1

Introduction

Women mother. In our society, as in most societies, women not only bear children. They also take primary responsibility for infant care, spend more time with infants and children than do men, and sustain primary emotional ties with infants. When biological mothers do not parent, other women, rather than men, virtually always take their place. Though fathers and other men spend varying amounts of time with infants and children, the father is rarely a child's primary parent.

Over the past few centuries, women of different ages, classes, and races have moved in and out of the paid labor force. Marriage and fertility rates have fluctuated considerably during this same period. Despite these changes, women have always cared for children, usually as mothers in families and occasionally as workers in child-care centers or as paid and slave domestics. Women's mothering is one of the few universal and enduring elements of the sexual division of labor.

Because of the seemingly natural connection between women's childbearing and lactation capacities and their responsibility for child care, and because humans need extended care in childhood, women's mothering has been taken for granted. It has been assumed to be inevitable by social scientists, by many feminists, and certainly by those opposed to feminism. As a result, although women's mothering is of profound importance for family structure, for relations between the sexes, for ideology about women, and for the sexual division of labor and sexual inequality both inside the family and in the nonfamilial world, it is rarely analyzed.

This book analyzes women's mothering and, in particular, the way women's mothering is reproduced across generations. Its central

question is how do women today come to mother? By implication, it asks how we might change things to transform the sexual division of labor in which women mother.

Historically, the actual physical and biological requirements of childbearing and child care have decreased. But mothering is still performed in the family, and women's mothering role has gained psychological and ideological significance, and has come increasingly to define women's lives.

Two centuries ago, marriage, especially for women, was essentially synonymous with child-rearing.[1] One spouse was likely to die before the children were completely reared, and the other spouse's death would probably follow within a few years of the last child's marriage. Parenting lasted from the inception of a marriage to the death of the marriage partners. Women often died during one of many childbirths.

Although marriage and adulthood were previously coextensive with child-rearing, mothering did not dominate women's lives. A woman carried out her child-care responsibilities along with a wide range of other productive work. In this earlier period, the household was the major productive unit of society. Husband and wife, with their own and/or other children, were a cooperative producing unit. Children were integrated early into the adult world of work, and men took responsibility for the training of boys once boys reached a certain age. Women's child-care and productive responsibilities included extensive training of girls—daughters, servants, apprentices—for work. Women carried out productive and reproductive responsibilities, as they have in most societies and throughout history.

Over the last two centuries, fertility and infant mortality rates have declined, longevity has increased, and children spend much of their childhood years in school. With the development of capitalism and the industrialization that followed, production outside the home expanded greatly, while production within the home declined. Cloth, food, clothing, and other household necessities, once produced by women in the home, became commodities mass-produced in factories. Production outside the home became identified with work as such; the home was no longer viewed as a workplace. Home and workplace, once the same, are now separate.[2]

This change in the organization of production went along with and produced a complex of far-reaching changes in the family and in women's lives. In addition to its diminished role in material production, the family lost much of its educational and religious role, as well as its role in the care of the sick and aged. The family became a quintessentially relational and personal institution, *the* personal

sphere of society.[3] Women's family role became centered on child care and taking care of men. This role involved more than physical labor. It was relational and personal and, in the case of both children and men, maternal. The early capitalist period in the United States produced an ideology of the "moral mother":[4] Bourgeois women were to act as both nurturant moral models to their children and as nurturant supporters and moral guides for husbands on their return from the immoral, competitive world of work. The ideology of the moral mother has lost some of its Victorian rigidity, but it has also spread throughout society. Women of all classes are now expected to nurture and support husbands in addition to providing them with food and a clean house.

As women's mothering became less entwined with their other ongoing work, it also became more isolated and exclusive. The Western family has been largely "nuclear" for centuries, in that households rarely contained more than one married couple with children. But these children could be grown, as long as they were not married, and households often contained a number of other members—servants, apprentices, boarders and lodgers, a grandparent—as well. Older children, grandmothers, and other older people living with or near a mother helped in child care. Capitalist industrialization removed grown children, grandparents, and nonfamily members from the household and sharply curtailed men's participation in family life.

Today, homes contain fewer children, and these children enter school at an early age. The household with children has become an exclusively parent and child realm;[5] infant and child care has become the exclusive domain of biological mothers, who are increasingly isolated from other kin, with fewer social contacts and little routine assistance during their parenting time. Participation in the paid labor force does not change this. When women are home, they still have nearly total responsibility for children.

In spite of the vast growth of the state and wage labor, women continue to perform their mothering activities in the family; the rearing of children remains a major familial responsibility. Organized child care and schooling outside the home presuppose and supplement mothering within it. They do not supplant this mothering.

