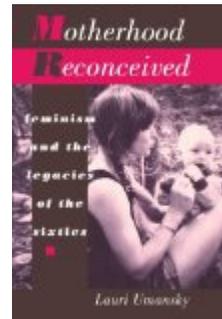


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lauri Umansky. *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties*. New York: New York University Press, 1996. x + 262 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-8561-4; \$21.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-8562-1.

Reviewed by James Seymour (University of Texas at Brownsville/Texas Southmost College)
Published on H-Women (June, 1998)



In *Motherhood Reconceived*, Lauri Umansky provides an intellectual history of women's liberation in the United States from 1968 through the early 1980s. Based on her dissertation at Brown, the work centers on the depiction of motherhood in feminist theory, using a wide array of primary and secondary material from the feminist movement. Umansky challenges the critics of feminism who maintain the women's movement denigrated mothers. Instead, she discovers that feminists embraced both symbolic and literal mothers in their writings. In answering her own question, "Why have feminists devoted so many words to understanding motherhood?" Umansky concludes, "motherhood soon became a symbolic screen onto which some feminists projected their desire for gender unity" (emphasis in source, pp. 159, 160).

Motherhood Reconceived traces feminism to the cultural left, New Left and counterculture of the 1960s. These movements demonstrated essentialist and communitarian impulses, glorified nature, and criticized the nuclear family and social oppression. Radical feminists, who regarded male oppression as women's main obstacle, brought a gendered analysis to these claims, contending, for example, that the nuclear family oppressed men and women differently. When counterculturalists advocated communes, radical feminists denounced this plan as liberating men's sexuality, while tying women to traditional roles as mothers and care-givers.

According to Umansky, radical feminists of the early years voiced the most anti-mother rhetoric of the movement. One demonstration crowned a sheep Miss America, and another group protested Mother's Day. While such actions attracted the media, they also alienated

mainstream women. Further, early feminist conferences included few wives and mothers. Since most radical feminist leaders were young and childless, they rejected such women as having a false consciousness. Other feminist groups, most notably Redstockings, sought common ground with traditional women and believed it better to criticize male oppression, rather than women who made decisions based on limited choices. They began consciousness raising exercises, to make women aware of their oppression, and addressed problems women faced, such as lack of adequate child care.

Next, Umansky shows that women's health forged a coalition between counterculturalists and members of the Lamaze method, La Leche League, and free clinic movement, centering on pregnancy and motherhood. She believes the counterculture established the larger ideas behind the debate. The counterculture celebrated birth as a natural process, praised its ability to create a community of women, and attacked male gynecologists who excluded women from the process. The others joined them in recapturing control over women's bodies from male gynecologists. Umansky believes the women's health issue demonstrates how feminists possessed a communitarian impulse, coming together in childbirth and about childbirth.

Lauri Umansky then examines relations between white and black feminists. The Moynihan Report, which criticized black families for being female-dominated and lacking role models for black youths, energized black nationalism. Black men claimed that familial matriarchies, established by white men and black women, castrated them, while a return to male-dominated households would save them. Black feminists disparaged the

idea, arguing they were oppressed twice, for being black and female. Instead of patriarchy, they called for what they characterized as traditional African family patterns, in which men and women were equal. Within their analysis, black feminists glorified motherhood. White feminists borrowed the idea of motherhood from them to create unity among black and white women. For instance, white feminists defended imprisoned Black Panther women because they were pregnant or new mothers, rather than for their racial or political views.

The possibility that motherhood would unify all women shifted the women's liberation movement from radical to cultural feminism. Umansky contends cultural feminism still denounced women's oppression, yet viewed men and women as being biologically different. The 1973 publication of Jane Alpert's "Mother Right" article in *Ms.* magazine synthesized cultural feminism. After postulating a mythic matriarchal past, Alpert proposed using a common gender history to create a community of women in the present, since "all women were essentially the same" (p. 111). Some feminists rejected her argument, claiming it detracted from activities and relied too heavily on myth. Others, such as Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich, embraced the new paradigm in their writings.

Finally, Umansky brings women's liberation into the 1980s, as feminists documented their own mothering experiences and cultural feminism shaped the movement. Feminist psychologists, such as Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein, called for both women and men to become mothers, which would overcome sexism provoked by separation from the mother in infancy. Ecofeminism and the feminist peace movement developed because radical feminists believed mothers had a closer affinity with nature. Cultural feminists vigorously debated pornography and sexual attitudes. Calling for its elimination, Andrea Dworkin considered pornography

the root of male violence and oppression. Pro-sex feminists, such as Samois, a lesbian sado-masochist group, denounced her dictating moral standards and sexual mores. Motherhood unified many women by the 1980s, yet failed to achieve hegemonic control over the movement.

Lauri Umansky raises interesting questions about women's liberation, and provides a refreshing antidote to critics who deride feminism for being anti-mother. *Motherhood Reconceived* does contain some flaws. Umansky apparently treats all theories as being equally debated within the movement. While ordinary women clearly discussed Jane Alpert's "Mother Right" article, it remains unclear whether they debated Samois' glorification of sex to the same extent. Similarly, low participation in ecofeminist conferences indicates many ignored them. In discussing sexual differences, Umansky discusses lesbian and heterosexual women, yet never mentions bisexual women. She notes the desexualization of mothers attempted to overcome differences between lesbians and heterosexuals. This process also omitted men from the experience as well, and the implications of that omission remain unexplored. Although she emphasizes New Left, cultural left and counterculture origins for feminist ideas, she fails to explain the hostility towards women's liberation by conservative women because of this liberal/leftist origin. Latinas and Asian women are largely absent, again depicting feminism as for whites only. Regardless of these minor quibbles, Lauri Umansky has contributed an important work to the understanding of modern feminist theory and the use of motherhood in feminist writing.

Copyright (c)1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit, educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permissions, please contact H-Net at H-Net@h-net.msu.edu

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-women>

Citation: James Seymour. Review of Umansky, Lauri, *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. June, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2116>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.