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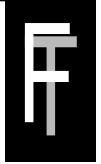
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Reconceiving citizenship

The challenge of mothers as political activists



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Abstract The resurgence of interest in the meaning of citizenship has encouraged debate on its gendered character, especially the relationship between public and private. Informed by such analyses, this article considers the political organizations, in this case in Australia, formed to reclaim maternity care from medical dominance and to promote women's choices as childbearers. As activists, mothers have carved out a new form of politics, transforming their 'private' experiences into issues of public contention. Challenging established categories, they have sought to improve their social rights through educating the public and changing professional and institutional practices – for example, asserting their 'right' to birth at home and breastfeed in public places. I argue that neither this project, nor that of feminism's emphasis on achieving equality in the public sphere, has been adequate, for gender equity requires intermeshed social, economic and political rights. By conceptualizing mothers as a political collectivity with distinctive, though not homogeneous, interests and needs, the article indicates ways to extend current theoretical frameworks, including postmodernist feminist debates on gender-justice and the politics of differentiated citizenship.

keywords *Australia, breastfeeding, childbirth, citizenship, feminism, motherhood*

In the past decade, debates on the meaning and significance of citizenship have emerged at the forefront of political and social theory, including within feminism. This resurgence reflects the crisis of the alternative social imaginaries offered by liberalism and socialism in the face of the intense individualism of neo-liberal policies in the West, on the one hand, and the demise of the Soviet bloc on the other (Beiner, 1995: 1; Held, 1991: 19; Turner, 1994: 156). It has also become abundantly clear that, in a globalizing context, the new social movements of the late 20th century have placed issues on the public agenda that cannot be accommodated by traditional conceptions of the relationship between state and civil society, and between public and personal life. Political and theoretical calls to revitalize civil society have become louder, and the resurgence of interest in

aspects of citizenship and new forms of communitarianism is notable (Kymlicka and Norman, 1995; Walzer, 1995). T.H. Marshall's (1967) work has been central to our understandings of shifting concepts of citizenship as involving civil and political and also social rights, although he stopped short of arguing for economic rights. The idea of a 'citizen' as being entitled to full participation in society, however, continues to be vital. But calls to reinstate citizenship as a social value are misplaced if they imply a return to an earlier social framework – one based on a gendered structuring of public and private spheres.

The civil society developed by modern industrial societies allocated to women most of the everyday labour of managing domestic tasks and personal relations in the home, and also of building community through local networking and voluntary work. The activity of women, especially as mothers, in establishing and maintaining health and educational facilities and community services has been recognized by historians and writers on the welfare state (for example, Koven and Michel, 1993). However, it rarely enters mainstream political theory as being foundational to modern democracies in the way that men's political organizations and activities are seen. Feminist writers have drawn attention to the many ways in which women's lives constantly bridge public and private domains, making the distinctions often meaningless (Fraser, 1989; Showstack Sassoon, 1987). This is especially evident in political organizations formed in recent decades to reclaim maternity care from medical dominance, to 'humanize' birth and to promote women's choices as childbearers. As activists, mothers have been carving out a new form of politics, constructing public issues from their 'private' experiences. Moreover, women, as both family members and as paid workers in human services, bear most directly and intensely the contemporary crisis resulting from the withdrawal of state services and economic restructuring. These social developments, I argue, suggest new possibilities for reimagining or reconceiving ideas about citizenship, interpreted as social practices that enhance people's effective participation in social life (Turner, 1993: 3) and in a shared political community (Mouffe, 1993: Chapter 4). Women's political mobilization around reproduction throws new light on interpretations of individual and collective action as social processes, and on the formation of rights and interests at the conjuncture of public and private life.

Feminist theory and social action have shown how conventional accounts of citizenship in political theory, both liberal and socialist, are profoundly limited by their gendered character. The presupposition of the separation of public and private spheres reflects men's everyday lives rather than those of women, and, as Pateman claims, the social contract is fundamentally a sexual one, institutionalizing marriage and the sexual division of labour (Pateman, 1988). Liberalism traditionally characterized citizens as bearers of universal qualities, especially reason, and as entitled to political rights on the basis of property ownership and readiness to defend the country (Voet, 1998). Anne Phillips notes that it therefore frequently 'smuggled real live men into the seemingly abstract and innocent universals that nourish political thought' (Phillips, 1991: 77). Liberalism has thus

