

## Creating a Life or Opting Out *Antifeminism and the Popular Media*

*This article explores the recent explosion of anti-feminist motherhood tracts to interrogate the often fraught relationship between idealized notions of motherhood and demonized visions of feminism in the popular media. Motherhood should be a ripe topic for feminists; but, as feminist activists have been campaigning for equality in the workplace and feminist theorists have been debating the meaning of feminism on academic turf, they often ignore issues of mothering as a source of feminist power. In so doing, they have let the term “feminism” be commandeered by conservative critics who have no trouble with concretely defining what feminism means and with affixing moral judgments to women, in particular women with children, who call themselves feminist. Such negative definition has become a dominant, if not the prevailing, definition in the popular media from both the left and the right. Through Manichean equations, writers as diverse as Lisa Belkin and Danielle Crittenden have reified ideals of motherhood and in so doing have shifted the boundaries between public and private desire, essentializing and thus normalizing what should be individual private choices. More specifically, they have presented the choice to have children and stay home with them as anti-feminist and the wish, or need, to leave them, as feminist. Instead of privileging the ability to chose, they privilege what these women have chosen, often ignoring issues of class and personal desire.*

When I was pregnant with my first child I took a prenatal yoga class. The class was taught by a woman named Deborah, a liberal mother of three, who spent most of the hour and a half explaining to us how childbirth had become overly medicalized and how the medical establishment is anti-woman. To my husband's dismay, I instantly fell in love with Deborah. She was strong-willed, opinionated, an advocate for women and children. One day during her regular sermonizing, however, Deborah said something that floored me. While

coaxing us all into modified downward dog positions, she explained that the women's movement had done a real disservice to women by leading us to believe that we can do it all. "You can't work and be a good mother," she exclaimed, "the feminists were wrong." I was flabbergasted and infuriated. She worked, she was a mother. How could such a hip, progressive woman have such a conservative view of feminism? And when did feminism promise women that they could do it all?

That was over five years ago. Since then, I have had another child and have so many personal anecdotes about my encounters with anti-feminism and motherhood that I could write a multi-volume book. And, since then, a number of books and articles blaming "feminism" for misleading women have also emerged: Danielle Crittenden's *What Other Mothers Didn't Tell Us* (2000) and *Amanda Bright at Home* (2003), Sylvia Hewlett's *Creating a Life* (2002) (which inspired a *Sixty Minutes* segment and *Time* cover story), Lisa Belkin's *New York Time's Magazine* article, "The Opt-Out Revolution" (2003), and Louise Story's *New York Time's* front page piece, "Many Women at Elite Colleges set Career Path to Motherhood" (2005), are just a few.<sup>1</sup> In each case, the authors present a uniform and often highly essentialized notion of feminism, and in each case, they hold it somehow responsible for a host of personal as well as larger social problems.

This article explores the recent explosion of anti-feminist motherhood tracts to interrogate the often fraught relationship between idealized notions of motherhood and demonized visions of feminism in the popular media. Why can't the two happily coexist? Is it merely semantic or is there something about linking motherhood and "feminism" that is so alienating? Motherhood should be a ripe topic for feminists, but as Anne Crittenden has written in her excellent study, *The Price of Motherhood*,

Even feminists are often reluctant to admit that women's lives revolve around their children. They measure success from the distance women have traveled from *Kinder and Küche*, and worry that if child-rearing is made a more tempting choice, many women ... will drift back into domestic subservience. They fear that if women are seen to be mothers first, the very real gains that women have made in the workplace could be jeopardized. (2001: 7)

Indeed, as feminist activists have been campaigning for equality in the workplace and feminist theorists have been debating the meaning of feminism on academic turf, they often ignore issues of mothering as a source of feminist power. In so doing, they have let the term "feminism" be commandeered by conservative critics who have no trouble with concretely defining what feminism means and with affixing moral judgments to women, in particular women with children, who call themselves feminist.

For example, in her 2003 book *Feminist Fantasies*, Phyllis Schlafly, writes

that “the ideology of feminism teaches that women have been mistreated since time began,” and “as a political movement, feminism teaches that a just society must mandate identical treatment for men and women in every phase of our lives, no matter how reasonable it is to treat them differently and that gender must never be used as the criteria for any decision” (3). Now, anyone even vaguely interested in feminist theory knows the centrality of gender in recent—and not so recent—scholarship in the field.<sup>2</sup> Yet anti-feminists such as Schlafly omit such work in their formulations and instead make preposterous blanket statements such as, “Feminism’s psychological outlook on life is basically negative; it teaches women that the odds are stacked so severely against them that they probably cannot succeed in whatever they attempt” (2003: 3). While this might seem extreme to those of us for whom feminism is rooted in the successful creation of myriad choices for women—in work, home, relationships, etc—Schlafly’s negative definition has become a dominant, if not the prevailing, definition in the popular media. As for Deborah, my yoga teacher, feminism itself assumes a form of agency for Schlafly and becomes guilty of misleading women rather than helping them achieve the possibility of having rich life choices.

