Stephanie Lawler. *Mothering the Self: Mothers, Daughters, Subjects* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000)

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1 The complex and multi-faceted relationships that exist between female identity, mothers, daughters and (the practice and institution of) motherhood have been the subject of intense debate since the emergence of the contemporary feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Marianne Hirsch in her study *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (1989), for example, situates the difficulty of defining motherhood 'at the breaking point between various feminist positions: between presence and absence, speech and silence, essentialism and constructivism, materialism and psychoanalysis.' She suggests, in other words, that debates surrounding motherhood and the mother-daughter relation have been central in/to feminist theories based upon a notion of equality, where women demand social and economic parity with men, and in/to those based upon a notion of difference, where women demand recognition for their 'feminine' specificity. While some feminist theorists take Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking study *The Second Sex* (1949) as a starting point, presenting motherhood as a patriarchal construction, as a trap that severely limits women's individual freedom, a number of 1970s and 1980s theorists considered motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship more positively, as alternative sources of female identity from those constructed by patriarchy.

2 Defining the meaning and value of motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship, then, has been central to post-war feminism. This is, of course, nothing new. The term 'mother' has always been capable of encompassing multiple contradictions, frequently functioning as a vehicle for the exploration of broader debates concerning, for example, education, the moral and physical welfare of the population, women's labour rights, ideas of nationhood, and the roles of nature and culture in the development of social and gender roles and identities. The definition of motherhood, in short, has frequently been related to the attainment of important political and economic objectives. The problem with many discussions of motherhood, and of the complex dynamics of mother-daughter relationships, is their failure to consider the actual experiences of flesh and blood individuals. Women's experience of maternity and the mother-daughter relationship may be mediated by cultural and political representations of motherhood, but there exists a gap between such representations and their daily practices. A key strength of Steph Lawler's study lies in the ways in which, rather than defending or (re)constructing certain debates around mothers and

daughters, she charts the interaction of individual women, both mothers and daughters, with various contemporary interpretations - cultural, political, feminist, medical, legal and so on - of motherhood in what she terms 'Euroamerican' societies. As she states in her Introduction, her work asks:

> What does it mean, in late twentieth-century/early twenty-first century Euroamerican societies, to be a mother? To be a daughter? How are maternal and daughterly selves produced? In this context, these are not questions of metaphysics, but of the workings of knowledge in the social world and in the lives of individuals. (p. 3)

These are evidently large questions that cannot be covered in a single study. Nevertheless, *Mothering the Self* sheds light on a number of important issues involved in the "production" of "maternal and daughterly selves", and provides welcome relief from the ahistorical, universalising and non-materialist stances common amongst theorists keen to promote one particular version of the 'truth' of motherhood.

3 Starting from a Foucauldian understanding that "knowledges about the self, about mothers, about childhood, about the mother-daughter relationship are produced and reproduced in specific relations of social and political power, and in response to specific social and political preoccupations" (p. 3), Lawler examines data taken from interviews with fourteen British women, who are simultaneously mothers and daughters. She then places the emotions, experiences and conceptions of motherhood and the mother-daughter relation expressed by these women in the context of other, dominant 'knowledges' about childhood, mothering techniques and selfhood circulating in late twentieth/early twenty-first century Euroamerican societies. What she discovers is sometimes surprising and often moving.

4 The women's differing experiences are not, as is often assumed, necessarily rooted in the particular relationship they have with their child, but rather in class- and gender-based expectations of the roles they should perform. Their judgements of their own mothering practices and of their relationships to their mothers are frequently intermingled with feelings of guilt and shame, of anger and frustration as well as of satisfaction and pleasure. Chapter 5, for instance, discusses the common phenomenon of 'matrophobia', that is, the fear of becoming one's mother. Lawler argues that the desire to be different from one's mother is not only understandable in terms of psychoanalytic insights, or of the ways in which all mother-daughter relationships are characterised by conflicting feelings of identification and rejection. Rather, she argues that in the case of many of her interviewees matrophobia is irrevocably bound up in movement from one class to another. She argues that these particular women's fear of becoming their mothers "stems from insecurities around their class positioning" and that "these women's mothers may come to signify a class position to which they fear

returning" (p. 102). This leads us to read Hazel's (one of the interviewees) comments about her mother's "taste in furniture" (p. 107) and Barbara's dismissal of her mother as "a snob […] a lot like Thora Hird" (p. 108) as expressions of their uncomfortable awareness that they have entered a different class to that of their mother, rather than simply as a dislike of their individual character traits.