also been unable to deal with the specificity of different groups of citizens, particularly with their embodied sexual difference (Young, 1990). Indeed, it has been taken for granted that the public life in which a community's members participate as citizens is based on the existence of a private world of home and family. This is seen as representative of particular rather than universal values and interests, and supposedly therefore not political. As Pateman has pointed out, '[t]he feminine, private world of nature, particularity, differentiation, inequality, emotion, love and ties of blood is set apart from the public, universal – and masculine – realm of convention, civil equality, and freedom, reason, consent and contract' (Pateman cited in Mouffe, 1992: 81). The specific attributes of women, their capacity for childbirth and motherhood, thus represent a threat to the idea of citizenship, symbolizing all that must be kept in a separate sphere away from public life. Granted such a legacy of political thought, what, then, are we to make of the efforts of women as mothers who have publicly asserted their needs in childbearing? Some have organized politically in community-based groups and carved out an associational presence in civil society, as pregnant and lactating women, flouting their very difference from the abstract 'universal' (that is, male) citizen. In effect, they have thereby challenged the very basis on which citizenship has been historically established in western societies.

This article addresses these complex matters of citizenship through using research into Australian mothers' organizations and political activity. Although women have long been involved in community activity through philanthropic, religious, educational and work-related causes, it is the activity of women seeking to claim rights as childbearers in which I am interested. These pose the most explicit threat to the hegemonic understandings of what is acceptably 'political' and fit for public debate. Like the mobilization around violence against women, reforming medicalized birth and promoting public acceptance of breastfeeding pushes so-called private sphere issues on to the public agenda. Mothers' claims to social citizenship as including increased choice and control over childbearing have been asserted in public as well as in immediate interpersonal encounters. Raising questions in the media and the state about the management of the intensely personal experience of birthing and lactation determinedly breeches the split between public and private. The emergence of maternity reform organizations from the late 1950s in Britain and North America and from the early 1960s in Australia is thus of considerable theoretical and practical interest. However, with some exceptions (for example, Blum, 1993; Gorham and Andrews, 1990; Kitzinger, 1990; and Umansky, 1995), organizations such as the National Childbirth Trust, the International Childbirth Education Association and breastfeeding support groups have passed largely unnoticed. They figure neither in historical accounts of feminism nor in political theorists' analyses of the new social movements characteristic of the later 20th century.

Even feminist debates on the meaning of citizenship have generally neglected this collective activity of women as mothers, although a few studies have explored their motivations (Blum, 1993; Umansky, 1995).

Feminist analyses have moved from critiques of existing political thought to formulating new theories of justice and democracy, in the process reasserting the importance of the specifically political aspects of women's search for full participation in society (Mouffe, 1993; Young, 1990). Recurrent tensions in traditional theory, however, also re-emerge in feminist controversy, especially that between the goals of equality and individual liberty. A contrast between communitarian and individualist social visions continues in conflicting views such as those over pornography (Bacchi, 1990) and is central to disputes over whether or not motherhood itself provides a new model of citizenship. Elshtain (1981) and Ruddick (1989) valorized maternal virtues of nurturance and altruism, seeking to extend them more widely as a model for social practice. However, Anne Phillips (1991) and other contemporary writers of the 1990s generally accept Dietz's (1985) argument that these 'maternalists' inappropriately confuse personal and civic qualities. They claim that, even in view of established feminist claims that the 'political is personal', some degree of separation of one's private life from one's political activities as a citizen is necessary, for 'citizenship acts on a more limited terrain' (Phillips, 1991: 85). Similarly, Chantal Mouffe, in discussing feminist theory's 'return to the political', contends that it is a new articulation of the relationship between universal and particular that is required, not a collapsing of the categories entirely (Mouffe, 1993: 13). In seeking to articulate the criteria for gender-specific social justice, postmodern theorists such as Iris Young (1990), Jane Flax (1993), Nancy Fraser (1997) and Chantal Mouffe have turned to consideration of women's search for inclusion in a genuinely 'civil' democratic society. Their discussion of differentiated citizenship and communicative democracy offers further possibilities for considering mothers' activism in maternity provision. So, too, does Marilyn Waring's (1997) related arguments about the need to extend consideration of women's human rights to include the embodied experiences of childbearing.

Through considering the role played in Australia by organizations such as the Childbirth Education Association (CEA) and the Nursing Mothers' Association of Australia (NMAA) in the 1960s and 1970s, and by others in more recent years, I contend that the project of seeking to humanize birth and improve 'consumer choice' for childbearing women has been an important aspect of women's citizenship claims. For voluntary associations of women with their own family responsibilities, taking on the medical profession and public opinion has been a large task. Many significant gains have been won in terms of changed hospital practices and general acceptance of breastfeeding – the right to feed in public places now being incorporated in anti-discrimination law, for example. However, lobbying for economic supports for childbearing women, such as increased provision of maternity leave, is also essential, as indeed it is for mothers to have political voice in relevant forums such as those determining funding for maternity care. In these areas, the birth activists have been considerably less successful. They have thus pursued social rights more than economic and political ones. At the same time, I argue that the ambivalent relationship between feminism and the 'mothers' movement'

in Australia has diminished the political effectiveness of both (Reiger, 1999a). The women's movement's neglect of maternity issues, other than childcare, and its preference for seeking educational, political and labour market opportunities, has limited its appeal and lessened its social impact among women who continue to construct their identities largely through family relationships. To indicate the resulting dilemmas for women's search for effective citizenship, and thus the theoretical issues they raise, I will trace the historical course of Australian women's political activism as mothers. In conclusion I will elaborate further on the conceptual debates, arguing for greater attention to the processes of personal lives and collective organization as the basis of citizenship claims.