Such moves are common within conservative formulations. Take for example the work of Danielle Crittenden.<sup>3</sup> In her diatribe *What Our Mothers Didn’t Tell Us*, Crittenden evokes the Bible of second-wave feminism, *The Feminine Mystique*, when she writes that “The modern problem with no name is, I believe, exactly the reverse of the old one: While we now recognize that women are human, we blind ourselves to the fact that we are also women. If we feel stunted and oppressed when denied the chance to realize our human potential, we suffer every bit as much when we cut off from those aspects of life that are distinctly and uniquely female” (2000: 22). Crittenden’s use of the “we” is interesting here. Women have always recognized that they are human. By evoking the pronoun “we” in this manner, Crittenden places herself outside of a gendered category. Who exactly is this “we” who did not recognize this before? By spatializing language in this way, she at first adopts a male voice that allows her to undercut Freidan’s articulation of the dissatisfied woman. However, in a confounding linguistic move, Crittenden then resituates herself back within her own gender in the same sentence when she says that: “we are also women.” If the “we” had been a group who once failed to recognize this fact, how can this same “we” suffer when cut off from “the aspects of life that are distinctly and uniquely female?”

The linguistic gymnastics in this passage demonstrate a recurring anxiety in Crittenden’s (2000) text, as well as in that of a number of the critiques of motherhood of the past few years, that emerge from the choices that contemporary women make when they work or when they serve as fulltime mothers, as well as the choice to be a working mother. For of course, Crittenden and Schlafly and my yoga teacher are working mothers. But they do not seem to want to acknowledge that choice. In fact, they seem to want to deny the

possibility of choice itself, for if they do not deny its existence, they might be forced to admit that their life choices have been informed by feminism. That is a position that they are not willing to grant, and so their work belies an anxiety that consistently rears its head. Indeed, according to her own definition, Crittenden and even Schlafly (2003) both should be considered feminists. Is this in fact their anxiety? Instead of embracing a definition of feminism that allows for choice and difference, why do writers such as Crittenden and Schlafly blame feminism for misleading women? Can't they be models of successful working mothers? Why are they afraid to admit this?

Like Schlafly, Crittenden (2000) constructs a concrete definition of feminism to first demonize it and then to ascribe agency to the movement rather than to individual women. In fact she argues outright against female autonomy, which she says makes women “self-centered” and “off-putting” to men. By relying solely on personal anecdotes and observations—as well as on an anachronistic rhetorical move that romanticizes “our grandmothers” and demonizes “our mothers”—rather than on any concrete evidence, she negatively mythologizes feminism and essentializes male and female difference to naturalize the idea of marriage and stay-at-home motherhood.<sup>4</sup> Crittenden's insistence that the success of feminism has misled the “average woman” is problematic on a number of levels. Aside from the absurdity of claiming feminism's success, her average woman is white, middle class, and for the most part a fiction. But Crittenden's critique of feminism is part of a larger conservative critique. When she writes that the “solutions” proposed by “these feminists” “so dramatically fail to appeal to the majority of women,” feminism acts as a stand-in for a host of other liberal sins:

Abortion on demand and condoms in the classroom have failed to prevent millions of unmarried teenagers from becoming mothers before they are old enough to vote. Affirmative Action may have propelled some women through the executive ranks but it has done little for the vast numbers of women who build their work around their family obligations.... Generous welfare benefits to single mothers and shrill warnings about male violence have not dissuaded most women from wanting to share their lives with men ... nor does “cheaper and better childcare” seem any sort of answer to mothers who are already guilt ridden about leaving their babies every morning. (2000: 24).

While Crittenden's conservatism is to be expected, her evocation of “generous welfare benefits for single mothers” in 1999—after the Clinton administration had radically restructured the welfare system, dramatically cutting benefits for Women with Dependent Children—if nothing else, crushes her authority. Yet, the book was well received and *Vanity Fair* called her one of the most important voices of the decade. Moreover, her ideas about feminism as a uniform entity with an agency of its own, has currency in the

mainstream, and even “liberal” media.

