



How Kinship Runs: Mothering, Discipline and Nation

Gálvez LVZ*

UFR-Escola de Treball Social, Universitat de Barcelona, Spain

***Corresponding author:** Lorena Valencia-Gálvez, Universitat de Barcelona, Passeig de la Vall d'Hebron, 171, Edifici Llevant, pl. 3, 08035 Barcelona, España, Tel: +34 611596028; Email: l.valencia.galvez@ub.edu

Opinion

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Opinion

During my fieldwork on south Manchester, in the UK, class and race were issues that women were reluctant to talk about explicitly, yet national belonging was something invoked in many of the narratives I encountered [1]. National belonging involves more than simply material procedures of containment such as borders and passports, which demarcate absolute distinctions between insiders and outsiders. It also includes a more diffuse sense of being, a lived experience, ways of thinking, everyday routines, acts of identification (or dis-identification) [2], or even a sentiment, as Gellner E [3] defines nationalism in the political arena. Women have long been considered central in the UK as the biological, cultural and symbolic reproducers of the nation, although they have only been recently included in discourses around nations and nationalisms [4]. For some scholars nations appear to be a natural extension of kinship relations [4-7]. Reproduction of the nation is not just biological, but dependent on hegemonic discourses in every historical context; women have been charged (encouraged, forced or forbidden) with having or not having children [8], and have been judged on the basis of right and wrong ways of looking after them. In other words, the biological and cultural reproduction of the nation comes to be seen as a series of gendered narratives in which relations between mothers and children in the family, domestic life, as well as ways of speaking, cooking, and even playing become naturalized [4]. As such, collective identities are reproduced as imagined communities. Women in this sense become bearers of the imagined nation: "Women, in their "proper" behavior, their "proper" clothing, embody the line which signifies the collectivity's boundaries" [4]. Women and mothers thus come to embody

the imagined nation. Women and children represent the idea of togetherness, relatedness, of family and the motherland. Mothers, children, and citizenship thus become entangled in national discourses.

I borrow Rutherford J [9] work on English whiteness and mothering yet develop it in a quite different direction. Rutherford J [9] examines "the relationship between masculinity, whiteness and English ethnicity in the context of a cultural history of race, imperialism and colonialism. In particular [he focuses on] ... the intimate connections between home and family, and the culture of English ethnicity" (: 6). He points out that "being white was a vague, amorphous concept to get hold of; it wasn't a colour, it was invisible". Motherhood in his argument was "the ideological centre of the Victorian ideal of the family. Mothers were endowed with a sacred mission to raise their children and provide a haven for their husbands away from the corrupting world of money and business" (1997: 7). Mothering came under intense scrutiny and women were subjected to a variety of taboos and regulatory practices. According to Rutherford J [9] it was this patriarchal institution of motherhood which contributed to the making of the English character.

I want to argue that one way to understand the notion of motherhood could be through examining the connections between class, race, and national belonging. I look into the politics of motherhood in terms of relationships between individual, local and national interests that impact upon child rearing, public policy and power relations. Motherhood is linked with belonging and identity, that of the nation as the "imagined community". This is an imagined community that "the state serves and protects, and over which it exercises authority" [8]. Failures in mothering or reproduction are claimed to threaten the very existence of the family or the nation-state.

In my fieldwork I have found how notions of motherhood and mothering that I have encountered in Manchester revealed interesting connections between class and poverty (living on The Estate) and being understood as national (as synonymous of an unmarked category of being white English and in opposition to the category of immigrant). As Gillies V [10] points out, “motherhood is a site where interactions of class, ethnicity and gender are commonly naturalized and normalized”. But it is not just class at stake here; concerns about ethnicity (white majority and ethnic minorities) are also identified as problematic. Indeed, often “whites are portrayed as angry, backward losers, while immigrants are pathologised as insufficiently integrated freeloaders” [11,12].

Conclusion

In conclusion, the interest of the state (and nation) in motherhood and their citizens serves to illustrate how techniques of government are deployed to shape and discipline the body personal and body politic, the connection being an understanding, often little mentioned in the UK government policy literature, of individuals as social beings. Motherhood embodies the state and vice versa. Politics of mothering are being personified through practices and techniques of child-rearing. Social and biological reproduction (mothering a child) is claimed as political in the very existence of the family as a social institution and concordantly in the nation-state [1].

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