The tradition of maternal activism

The emergence of women's organizations challenging medically dominated childbirth in the 1960s and 1970s continued an established tradition of maternal activism in Australasia, Britain and North America (Koven and Michel, 1993; Scokpol, 1992). In *The Disenchantment of the Home*, I discussed the particular combination of social factors that gave rise to increased public attention to maternity in the decades from 1900 to the Second World War (Reiger, 1985). Nationalist and eugenic debates over population quality and the public health movement's heightening of awareness of seemingly intractable infant and maternal health problems took distinctive form in the Australian context, but affected the development of maternity services elsewhere too (Arnup et al., 1990; Lewis, 1980). Two central themes have emerged from the feminist scholarship on these early maternity services. The first concerns the ways in which women sought services from the state, and the second concerns the grounds on which they did so. Considering these provides a basis for analysis of later struggles over maternity care. It may seem ironic to consider the accomplishment of the very health services now under criticism as an earlier achievement of women's organized political activity. It was never wholly that, of course, as the self-interested growth and political power of the medical profession makes clear (Willis, 1983). However, it was due to significant efforts on the part of white, middle-class women that infant and maternal health clinics, antenatal care and specialized maternity hospitals were established in the interwar years. In the years between the 1900s and 1940s, however, women activists' demands, articulated through temperance organizations, unions and housewives' associations as well as more specialized groups, were not only for particular services, but for greater recognition of the social value of mothering. They staked this claim in the context of the state in Britain, Canada and the Scandinavian countries, to a lesser extent in the USA, but to a still greater one in Australia (Lake, 1999). Their claims for financial support through schemes of motherhood and child endowment sought public recognition of the contribution they made to the community. Under the influence of first-wave feminism and the attempt to extend maternal influence from the home to the public sphere, they sought a special status as maternal citizens.

In arguing for the extension of political and also of social rights for women, advocates of financial measures to increase mothers' welfare drew on liberal concepts of citizenship, but reformulated them in ways that have been picked up again by 'second-wave' feminists. They sought to extend notions of equality and justice to women in so far as they were deemed to 'need' pain relief in labour, hospital care for birth, and maternal and child health advice in order to better carry out their 'natural biological role'. Seeking public redress through the ambit of the state and the discourse of the medical profession, during the interwar years those who have been called 'maternalist' feminists developed a model of women as equal to men but with different needs. In the Australian context, they argued for the rights of women as mothers, but were less successful there than in Europe in maintaining political interest in motherhood. Their achievements fell short of the 'maternalist welfare state' and economic independence that they sought (Lake, 1999).

Although I will return in the final section to debates on conceptualizing women as citizens, as Marilyn Lake (1994, 1999) has argued, understanding strategies used by earlier feminists in the name of citizenship is instructive. For it was primarily under this established liberal notion of the rights due to people as citizens of the modern state that resources for mothers were sought. This was most evident in the attempts to gain financial support through a maternity allowance, as a gesture of recompense to bearers of children for their social responsibility. From the 19th century onwards, Australia had a strong state tradition. It is in this context that Lake traces the ways that postsuffrage feminist organizations and individuals followed three strategies to improve women's citizenship possibilities. Primarily with an eye to economic independence, they sought equal pay, childhood endowment and motherhood allowances. They took seriously needs for personal autonomy or individuality, and economic freedom, with some consciously seeking to replace economic dependence on a husband with a mutual 'service' relationship with the state (Lake, 1999). The view of the state, then, tended to be fairly positive, in contrast to some later more critical accounts of the ways in which its agents socially controlled women. Even in the interwar years, though, there was an ambivalent legacy of concern regarding state intrusion and supervision, especially of working-class women's lives, but also a turning to the state as the source of succour, the 'maternal state'.