For example, Lisa Belkin begins her October 2003 *New York Times Magazine* cover story, “The Opt Out Revolution,” by delimiting a divide similar to the one Crittenden establishes between “feminists” and “average women.” Belkin writes,

The scene in this cozy Atlanta living room would—at first glance — warm an early feminist’s heart. Gathered by the fireplace one recent evening, sipping wine and nibbling cheese, are the members of a book club, each of them a beneficiary of all that feminists of 30-odd years ago held dear. The eight women in the room have each earned a degree from Princeton, which was a citadel of everything male until the first co-educated class entered in 1969. And after Princeton, the women of this book club went on to do other things that women once were not expected to do. They received law degrees from Harvard and Columbia. They chose husbands who could keep up with them, not simply support them. They waited to have children because work was too exciting. They put on power suits and marched off to take on the world. (2003: 42).

While certainly one of affluence, the picture Belkin (2003) paints of feminist success—Ivy League educations, successful husbands, power suits and book clubs—is rather limiting and defined almost exclusively in terms of these women’s relationships to what we might call traditional sources of female pleasure: husbands, children, novel reading, and wine and cheese parties. What makes these women appear “feminist,” “at first glance,” is their prestigious educations and their six-figure salaries. Despite their deferral of child-bearing for work, their lifestyle choices are ultimately still quite conventional and rooted in the normative construct of the upper-middle class, heterosexual family dynamic. But this limited notion of feminist success quickly gives way to its opposite as Belkin continues her story:

Yes, if an early feminist could peer into this scene, she would feel triumphant about the future. Until, of course, any one of these polished and purposeful women opened her mouth. “I don’t want to be on the fast track leading to a partnership at a prestigious law firm,” says Katherine Brokaw, who left that track in order to stay home with her three children. “Some people define that as success. I don’t.” (Belkin, 2003: 42-44)<sup>5</sup>

Brokaw, like all of the women spotlighted in the article, has left the corporate rat race for fulltime motherhood, and this, according to Belkin’s (2003) either/or paradigm, is not a feminist move. But why can’t Brokaw’s choice to stay home be construed as feminist? Isn’t Belkin overlooking the idea

and act of choice as a form of female empowerment?

In many ways, Belkin's (2003) equation of feminism with a winning lap on the career fast-track and non-feminism as the desire to leave the race, is directly in line with notions of what constitutes feminism coming from Schlafly and Crittenden. All three ignore the important issues of race, class, gender, and sexual identity that feminist theorists and activists have spent the past "30-odd years" addressing. Belkin's limited definition of feminism, as measured solely in terms of professional success in comparison to men, becomes the proper object against which she measures all other lifestyle choices.<sup>6</sup> The desire for things outside of this correspondingly becomes, in her equation, anti-feminist and in most cases, normalized. Indeed, defining feminism in relationship to an opposite empties the concept of its radical as well as its pragmatic potential. Distilling the complex relationships between feminism, work, and motherhood into binary terms, and then coding these as either feminist or anti-feminist, acts as a reductive strategy: arbitrarily bringing together diverse groups of people and force-fitting them into predetermined identity positions. Such a process closes the spaces for dissent as well as for social change. As in Danielle Crittenden's (2000, 2003) work, Belkin's (2003) formulations allow for the concept of feminism, as well as its uses, to be essentialized and then dismissed. By defining it in relation to its negative through assertions such as "feminists would be aghast..." and emptying it of the possibility of difference, they presume a unified feminist stance and present a homogenous picture of who feminists are and what they want by attempting to delineate what they are not. Through their Manichean equations, they have also reified ideals of motherhood and in so doing shifted the boundaries between public and private desire, essentializing and thus normalizing what should be individual private choices. More specifically, they have presented the choice to have children and stay home with them as anti-feminist and the wish, or need, to leave them, as feminist. Instead of privileging the ability to choose, Belkin privileges what they have chosen. Moreover, issues of class—many mothers have to work for economic survival—as well as other forms of what could be called non-biological maternal desire—many mothers find satisfaction in arenas that might take them away from their children, and they may identify as something other than a mother for part of their day—have fallen out of their scenarios and thus out of the larger popular debate.