Thus, biological mothers have come to have more exclusive responsibility for child care just as the biological components of mothering have lessened, as women have borne fewer children and bottle-feeding has become available. During the last fifty years, despite the decline in the birthrate, housewives have come to spend more time in child care.[6] Post-Freudian psychology and sociology have provided new rationales for the idealization and enforcement of women's ma-

ternal role, as they have emphasized the crucial importance of the mother-child relationship for the child's development.

Women's emotional role in the family and their psychological mothering role grew just as their economic and biological role decreased. We notice women's mothering today because it has ceased to be embedded in a range of other activities and human relations. It stands out in its emotional intensity and meaning, and in its centrality for women's lives and social definition.

When we look back historically, we can see both the changes that have occurred and the tenacity of some ways that gender is socially organized. Women's productive and reproductive roles have changed, and the family has changed as well. A century ago, women were legal nonentities, subsumed under their husband's political and legal status. Today women can vote, and there is widespread recognition that they should have equal rights under the law. A century ago, few women could earn an independent living. Today, women are likely to have jobs, though few are likely to earn enough to support themselves and their children adequately. Women today have two or three children, and occasionally choose not to have any. The divorce rate is much higher, and people marry later.

But women continue to mother, and most people still marry. Women remain discriminated against in the labor force and unequal in the family, and physical violence against women is not decreasing. We continue to live in a male-dominant society, even though the legal bases of male dominance are eroding. These features of our contemporary social organization of gender are common to most other societies and tie us to our preindustrial, precapitalist Western past.

Everyone interested in questions of gender and sexual inequality and how to change these today must recognize these tenacious, almost transhistorical facts. Such recognition has led feminists to focus politically on questions of personal life, on women's control of their sexuality and bodies, on family relations, on heterosexual bias and discrimination against lesbians and homosexuals, and on the sexual division of labor, in addition to questions of equality in the paid economy and polity. Women have learned that fundamental changes in the social relations of production do not assure concomitant changes in the domestic relations of reproduction.

This same recognition of the tenacity of sexual asymmetry and inequality in the face of sweeping historical changes has stimulated feminist attempts to articulate theoretically the systemic nature of the social organization of gender, to move beyond descriptive generalizations about sexism, patriarchy, or male supremacy to analysis of

how sexual asymmetry and inequality are constituted, reproduced, and change.

This book is a contribution to the feminist effort. It analyzes the reproduction of mothering as a central and constituting element in the social organization and reproduction of gender. In what follows, I argue that the contemporary reproduction of mothering occurs through social structurally induced psychological processes. It is neither a product of biology nor of intentional role-training. I draw on the psychoanalytic account of female and male personality development to demonstrate that women's mothering reproduces itself cyclically. Women, as mothers, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother. These capacities and needs are built into and grow out of the mother-daughter relationship itself. By contrast, women as mothers (and men as not-mothers) produce sons whose nurturant capacities and needs have been systematically curtailed and repressed. This prepares men for their less affective later family role, and for primary participation in the impersonal extrafamilial world of work and public life. The sexual and familial division of labor in which women mother and are more involved in interpersonal, affective relationships than men produces in daughters and sons a division of psychological capacities which leads them to reproduce this sexual and familial division of labor.

I attempt to provide a theoretical account of what has unquestionably been true—that women have had primary responsibility for child care in families and outside of them; that women by and large want to mother, and get gratification from their mothering; and finally, that, with all the conflicts and contradictions, women have succeeded at mothering.

The remainder of Part 1 introduces the main lines of argument of the book. Chapter 2 investigates explanations for the reproduction of mothering based on biology and role socialization. It argues that these explanations are insufficient; psychoanalytic theory can better account for the reproduction of mothering. Chapter 3 examines psychoanalytic object-relations theory as a theory of the reproduction of sex, gender, and family organization.

Part 2 puts forth my reinterpretation of feminine and masculine development. Chapters 4 and 5 show that the early mother-infant relationship creates both a foundation for parenting in children of both genders and expectations that women will mother. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 describe how asymmetries in family experiences, growing out of women's mothering, affect the differential development of the feminine and masculine psyche. Chapter 6 discusses how the early

mother-infant relationship differs for girls and boys; chapters 7 and 8 explore gender differences in the oedipus complex. Chapter 9 returns to the early Freudian account, in order to distinguish its useful findings from its methodological and valuational limitations. Chapter 10 continues this critique, emphasizing the importance of parental participation in the oedipus complex.