The tension between arguing for rights to a political voice and to economic resources on the ground of equality, meaning likeness to men, and on the basis of sexual difference, was already evident. Both Lake (1993), using Australian evidence, and Sarvassy (1992), referring to the USA, argue that some postsuffrage feminists straddled the tension effectively in practice, although the underlying contradiction remained. Seeking a place in the sun of citizenship, fundamentally conceived of in masculine terms (the worker/soldier), on the grounds of female-specific needs eventually left women still defined as mothers. Nonetheless, it challenged existing conceptions of the social value of their reproductive activity. With regard to maternity services, then, the privileging of motherhood certainly generated

demands for improved care in childbearing as well as greater support with childrearing. However, the middle-class leaders of the mothers' 'rights' struggles in the period to the 1950s generally did not contest the medical definitions of what such 'improvement' should entail. Their claims remained within a framework of acceptance of professional authority and the associated belief in scientific 'progress'.

From personal to political: reforming maternity care

Debates on antenatal preparation and forms of pain relief were already evident in some medical circles, but by the mid-1960s those seeking more radical change in the management of birth and infant care were organizing to 'take on the system'. By the 1970s, maternity reform as a social movement produced an extraordinary explosion of personal and organizational energy and public controversy. Although they did not directly reach all segments of Australian society, and remained primarily white, Anglo-Celtic, middle-class groups, the impact of the reform groups cannot be measured solely in terms of membership. The various branches were also engaged in a propaganda war against community attitudes and health professionals' practices. The message of the CEA, and its style, was strongly evangelistic – that childbirth should be demedicalized as much as possible and women should control their own labour on the basis of a rigorous programme of preparation, specifically in psychoprophylactic breathing techniques. The wider community was targeted through articles in magazines, and radio and television appearances. Through letters in the press, talks to local groups, use of films, tapes and written information, the CEA hoped not only to address childbearing women themselves, but their partners, wider family and friends. It is hard to imagine now the extraordinary effort involved in showing films such as *Naissance* and *The Case of Dr Laurent*. These early birth films attracted long admission queues, for they were breaking a profound cultural silence, making birth visible to men as well as to women in quite new ways.

Although sympathetic doctors were enlisted as a panel of advisers, the reform project occasioned considerable hostility from the medical establishment. Most doctors and midwives remained sceptical about the idea of 'natural' birth. Confrontations with many nursing and medical staff ensued. In the face of routine analgesia, the women trained in 'the method' (the psychoprophylactic breathing techniques) were very conscious of the possibility that they might be sedated against their wishes or have a mask with nitrous oxide put over their face automatically. Strategies used by 'natural childbirth' advocates therefore had to include immediate resistance to unsympathetic hospital staff, as well as a general process of re-educating both them and the public. Some of the greatest difficulties for childbirth reformers arose in private rather than public encounters and at times of considerable vulnerability. Nonetheless, this was a social movement, not merely a series of isolated personal struggles. Those most committed to reforming birth organized local classes, guest speakers and fundraising. The traditional activities associated with women's voluntary work entailed

many mundane things such as preparing newsletters on begged or borrowed typewriters and sending mail-outs, finding meeting venues, and contacting local media and schools as part of public education strategies. Community-based groups were linked through various layers of the same and related organizations. At national, regional and local levels, there were tasks of fundraising and financial management, establishing and running antenatal classes and meetings, training and supervising voluntary and paid staff, and dealing with the complexities of conflict and decision-making. In many ways, birth and breastfeeding are highly personal and emotional, even 'private' matters, which do not sit easily with the usual 'impersonal' requirements of organizations. The talents and tasks needed to interact effectively with professionals, hospitals, government and the media, and to develop an efficient educational or commercial enterprise, are not the same as those of the 'skilled and loving mothering' which the NMAA, in particular, advocated. Mothers grappled with the dilemmas that this tension presented as they took on public roles as activists in civil society, yet also managed their family commitments.

Although by the end of the 1960s, various childbirth and parenting organizations had been established around Australia, it is no coincidence that the greatest dynamism in the movement was during the 1970s. As Ros McIntosh, a childbirth educator with CEA Eastern Districts, later the Childbirth and Parenting Association, said: 'Change was in the air and people were starting to have voice' (interview with Ros McIntosh, 7 February 1998). The social ferment or season of 'protest' included opposition to Australia's involvement in the war in Vietnam, the growth of the consumer movement, changing attitudes to authority, and greater questioning of received 'wisdom' in education, in social welfare and in health fields. Clients should now be involved in decision-making about their care instead of merely taking doctors' orders. With a reformist government taking power at the federal level in late 1972, and the consumer movement and feminist ideas emerging as part of this wider mood of social critique, the ground was laid for the childbirth organizations, along with the NMAA, to become a more widespread movement. Numbers escalated, new branches formed, and the media picked up the cause with enthusiasm, announcing a childbirth 'revolution' (*The National Times*, 1 December 1974).