What does the ubiquity of this formulation suggest? Why have writers as diverse as Lisa Belkin and Danielle Crittenden defined the relationship between feminism and motherhood in such a way that they undercut the very foundation of feminism: choice? There are models of feminist mothers that are compelling. Take for example the writer Ayun Halliday. After the birth of her children Halliday chose to stay home rather than continue working in the performance troupe of which she was a member. But she did not completely surrender her artistic autonomy nor did she thoughtlessly suppress her ambitions. Rather, she found inspiration in her new role as a full-time mother and

capitalized on it by creating a zine *The East Village Inky* and then a book, *The Big Rumpus* (2002), both of which chronicle the day-to-day antics of her life with her two children. After the birth of her daughter, Halliday—like many before her—experienced an existential crisis. “The baby had me in such a chokehold . . . that I feared that a large and utterly tedious beast would devour me before my firstborn child could mount the tenement staircase, pronounce her own name, or eat anything more robust than wallpaper paste. If it hadn’t been for the magazine, I don’t know what I would have done. The magazine saved my heiner” (2002: 6).

Unlike the mothers in Belkin’s piece, Halliday does not define her work experience through the construction of financial gain, but instead imagines it as a medium through which she can better articulate her experience of mothering. Unlike Crittenden, Halliday’s work—her writing—does not serve to separate her from her identity as a mother, but instead functions as an outgrowth of it. Despite being a stay at home mom, she identifies as a feminist and considers her magazine an iconoclastic, feminist publication. She writes:

It wasn’t one of those glossy mainstream monthlies that publish the same two articles in every issue describing your toddler and decorating the nursery for under two thousand dollars. It wasn’t a slick newcomer hyping money management as hip and fun. It sure as bugfuck wasn’t *Martha Stewart Living*. I guess one might call it an anti-corporate, consciousness-raising, feminist call to arms. (2002: 6).

By positioning herself in this way, Halliday (2002) defies categorization within Belkin (2003) and Crittenden’s (2000) rigid formulations. Her definition of feminism, like her notions of work and motherhood, is nuanced in a way that goes beyond either/or binaries. She works and she stays at home. She is a mother and a feminist. And her choices are her own. While she, like Crittenden and Schlafly and the women profiled in Belkin’s piece can afford to stay at home (and this is key), Halliday does not see this move as an anti-feminist capitulation. On the contrary, she regards it as an empowered choice; one that allows her to be both a mother and an artist, a feminist and a stay-at-home mom. Rather than locate her definition of feminism in the choices she has made—to have children and be their full-time caregiver—she grounds it in her ability to make these choices.

Perhaps we, as feminists, should follow Halliday’s lead and return to a more dynamic notion of feminism, rooted in choice for all women, regardless of who they are and where they work. If we make room for women who express a desire to stay home with their children under the feminist tent, perhaps then we can reclaim the term *feminism* from the negative grip of critics such as Phyllis Schlafly and Danielle Crittenden. By dispelling some of the anxiety surrounding the term, we may be able to work towards creating real choices for women and children, from all classes and backgrounds.

<sup>1</sup>A partial listing of these texts include Sylvia Hewlett's *Creating a Life* (2002); Naomi Wolf's *MisConceptions* (2003); Alison Pearson's *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2003); Danielle Crittenden's *Amanda Bright at Home* (2003); Phyllis Schlafly's *Feminist Fantasies* (2003); Lisa Belkin's "The Opt Out Revolution" (2003); and Louise Story's "Many Women at Elite Colleges Set Career Path to Motherhood" (2005).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" in Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 28-52.

<sup>3</sup>Interestingly, Danielle Crittenden's mother-in-law, David Frum's mother, was the late Barbara Frum, another outspoken female and a pioneer in Canadian broadcasting.

<sup>4</sup>Kathy Peiss (1986), for example, demonstrates how women in the early part of the twentieth century, Crittenden's grandmother's generation, engaged in premarital sex and other forms of "treating" in her well-researched study *Cheap Amusements*.

<sup>5</sup>Lisa Belkin, "The Opt Out Revolution" *New York Times Magazine*, October 26, 2003. 42-3. The article generated the magazine's largest on-line response as well as a number of angry editorials in other publications from *Bitch* to the *Nation*. Importantly, and I don't go into it in detail here, most critics of the piece, myself included, took issue with the class-based assumptions of Belkin's article. These women could afford to stop working and live a life of continued comfort thanks in large part to the salaries that their husbands were still making.

<sup>6</sup>For more on the idea of feminism's "proper object" see Butler (1994). Butler is talking about what she sees as the false divide between feminism and queer theory; in particular the equation proposed by Henry Abelove in the *Gay and Lesbian Reader* that: "gender is to feminism as sex is to queer theory." Butler urges us to move beyond relationships defined by proper objects and "for feminism to offer a critique of gender hierarchy that might be incorporated into a radical theory of sex, and for radical sexual theory to challenge and enrich feminism" (15).

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