Part 3 shows how the feminine and masculine development that results from women's mothering also recreates this mothering. Chapter 11 explores women's and men's differential location in reproduction and production, and the contribution of gender personality differences to women's and men's locations in these spheres. Chapter 12 examines the psychological and interpersonal capacities and needs that emerge from women's and men's development, and how these, finally, create women as mothers. In the Afterword, I explore some current contradictions in the organization of parenting and speculate on possibilities for change.

Two contributions to feminist theory have been particularly important to my own thinking and have influenced my presentation here. The first of these formulations argues for the analytic autonomy and social significance of the organization of gender. Gayle Rubin claims that every society is organized by a "sex /gender system" —"systematic ways to deal with sex, gender and babies"[7]—as well as by a particular organization of production. The sex-gender system (what I have been calling the social organization of gender) is, just as any society's dominant mode of production, a fundamental determining and constituting element of that society, socially constructed, subject to historical change and development, and organized in such a way that it is systematically reproduced. A society's sex-gender system consists in "a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner. . . . The realm of human sex, gender and procreation has been subjected to, and changed by, relentless social activity for millennia. Sex as we know it —gender identity, sexual desire and fantasy, concepts of childhood —is itself a social product."[8]

The sex-gender system is analytically separable from, and it is never entirely explainable in terms of, the organization of production, though in any particular society the two are empirically and structurally intertwined. Developments in the sex-gender system can affect and in different societies have affected changes in the mode of production. In the modern period, however, the development of cap-

italism, and contemporary developments in socialist societies, have changed the sex-gender system more than the reverse.

Theoretically, a sex-gender system could be sexually egalitarian (and, presumably, generationally egalitarian as well). Hitherto, however, all sex-gender systems have been male-dominated. Moreover, every sex-gender system has organized society around two and only two genders, a sexual division of labor that always includes women's mothering, and heterosexual marriage. Drawing empirically from her analysis of anthropological literature, Rubin suggests that kinship and family organization form the locus and core of any society's sex-gender system. Kinship and family organization consist in and reproduce socially organized gender and sexuality.

The second theoretical formulation of feminist theory that has been particularly important to me both specifies and extends the first, helping to define and articulate the organization of the sex-gender system and sexual asymmetry as it has hitherto been constituted. More specifically, it demonstrates that women's mothering is a central and defining feature of the social organization of gender and is implicated in the construction and reproduction of male dominance itself. Michelle Rosaldo, Sherry Ortner, and I suggest that one can distinguish analytically in all societies between domestic and public aspects of social organization.[9] Mothers and children form the core of domestic organization; domestic ties are based on specific particularistic relationships among people and are assumed to be natural and biological. Because of their child-care responsibilities, women's primary social location is domestic. Men are also involved with particular domestic units, but men find a primary social location in the public sphere. Public institutions, activities, and forms of association link and rank domestic units, provide rules for men's relations to domestic units, and tie men to one another apart from their domestic relationships. Public institutions are assumed to be defined according to normative, hence social, criteria, and not biologically or naturally. It is therefore assumed that the public sphere, and not the domestic sphere, forms "society" and "culture"—those intended, constructed forms and ideas that take humanity beyond nature and biology and institute political control. Men's location in the public sphere, then, defines society itself as masculine. It gives men power to create and enforce institutions of social and political control, important among these to control marriage as an institution that both expresses men's rights in women's sexual and reproductive capacities and reinforces these rights.[10]

Thus, we can define and articulate certain broad universal sexual

asymmetries in the social organization of gender generated by women's mothering. Women's mothering determines women's primary location in the domestic sphere and creates a basis for the structural differentiation of domestic and public spheres. But these spheres operate hierarchically. Kinship rules organize claims of men on domestic units, and men dominate kinship. Culturally and politically, the public sphere dominates the domestic, and hence men dominate women.

Societies vary in the extent to which they differentiate the public and domestic spheres and restrict women to the latter. In small gatherer-hunter bands, for instance, there is often minimal differentiation. Even here, however, men tend to have extradomestic distribution networks for the products of their hunting, whereas what women gather is shared only with the immediate domestic unit.[11] Men exchange women in marriage, gaining rights in women that women do not have in themselves or in men, and gaining a position in the masculine social hierarchy.[12]

In Western society, the separation of domestic and public spheres —of domestic reproduction and personal life on the one hand and social production and the state on the other—has been sharpened through the course of industrial capitalist development, producing a family form reduced to its fundamentals, to women's mothering and maternal qualities and heterosexual marriage, and continuing to reproduce male dominance.

All sex-gender systems organize sex, gender, and babies. A sexual division of labor in which women mother organizes babies and separates domestic and public spheres. Heterosexual marriage, which usually gives men rights in women's sexual and reproductive capacities and formal rights in children, organizes sex. Both together organize and reproduce gender as an unequal social relation.