However, in spite of all this activity over women's rights to autonomy in the processes of reproduction, this was not articulated in traditional political terms. Indeed, the NMAA maintained that it was 'not political', and certainly the organizations directed their energy mainly at changing institutional and professional practices, such as routine use of analgesia and separation of mother and baby. Nonetheless, the public relations activities took the message out into the community. They were even quite flamboyant on occasions, such as Parents' Centres Australia's letting off breast-shaped balloons in central Sydney to mark national breastfeeding week. Approaches to the state included some funding applications to assist with training activities and specific initiatives, but these organizations remained wary of reliance on the state, not seeking the close bureaucratic involvement of the 'femocrat' strategy. What was widely perceived, and I

believe with good reason, as an anti-motherhood position within women's liberation, increased the caution of these organizations over activities such as those associated with International Women's Year. Claims on the state met with limited success in any event, partly because the organizations were neither traditional charitable groups nor purely educational. Operating with a voluntary grass-roots community base and often reflecting a strong liberal tradition of self-reliance, which was especially evident in the NMAA, these mothers' associations did not use the language of citizenship as such, but asserted notions of entitlement to professional respect and social recognition for their capacity and role as childbearers.

By the mid-1980s, however, a more overtly and self-consciously political standpoint was emerging in both the homebirth movement, and through the development of a distinctive identity couched in the new discourse of maternity consumers. Both the Maternity Alliance (MA), the Australian organization formed in Sydney in 1987, and contemporaneous Melbourne groups, Mothers and Midwives' Action (MAMA) and Friends of Little Kids (FOLKS), sought a voice in established political forums. They now extended the claims of women as mothers. Not only did they want new models of care rather than merely modifying existing practices, but they also sought a role in decision-making. MAMA, for example, worked hard behind the scenes to facilitate the establishment of the Victorian Ministerial Review of Birthing Services, and played an effective role in shaping its direction (Reiger, 1999b). Similarly, the MA lobbied hard to gain representation on the comparable NSW review led by obstetrician Professor Rodney Shearman, pointing out that a pregnant public servant hardly counted as a consumer representative, and gaining a place on the panel (Schofield, 1995). FOLKS, too, played an active, though short-lived, role with regard to Maternal and Child Health Services in Melbourne in the late 1980s, publicly demanding representation on a government review of the service. Although it was rebuffed, the Victorian government set aside considerable funds to reassure the public that the service would be maintained. Homebirth Australia, too, achieved a notable presence in National Health and Medical Research Council deliberations on homebirth, achieving some limited success.

Opportunities for consumer involvement in policy-making processes thus increased in the late 1980s, reflecting the multiple influences of the organized consumer health movement, labourist commitment to community consultation, and the support of femocrats working in women's health. In this conjuncture, then, mothers' voices were heard in the machinery of the state. In spite of these achievements, however, they have had little overall effect on the dominant medical system. Traditional maternity hospital care has been 'humanized', primarily under the influence of the 1970s activists, but options are still highly circumscribed. Birth centres cannot meet demand and homebirth remains a stigmatized and expensive option. Furthermore, such gains that have been won have been undermined by rising rates of technological intervention.

By contrast with this explicit articulation of a voice within the arenas of the state, the NMAA has generally maintained its traditional apolitical stance. In spite of involvement in promotion of the World Health

Organization's policy of discouraging use of breastmilk substitutes, as an organization it has avoided contentious issues and played little role in gaining increased economic or political voice for mothers. Even recent initiatives such as the innovative breastfeeding at work project have not been maintained. Nonetheless, as far as contesting restrictions of women's civil liberties go, the reclaiming of public space for women breastfeeding children has been a significant challenge to patriarchal divisions of public and private. Throughout recent decades, media reports of women asserting their right to feed babies as and when needed, in restaurants or shopping centres, have occasioned public debate. They have been strengthened by the feminist achievement of anti-discrimination legislation. The latest Victorian controversy, concerning a mother breastfeeding her child at a meals area at the Crown casino, involved, in effect, a maternal assault on the icon of the masculinist and capitalist state. When Premier Kennett spoke publicly to express support for those who possibly found such action 'offensive', members of the NMAA protested with a breastfeeding demonstration on the steps of Parliament House, provoking further controversy over whether they were 'force feeding' babies for political effect! Amusing and possibly trivial though this incident may seem, as a highly visible, public proclamation of maternal rights, it suggests the continued contestation over mothers' place in public space.

What these various struggles indicate, I contend, is an ongoing and unresolved search to extend the civil, political and social rights of women as mothers. Their citizenship claims were expressed in MAMA's submission to the ministerial review of birthing services in Victoria:

Birth is socially significant at both the personal and global level. There is a continuum of effects that flows from maternity care right through the family's life and onwards into the whole community. . . . Life enhancing childbirth is achieved by management policies and actual practices that give us healthy babies, well women and confident mothers. (MAMA, 1989)

However, it has been difficult to make these claims in view of cultural dismissal of mothers as a political constituency at all. Furthermore, the class and ethnic basis of the movement, and its quite specific focus as a social movement, has precluded the coalitions needed to seek related social rights for mothers in terms of economic support, both in the home and labour force. How, then, are we to assess the role played by mothers' organizations as agents of citizenship rights for women? To admit their activity into political discourse, I suggest that we must broaden the framework not only of traditional political theory but of feminist debates.

