mother to the beliefs of the radicals who failed to confront the ideology of the Mother which was emerging. Riley does discuss the basic outline of the platform of the Fabians and women's groups, but not in connection to their psychological allegiances, or their implicit or explicit critiques of prevailing notions of nature and nurture. This is a glaring omission in view of Riley's argument that the only way to combat reactionary ideologies about women depends on the sophistication of one's critique of theories of gender.

Because the task of illuminating "the needs of mothers" starts out with gender at its most decisive and inescapable point—the biological capacity to bear children—there's the danger that it may fall back into a conservative restating and confirming of social-sexual difference as timeless too. This would entail making the needs of mothers into fixed properties of "motherhood" and a social function: I believe that this is what happened in postwar Britain.¹⁰

Unfortunately, although this perspective is in evidence during the discussion of present theories of gender and sexuality, it all but disappears during the wartime analysis, despite its importance to her argument.

What is at issue is a conception of what psychology is, and what effects it may have on political processes concerning the role of women. In the feminist argument it is assumed that psychologists generated theories which were inherently harmful to women's interests (Bowlbyism) and, alternately, that political actors like the government appropriated and vulgarized psychological theories to serve their own interests.¹¹ Riley rejects the former argument on the basis that psychologists themselves were minor actors during the wartime period, and is also suspicious of theories which ascribe a functional fit to ideas and their epochs—these ideas usually emerge through a far

more complex process where political-economic factors are decisive, and contingent.¹² The second thesis is also deficient in that it ignores the degree to which psychologists often popularized their own work.

Riley's alternative vision of the role of psychology is difficult to perceive clearly, however, for she rarely presents her perspective in isolation from comments on the feminist thesis. Thus, the presentation of psychology is eclectic, and not necessarily consistent with her main argument. Within the text the author presents views on the content of psychological theories (Chapters 1 and 2); the rise of child psychology as a discipline (Chapters 3 and 4); and the relation between the content of psychological theories and social context. It is the place of psychology during the post-war struggle over the nurseries which is most perturbing. Riley clearly establishes that *psychologists* were inactive during the period, thereby debunking the feminist argument, but takes this to be equivalent to the irrelevance of psychology *in toto*. Clearly, the influence of psychological theories can be disassociated from the activities of psychologists themselves without concluding that psychology had no effect on the ideas about mothers and children. This appears all the more evident when a biologicistic conception of motherhood becomes so central to political discourse. Unfortunately, in her effort to show that psychologists were minor actors in the nursery drama, the wider implications of psychology's influence are overlooked. The point is not to re-assert the influence of psychology in the person of psychologists, so much as it is to recognize the manner in which popular ideologies integrate academic theories, and in doing so give them a life of their own. Riley appreciates this with respect to the role of psychologists when she does not look at the other side of the coin, namely, what happens once the popularization process is successful. The primacy of the category of Mother may well have owed more to the actions of psychologists of the previous decade than the contemporary psychologists who were inactive; however, this in no way diminishes the salience of psychology to the analysis.

As a result, Riley believes that the onus of responsibility for pre-empting reactionary appeals to psychology falls on the shoulders of radicals. As counsel to the left this is perfectly acceptable, but as analysis of an historical period it leaves much to be desired. Any connection between psychology and the socio-economic circumstances of the day are obscured in her analysis by her reluctance to fall into the functionalist trap. Consequently, political-economic considerations assume primacy during the nursery controversy, yet psychology is exonerated by virtue of the

inactivity of psychologists. The more interesting question of how psychological theories may positively shape social relations is thus avoided, preventing any comprehension of why Kleinianism took root in Britain. Further, this suggests that psychology's inherently right wing tendencies cannot really be prevented save by leftist interventions, which may be passable strategic advice, but leaves one wondering how mainstream psychology "works" the way it does.

The fact that Riley is unable to maintain the high standards of analysis which are established in the final sanctions of the book, is a testament to the contribution which she makes in an area which has been under-theorized. As she demonstrates so clearly, it is all too tempting to perceive a seamless web of collaboration during periods when political decisions are made that are later justified by a seemingly unquestionable ideology. To this extent, detailed historical deconstructions are needed, but always constitute an arduous task as they demand that nothing be taken as a given. Riley's example with respect to the ideological currents present during the closure of the nurseries is highly valuable and makes the book's inconsistencies easier to accept as it provides the tools with which to overcome these shortcomings.

