

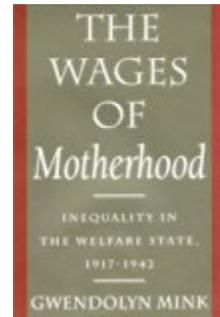
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gwendolyn Mink. *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995. xi + 198 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-9534-2; \$39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-2234-8.

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In this contribution to the substantial opus on the role of gender in the creation of the welfare state, Gwendolyn Mink emphasizes race, and particularly the connection between mothering and assimilation in the minds of Progressive Era women policy-makers. These “maternalist” reformers (Florence Kelley, Julia Lathrop, and Grace Abbot, among others) endorsed a simple premise: the development of good Americans required good American mothering. Thus, they and their heirs counseled first immigrant mothers and later African-American mothers to shuck their own cultural idiosyncracies and hew to the precepts of mothering as practiced by the Anglo-American middle class. While recognizing their biases, Mink points out that this group of reformers did not adhere to the more lethal version of “Americanism” that branded Southern and Eastern European immigrants and black Americans congenitally inferior and therefore unable to benefit from the tutelage of their cultural superiors. To the contrary, these maternalist reformers felt sure that proper education would result quickly in a perfected motherhood that would then produce upstanding American men and women, acting in accord with appropriately gendered social roles. Mink labels this more benign outlook “racial liberalism.” These reformers insisted that the welfare of the child demanded state intervention on behalf of poor mothers of all races, thus participating in gender-based resistance to both laissez-faire capitalism and essentialist racism. In doing so, however, they reified distinctions based upon sex, incorporating women’s economic dependence as an essential component of good mothering, and they endorsed a single, culturally loaded standard for what good mothering looked like.

Mink divides this volume into three sections: the first deals with the development of maternalist social pol-

icy and reformers’ pursuit of state “mothers’ pensions” to enable mothers without husbands to care for children without waged work. The second section focuses on the attempt to employ education to achieve adoption of middle-class Anglo-American homemaking models by immigrant and black women. The third section describes the federalization of state programs supporting single mothers and the challenge to maternalism posed by World War II. Mink discusses the renunciation of maternalism for underclass black women in an afterword on contemporary welfare politics.

Although much of this territory has been mined before, Mink offers a fine synthesis of the earlier work, as well as an enlightening perspective which focuses on assimilative goals. She begins by detailing the shocking data about illiteracy, mental deficiency, and the ill-health of military recruits during World War I, which allowed maternalist reformers to point to the consequences of inferior mothering. Explanations for the deficits appeared in racialized analyses, which provided opportunities for maternalists to assert the need for benefits (support for single mothers, money for education) to improve the mothering of unassimilated new immigrants in northern cities.

The Smith-Hughes Act, adopted in 1917, offered federal support for vocational education in high schools, and maternalists used the money to advance education for women in homemaking. (Their hope, that girls would bring lessons home to their mothers, had previously prompted “Little Mothers’ Leagues,” which reached 50,000 girls in forty-four cities by 1915.) Mink examines reformers’ concern with nutrition as a central aspect of mothering, and this section provides some of

the most entertaining and compelling evidence that cultural smugness rather than reason or knowledge controlled their ideas. Traditional cookery spelled continuing attachment to old-country ways and social workers viewed it with dismay; “Still eating spaghetti, not yet Americanized,” wrote one social worker after a visit to an Italian family (p. 90). Home economists addressed the troubling topic in journal articles, in which one noted that Jewish foods were “generally overseasoned, over rich, over sharp, or overconcentrated” (p. 91). One pamphlet writer, in the hopes of correcting the diet of Mexican-American families in Southern California, advised preparing salads of spinach or fruits served with mayonnaise and sandwiches of lettuce or graham crackers.

Mink goes on to describe the way in which the fulfillment of the maternalist policy agenda during the New Deal foundered on the shoals of obdurate racism. The separation of benefits for widowed mothers from those for unmarried mothers led to racial sequestration that made the Aid to Dependent Children (later Aid to Families with Dependent Children) program vulnerable to stigma and attack. The maternalist belief in “education” toward a particular kind of mothering justified insult and intrusion; maternalist endorsement of cultural conformity damned black families who declined to accept Anglo-American norms. After World War II supplanted the New Deal and lowered the barriers to work for white

married mothers, maternalists found themselves increasingly unable to continue arguing that wage-earning and motherhood could not succeed together.

Mink notes that the maternalist legacy had important detrimental consequences: welfare adversaries could appropriate their argument that bad mothering, not economics, produced the problems of the poor. Payments for mothers to stay home with their children, therefore, were producing the problems they had been intended to solve. Since the black mother had never won the same degree of protection accorded white mothers—many state programs had always considered the black mother employable by virtue of her race and declared her therefore ineligible for welfare benefits—a program that appeared to permit chiefly black mothers to stay home with their children retained fewer and fewer supporters. Thus, readers of Mink’s book will understand why, in 1996, Congress revoked the federal guarantee of assistance to poor mothers in favor of a program requiring mothers to work at minimum wage. Moreover, her careful exegesis and the breadth of this study should make this volume a good choice for undergraduate and graduate students in the history of social policy.

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