Reconceiving citizenship

The political struggles discussed briefly in this article, and at greater length elsewhere (Reiger, in press), have clearly breached not only the spatial but the discursive separation of personal and political, private and public action which characterizes the gender order of modern industrial societies. Such political activities have arisen directly through women's participation

in the voluntary, community-based associations of civil society. What is the significance of this collective maternal activity, and how should we conceptualize its assertion of the rights and interests of women as mothers? Feminist political theory has established some interesting possibilities, but they can be further extended in the light of my analysis of the social processes involved in seeking full social, economic and political participation or citizenship.

Representing maternal collectivity

In order to understand the theoretical significance of women's collective activity to attain rights as childbearers, it is necessary to contrast my argument with an essentialist, maternalist one. Rather than claiming that the women whose associations I have discussed shared an intrinsic political identity, I have stressed the historical processes at work in their organizing. It is possible to avoid simplistic assumptions about shared identities, yet still conceptualize mothers as forming a group or collectivity. Iris Marion Young (1994) offers a helpful framework, suggesting that we consider collectivity in terms of processes rather than categories. Young addresses the question of 'can we speak of women as a collectivity?', noting that we certainly do so in everyday life, and we need to for 'pragmatic political reasons' (1994: 714). After considering critiques of essentialist notions of grouping women together on the basis of intrinsic attributes, Young draws on French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of a 'series' – that is, the idea that aspects of social and material life give rise to loose, fluid forms of collectivity. Using the everyday example of people who come together in a bus queue, sharing nothing else but their purposeful positioning in time and space, Young extends Sartre's analysis of class to the idea of 'gender as seriality'. To put an elegant and nuanced argument very briefly and simply, she suggests that women in general are clearly not a single group. They form a 'series' though, insofar as they share some shifting commonality. Although not comprising a single identity such as the category 'women' might imply, a certain collectivity of women arises from shared aspects of material reality. These include not only bodily existence, but the effects of the social regulation of clothes, labour, space and sexuality (Young, 1994: 728–36). From this diffuse shared experience, more developed, self-conscious groups emerge, producing different levels of organization: 'Social life consists of constant ebbs and flows of groupings out of series: some groups remain and grow into institutions that produce new serialities' while others disperse (1994: 735). Likewise, Chantal Mouffe has argued for understanding the construction of 'women' as a fluctuating entity emerging through political and social processes, especially through an 'essentially unstable discursive structure' (Mouffe, 1992: 373). Unity is only the result of 'the partial fixation of identities' through the development of 'nodal points' of social action.

These formulations, it seems to me, allow new ways of thinking about groupings of women as mothers and their relationship to the broader collectivity of women, with all their multiple differences. They make it

possible to examine the political action of various groupings of women, such as around childbearing, without trying to see them as representing all women. They also allow for conflict and difference between groups as diverse even as pro-abortion and anti-abortion lobbies, or homebirthers and those wanting 'high-tech' reproduction. So women's capacity for bearing children can be thought of as providing part of the basis for their 'seriality' or general collectivity, but their mobilization at certain historical 'nodal points' around the management of reproduction has been a self-conscious activity to assert various perceived interests.

However, the analysis of collectivity as process also needs to allow for personal life history and for the role of associational forms of collective life. The women who join maternity organizations do so as part of individual life experience, frequently reflecting either a positive or negative response to the management of the birth of their first child. This raises questions that Flax points out are basic to citizenship claims – those concerning 'the transformation of private need into public action and the transformation of necessity into freedom' (Flax, 1993: 126). Referring to the 'play of justice', Flax argues that the individual must become situated as a member of a public, with her 'I want' transformed into 'I and others in my situation are entitled to' (1993: 126). Many voluntary associations in what has traditionally been called 'civil society' are best understood as the mechanisms of just this transformation. As women form organized groupings, sharing stories, encountering opposition and articulating their needs and claims, they actively create their citizenship rather than have it conferred as a status. As Held (1991: 20–1) points out, citizenship is about membership in a community that involves rights as public and social, not merely as private and individual, entitlements.