NOTES

1. The legislative history can be found in Status of Women Canada, *Report of the Task Force on Child Care*, (Ottawa, 1986) and Ontario, Ministry of Community and Social Services, *Day Care Policy: A Background Paper*, (Toronto, 1981). For feminist articles on the issue, see Patricia Vandebelt Schultz, "Minding the Children," in Maureen Fitzgerald, Connie Guberman and Margie Wolfe, eds. *Still Ain't Satisfied!*, (Toronto, 1982), Genevieve Leslie, "Childrearing as a Social Responsibility," in Kathleen Gallagher Ross, ed., *Good Day Care*, (Toronto, 1978). For the American situation, see Rosalyn F. Baxandall, "Who Shall Care for the Children? The History and Development of Day Care in the United States," in Jo Freeman, ed., *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, (New York, 1975).
2. Indeed, governments have frequently commissioned more research on day care as a means of forestalling any action on the issue. In Canada, this strategy was most recently employed by the Mulroney government when it set up its own day care task force just as the former Liberal government's task force made its report public. For the proliferation of research in the United States with the same aim, see Stevanne Auerbach, *Confronting the Child Care Crisis*, (Boston, 1979).
3. Denise Riley, *War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother*, (Essex, 1983).
4. Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, (London, 1974).
5. Denise Riley, *op.cit.*, p.11.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 80 ff.
9. The necessity of this form of analysis is clearly stated by the author when she rejects the equation of popularization with the vulgarization of a theory. For popularization to be intelligible, the social context in which the theory is received must be provided. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.194-5.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 115. See also chapter six on the ideology of pronatalism after the Second World War.

Stephen Milton

Lovhers. Nicole Brossard, Barbara Godard, translation. *Montreal, Quebec: Guernica Editions, 1986. Pp. 109.*

Lovhers is a radically feminist, radically new, radically poetic text which sings the energy of women. It is a text which excludes men, totally, as it brings together women who will celebrate their be-ing, in Mary Daly's sense: Be-Dazzling, utopian girls naturally unanimous, grappling with the "question of vertigo" (86) in this "spatial era of women" (90).

And of course Mary Daly is named, with all the others that have nourished, challenged and touched Nicole Brossard:

Djuna Barnes, Jane Bowles, Gertrude Stein, Natalie Barney, Michèle Causse, Marie-Claire Blais, Jovette Marchessault, Adrienne Rich, Mary Daly, Colette and Virginia, the other drowned ones, Cristina Perri Rossi, Louky Bersianik, Pol Pelletier, Maryvonne so attentive, Monique Wittig, Sande Zeig, Anna d'Argentine, Kate Millet, Jeanne d'Arc Jutras, Marie Lafleur, Jane Rule, Renée Vivien, Romaine Brooks (108).

A gallery of feminist writers and poets, of Lesbian thinkers, of clairvoyant women, conscious and expressive, joyful, delirious (in the sense also of Brossard's French "dé-lire" which is delirium and un-reading simultaneously), enraptured, vital, intelligent, daring.

Lovhers was first published under the title *Amantes*, in 1980. It took as sensitive and innovative a translator as Barbara Godard to come up with this word l-o-v-h-e-r-s, to render the French word for female lovers in all its power. Bravo, indeed. With this book we are in the centre of Nicole Brossard's writing and at the same time in the very centre of women's existence, women no longer being for men, but women being for themselves and for each other. The patriarchal world has been left behind. Here in *Lovhers*, women only wish to be with and celebrate each other. Brossard continuously combines traditionally opposing ideas. Thus the celebration is not only exuberance, it is also quiet recollection, bringing together polarities of the female being. We read of rejoicing in lesbian love and love of text, text to read and text to write. Loving, reading

War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and the Mother. London. D. Riley. This paper builds on the idea that any further development of the concept of 'welfare regime' must incorporate the relationship between unpaid as well as paid work and welfare. Consideration of the private domestic is crucial to a gendered understanding of welfare because historically women have typically gained entitlements by virtue of their dependent status within the family as wives and mothers. The paper suggests that the idea of the male-breadwinner family model has served historically to cut across established typologies of welfare regimes, and further that the model has been War in the Nursery by Denise Riley, 1985, Virago Press edition, Paperback in English. War in the Nursery. Theories of the Child and Mother. by Denise Riley. Published 1985 by Virago Press . Listen Playing Paused You're listening to a sample of the Audible audio edition. Learn more. See all 3 images. War In The Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother Paperback " 24 Oct 1983. by. Denise Riley (Author).