5 In terms of dominant ideas about motherhood, Lawler consistently underlines the extent to which mothers are deemed to be responsible not only for creating balanced individuals, but also a harmonious society. She cites a number of authoritative male figures who celebrate women's 'natural' mothering and nurturing instincts, and reject non-normative - unloving, single, working, teenage - mothers as 'unnatural' and deviant. This includes politicians of both left and right. While, perhaps unsurprisingly, the British Conservative John Redwood confidently states, somewhat paradoxically, that "the natural state should be the two-adult family caring for their children" and his party colleague Kenneth Baker blames criminality on "erratic and inconsistent parenting", the Labour MP David Blunkett also blames parents (and here mothers are always first in the firing line) for poor results in children's education. Mothers have also been held responsible for the moral and psychological welfare of the population by a number of childcare 'experts', including the hugely influential psychologist Donald Winnicott who developed the notion of the "good-enough mother" in his radio broadcasts of the 1950s. Although this may seem a reasonable proposition, being "good-enough" is in reality highly demanding, and Winnicott sets exacting standards for mothers to follow. The "good-enough" mother is, in effect, "a woman whose whole life is bound up with the needs of her child" (p. 49). In contrast, women who are "masculine" or "preoccupied with themselves" (p. 49) are singled out for criticism. This mother-blaming tendency is particularly evident in Lawler's discussion of the Bulger case in the second chapter of her study. In 1993, Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, two 10-year-old boys, abducted the 2-year-old James Bulger from a shopping centre, and later murdered him. In her analysis of media reports of the case, Lawler shows how clichés about mothering practices come into play in debates surrounding the guilt or innocence of Thompson and Venables, whether they should be considered as "evil monsters" or as "damaged victims" (p. 41). Lawler convincingly argues that, because middle-class childhood is constructed as 'normal' and 'natural', the working-class childhoods of Thompson and Venables are held to be at least partly responsible for their crimes.

6 Lawler shows throughout her study how working-class childhoods and parenting techniques are constantly taken as 'deviant' in relation to the middle-class norms: "Middle-

classness becomes the norm against which others are measured: it is also the norm to which working-class people are supposed to aspire" (p. 79). It is against such norms that Hazel and Barbara, cited above, judge their mothers and find them wanting. Lawler questions the validity of these "commonplace and common-sense" (p. 168) middle-class understandings of motherhood and childhood, pointing to the damaging effect on women of childcare 'experts' who construct 'normal' mothers as "having no desires beyond the (biologically or socially impelled) desire to have children" (p. 150). In her analysis of the interviews, Lawler looks at various ways in which women succeed in resisting such child-centred understandings about mothering. As one interviewee, Lynn, comments, mothering can engender a loss of identity on the part of the mother: "The time that [child-care] responsibilities take up is time that's taken away from me to be myself" (p. 164). Nearly all of the women interviewed appear to have developed a number of strategies in which they allow themselves to slip out of the role of mother in order to "be themselves", and to resist the dominant ideal of the devoted and selfless mother. As Lawler concludes, mothers and daughters do not simply passively absorb information and knowledges relating to mothering, childhood and mother-child relationships. Rather, they tend to "find ways of resisting the occlusion of the maternal self" which Lawler reads as "an indication of their unwillingness to wholly participate in 'expert' understandings of motherhood" (p. 166). The story ends, then, on a more positive note. Mothers have been held responsible throughout history for the conduct and physical and emotional development of their offspring. And feminists have been just as guilty as others in assuming that 'the shaping of the self is […] within the mother's gift' (p. 51). But, although for both mothers and daughters the experience of motherhood can be a painful and complex aspect of their lives, the interviewees in this study also demonstrate a degree of agency in relation to the demands made of them - more agency, perhaps, than Foucault himself would have recognised as possible.

7 As the series editors suggest, Steph Lawler's book is timely and important. It focuses not only on daughters' experience of their relationships with their mothers - long the subject of feminist enquiry - but also on that of mothers' own experiences. This rectifies a major lacuna in the majority of theorisations of motherhood. The most convincing and interesting aspects of the study relate to the analysis of real data - whether cases in the media or the collected interviews - in relation to deeply entrenched assumptions about the role and function of mothers. The more theoretical sections, particularly in the first chapter, seem in contrast rather superfluous at times - while detailed discussion of methodology, for example, may be necessary for an academic dissertation, it could have been omitted for publication. Foucault is

also clearly a guiding light from the very beginning, but is not acknowledged as such until midway through the first chapter. The author's non-critical stance in relation to Foucault also jars a little in the closing stages of the book, where she suggests a more flexible notion of resistance to dominant power structures than that which exists in the majority of Foucault's writings. These, however, are minor quibbles. Lawler's study is an original and stimulating contribution to the field of gender study and deserves a wide readership.