Interests, rights, the 'political' and gender-differentiated justice

Recent feminist political theory debates influenced by postmodernism as well as by traditional socialist concerns have sought to provide a new vision of citizenship and of justice. Various described as a framework for 'radical democracy' (Mouffe, 1993), 'the politics of presence' (Phillips, 1996), justice as a 'transitional space' for the recognition of difference (Flax, 1993), 'communicative democracy' (Young, 1996), and rights to freedom of the 'imaginary domain' (Cornell, 1998), certain recurrent themes emerge. In differing ways, these feminist theorists all grapple with the reality of differences in power and resources between citizens, seeking substantive justice rather than the formal equality promised by liberalism. I cannot review here the many important contributions to understanding the relationship between 'democracy and difference' (Benhabib, 1996), but three issues are of direct import for interpreting mothers' political activity. The first concerns the reclamation of notions of rights and interests; the second, the relationship between public and private and the nature of political activity. The third, and closely related theme, reconceives citizenship not as abstract and universal, but as historically grounded and socially, including sexually, differentiated.

Reclaiming 'rights'

The terms 'interests' and 'rights' have now been called into question theoretically and politically by critiques of liberalism, indicting the concepts' individualism, links to property ownership, implicit masculinism and the negative concept of rights as 'against the state' (Held, 1991: 21; Kiss, 1997; Phillips, 1991: 77). Nonetheless, like Elizabeth Kiss and Marilyn Waring (1997), I argue that 'rights-talk' remains central to women's struggles for justice, along the lines that Patricia Williams (1991) has established with regards to race. Just as keeping some concept of a collectivity of women is of, in Young's words, 'pragmatic political' use, so the language of entitlement to social well-being, expressed in our culture in terms of interests and rights, also still has value. The increased international political attention given to women's claims as human rights may have its dangers, but it is also contributing to significant change (Cook, 1994; Waring, 1997).

I argue that we can reinterpret the concept of women's interests (Jónasdóttir, 1988) and rights in ways that meet many feminist objections, including the need to recognize women's differences, but this entails stressing their social rather than legal or formalistic character. As Kiss contends, the rights framework has to be supplemented by feminist care ethics, by attention to other moral questions of meeting human needs (Kiss, 1997: 8–10). 'Feminists should not conceive rights simply as commodities the law grants, but as social relationships to be established and secured' (1997: 15). The women in the mothers' organizations have used this more social interpretation in the field of childbirth activism, rarely insisting on their legal rights to bodily autonomy in hospital contexts, for example. They have emphasized their shared, although widely variable, experiences of giving birth and breastfeeding. However, those committed to the political project of changing maternity care to become more 'women-friendly', would do well to heed Kiss's comment on the values of rights strategies in practical, political terms. She notes that dealing with problems of abuse and harm – in this case, the use of inappropriate medical technologies, for example – requires that 'people are protected from harm and guaranteed the capacity to exercise some control over their lives and make certain claims on one another – precisely the kind of moral work which rights do' (Kiss, 1997: 10). They frequently require legal sanctions to give them the added weight of state authority, hence the value to breastfeeding mothers of anti-sex discrimination laws.

Beyond public–private: the sphere of the political

As I pointed out at the outset, mothers' citizenship claims threaten the basic distinction between public and private which has been foundational to notions of citizenship. Engaging in political action around intimate bodily processes is a classic exemplar of the feminist concept, 'the personal is political'. Yet, in recent years, several theorists have sought to reclaim the value of recognizing a distinctive political sphere, one to which the concept of citizenship particularly pertains (for example, Mouffe, 1993; Phillips,

1991). Summarizing feminist debates on citizenship, Anne Phillips has shown the links between seemingly disparate positions on whether citizenship entails transcendence of immediate personal and community ties or is best realized through group participation and identification, the position of Iris Marion Young (Phillips, 1991: 85). She argues that there has been some emerging agreement that

... instead of reshaping politics to cover any arena in which there are relations of dominance and power, the discourse of rights and entitlements affirms a division between public and private spheres. ... In the new language of citizenship, only [activity] which takes place in a public arena can seriously contend for the name [political]. (1991: 85)

It is not that we stop struggling for gender equity in our private lives, but that 'citizenship acts on a different and more limited terrain'. Likewise, Chantal Mouffe, in her aptly titled *The Return of the Political* (1993), insists that a modern pluralistic democracy is based on principles of freedom and equality for all, and citizenship, rather than being merely a legal status, involves a complex process of constructing a shared political identity (Mouffe, 1993: Chapter 4). However, she vehemently rejects the idea that the universal public realm of the political is then opposed to 'a domain of the private seen as the realm of particularity and difference' (1993: 71). Instead, the 'public/private is not abandoned but reformulated' with the 'common concern' for others, for one's fellows, as the "grammar" of the citizen's conduct' (Mouffe, 1993: 72).

This resurgence of interest in the specifically political dimensions of struggles around citizenship can be complemented by closer attention to the activities in between the wider public context of the state and those of the household. Here, too, childbearing women's organizing directs our attention to the formation of social bonds that extend beyond kinship and friendship to forms of solidarity with a wider perceived community of women. Whereas, in practice, the mothers' groups have been limited by their class and ethnic constraints, they also provide evidence of the value of establishing meeting places and common projects, and thus of the formation of community at local and national, even international, level – such as through the International Childbirth Education Association. They represent, therefore, the work of building civil society, 'the space of uncovered human association and also the set of relational networks – formed for the sake of family, faith, interest and ideology – that fill this space' (Walzer, 1995: 153). Arguing for a 'critical associationalism', Walzer suggests that we need to pay more attention to this associational sphere, for it is, after all, the crucible of citizenship and construction of the good life. In spite of his analysis of the everydayness of much civil activity, he does not notice the extent to which women play a greater part in many community-building activities than do men. Yet his recommendations that both the state and public give greater recognition to the value of these activities, and resource them better, is especially pertinent to the rarely noticed 'civil' work of mothers.

Gender justice: differentiated citizenship

The argument of this article has been that, contrary to maternalist arguments, it is not in the intrinsic attributes of mothers that their citizenship credentials reside. Rather it is in the developing of a political consciousness and presence through collective activity. Here, I find the work of feminist postmodernists again helpful in establishing new understandings of gender justice and citizenship that illuminate the political and personal projects discussed in this article. Their development of concepts of 'differentiated citizenship' (Young, 1990: Chapter 4), equivalence of citizens (Cornell, 1992), and 'non-consensual politics of difference' (Yeatman, 1995: 118) recognizes the importance of specific, embodied life experiences and of associational processes. Although it is beyond my scope to discuss these fully here, they allow us to 'address issues of difference, relatedness and domination in new ways' (Flax, 1993: 111–12).

The political processes in which women are engaged when they mobilize in order to press their claims for resources, or changes in practices such as childbirth management, do not merely reflect shared qualities or experiences as childbearers. Instead, following Chantal Mouffe's argument, what we can discern is 'multiple forms of unity and common action' among women resulting not from essential commonality, but from the 'partial identities' they establish in the course of political activity around certain discursively constituted interests. As women have organized in various social movements, whether for political rights or to change hospitalized birthing, they participate in political contestation over language and routine practices, such as concepts of 'safety' in childbirth. Some groups of women have come together as childbearers, then, to participate in social action over which they do not have complete control. Its possible directions are already shaped by historically developed institutional forces, such as the healthcare system, and contemporaneously by others, such as differing groups of women, various health professionals and government agencies.

Clearly, women of differing backgrounds have and do seek many goals: better conditions in the labour market, childcare, control over fertility, improved status for housework, freedom from racism and from domestic violence, to name merely a few. Should such claims be interpreted as seeking 'equality' with men or justice for women as citizens with specific needs? Without detailing a complex debate, I will state my position, which is that the limitations of equality equated to 'sameness' make the latter a preferable framework. Although I have argued that women do share some aspects of life, including reproduction, that allow them to be considered a 'serial' collective, is it possible to argue for justice for women as reproducing citizens when they do not all want the same thing, either in birth or childrearing supports? How can we allow for competing claims without falling into relativism? A conception of 'equivalence of citizens' is needed which means 'equality of capability and of well-being' (Cornell, 1992: 282). Justice should, then, be conceptualized not in terms of abstract, universal principles, but as a social process of seeking fairness, as both Flax (1993)

and Young (1990: 121–3) argue. Equivalence or fairness does require articulation of particular needs arising from lived situations, such as the bearing of children, and thus some special/specific or differentiated treatment. With such a notion of citizenship, though, what is now called ‘difference’, whether of pregnant women, the aged, or those with particular disabilities, would not be stigmatized, for all citizens have ‘specific’ needs that are entitled to be voiced as part of a dialogical community or communicative democracy (Young, 1990, 1996).

The role of women as mothers who, over recent decades, have established sustained forms of political activity to improve their birthing experience and assert their social value has been neglected by feminist scholarship, and would commonly be seen as marginal to the somewhat abstract debates over such worthy questions as the meaning of citizenship. By contrast, however, I have indicated that such activity is of considerable interest. Close attention to these historically specific struggles encourages us to take them more seriously, both politically and intellectually. While the women involved have implicitly asserted their ‘rights’, the political domain of the state could be more directly targeted, and the value of women’s associational life as citizens, rather than as consumers, asserted publicly. The challenge to the public–private dichotomy presented by pregnant and lactating women organizing to make their presence felt in social life contributes to realizing gender equality, based not on sameness but on genuine shared citizenship. Reconceiving citizenship, therefore, takes place in collective or associational spaces – what Flax (1993) calls the ‘transitional spaces’ between self and other in which the process of justice can flourish on the basis of mutuality and recognition across difference.

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