

Making Modern Mothers: Ethics and Family Planning in Urban Greece. Heather Paxson. University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles. 2004. 335 pp. ISBN 0-520-22371-2 (cloth), 0-520-23820-6 (paper).

Milena Marchesi
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

In *Making Modern Mothers*, anthropologist Heather Paxson investigates how “experts,” such as family planners, demographers, policy-makers, and three generations of urban Greek women explain the paradox of a “family-oriented” culture having one of the highest abortion rates and one of the lowest fertility rates in the European Union. In examining the cultural politics of motherhood in contemporary Greece, *Making Modern Mothers* contributes to emerging critical works on demography, the modernist ideology of international family planning, the relationship between reproduction and the nation, and the valence of reproductive practices as markers of modernity.¹

Paxson’s research, based on two years of fieldwork in mid-1990s Athens, reveals a gap between women’s reproductive experiences and dominant “expert discourses” that attribute Greece’s high abortion rates to “the tenacity of tradition” (p. 3) and to “cultural resistance to contraception” (p. 121). However, Athenian women’s experiences of fertility decline do not fit neatly into the teleological assumptions of demographic transition theory, which posit low fertility as a necessary condition and marker of modernity. Instead, urban Greek women are caught between the demands of modern subjecthood and the social and moral expectations of motherhood.

Chapter one, “Realizing Nature,” examines the cultural specificity of the meaning and relationship of nature and gender in Greece. In the Greek language sex and gender are signified by the same word and describe a “socially ascribed and institutionally reinforced category of difference assumed by persons as a matter of moral responsibility” (p. 39), not a biologically determined state. Paxson organizes these changing, but overlapping, moral expectations of gender proficiency and motherhood into three roughly chronological ethical frameworks: the ethic of service, of choice, and of well-being. The ethic of service defines motherhood as a service to the family and the nation, a sacrifice which “redeemed women’s sexuality and accorded women adult status” (p. 34). The ethic of choice describes the postwar generation, its struggle for reproductive rights, but also the increase burden of responsibility on women, and “compromises, contradictions, and hidden agendas” (p. 35). Finally, the ethic of well-being describes the current liberal ethic and mandate of self-care. Looking at abortion through the lenses of these three ethics reveals that these shift do not represent

an automatic increase in women’s reproductive freedom. Although abortion was morally acceptable under both the ethic of service (for the good of the family), and the ethic of choice, under the ethic of well-being abortion becomes suspect as a backward and unhealthy practice that threatens the fertility of women and the nation.

Chapter two, “Remaking Mothers: From an Ethic of Service to an Ethic of Choice,” traces the shift from early modern ethics, characterized by duty and convention, to modern ethics, which privilege inner subjectivities and consciousness. Under the ethic of service, procreation is not a personal choice, but rather a reflection of “God’s will.” Because modern contraceptives contradict the notion that fertility is outside of human agency, professional family planners depict abortion as a “traditional” method of fertility control. The shift from an ethic of service to an ethic of choice marks a change in subjectivity from “a self-controlling nature aimed at conforming to external standards” to internalized “inner desire that should be actualized through conscious planning” (p. 66).

In chapter three, “Rationalizing Sex: Family Planning and an Ethic of Well-Being,” Paxson examines and critiques “family planning as an ideology” (p. 104) linked to the desire to be modern and European. Professional family planning, which according to Paxson is “caught in the tradition/modernity dualism” (p. 105), aims to bring rationality to sex and modernity to the nation. The desire for Europeaness (p. 105) forms the backdrop of how sexuality and reproductive choices are contextualized in contemporary Greece and explains the persistence of the ideology of family planning despite nationalist concerns over low fertility rates (p. 112–113). Family planning embraces a “medical sexual ideology” (p. 141) that mystifies the structures of patriarchal power and ignores the “deeply gendered” nature of modern contraception (p. 142), thus reinforcing women’s burden as the domain of fertility moves from social control to individual medicalization. Whereas Athenian women described abortion as a “necessary evil” of a patriarchal society, for example, family planners explain it as a failure of rational planning and a cultural holdover.

Chapter four, “Maternal Citizens: Demographics, Pronatalism, and Population Policy,” examines the gendered status of citizenship and women’s roles as the symbolic and actual reproducers of the nation. Paxson traces two decades of discourses on “the problem” of low fertility in Greece, highlighting the nationalist assumptions of demography, the paradoxes of Greek pronatalist policies under the ethic of choice, and the slippery slide from nationalist demography to biological racism. Since nations are “figured” as families, only citizen mothers can reproduce them, as “only women can ensure the reproduction of a pure, legitimate nation” (p. 153). In this context, according

to Paxson, citizenship is gendered and demography and its ensuing policies are obviously “a woman’s issue” (p. 179). Paxson contends that family planning is also “a pronatalist population policy” (p. 162): While access to contraception gives people “choice,” which in any case is never free, the biomedical family planning model shifts the locus of control in reproductive matters from the state to the disciplined individual. This internalization of the state’s interest suggests that the shift from the ethic of service to the ethics of choice does not fundamentally threaten the state. In fact, “the government can simply direct its policy efforts at encouraging women to make the choice that will further state interests” (p. 210). The cultural politics of motherhood are one manifestation of these efforts.

Chapter five, “Technologies of Greek Motherhood,” examines the meaning of new reproductive technologies, such as in vitro fertilization (IVF), for urban Greeks. Because motherhood is not simply “natural,” but a socially fulfilled potential that requires work, Athenian women understand IVF not as an artificial technological intervention but rather as another technology of motherhood. New reproductive technologies fit into the Greek moral framework because they resonate with the ethic of service,

both to the family and the nation, with the ethic of choice, and with the understanding of motherhood and nature as “socially realized” (p. 215). Yet, IVF also brings into relief “the contradictory nature of modern Greek femininity” (p. 237): Whereas motherhood and femininity are associated with the qualities of sacrifice, dependence, and emotivity, to be a modern person is to be independent, autonomous, and rational.

Making Modern Mothers is a nuanced and multilayered analysis of fertility decline in Europe that successfully answers Faye Ginsburg’s and Rayna Rapp’s 1995 call to locate reproduction at the center of anthropological theory and inquiry. However, the breadth of Paxson’s ethnography makes it relevant not only to scholars of the cultural politics of reproduction, reproductive technologies, or critical demography, but also for those interested in nationalism, gender studies, ethics, alternative modernities, and identity in the New Europe.

Endnote

¹ See, for example, Ali 2002, Greenhalgh 2003, Kanaaneh 2002, and Krause 2005.

Uprooted: Dutch Immigrant Children in Canada 1947–1959. Ann Van Aaragon Hutten. Kentville, NS. North Mountain Press. 2001. ISBN 0-9680107-1-7 (cloth).

Robin Oakley
Dalhousie University

In *Uprooted: Dutch Children in Canada 1947–1959*, Anne van Aaragon Hutten documents both personal experiences and the larger political economic context of postwar Dutch immigration to Canada. Original ethnographic and quantitative research supplemented the author’s own personal experiences of immigrating to Canada from Holland. The book, peppered generously with black and white photographs, provides a rich historical and archival document testifying to the difficulties faced by the Dutch subsistence farmers and working class women, men and children who were allowed into Canada on the basis that as white Christians, they would effortlessly assimilate into Canadian society. Canada, she writes, needed white Christian farmers, and Holland, eager to rid itself of the surplus labour of its ruined post war economy, subsidized the passage of some eighty thousand emigrants. Much more than the modest “...effort to pass on the story of what it is like to be an immigrant child” (2001:283). van Aaragon Hutten’s book also illuminates an important episode in the

historically racist immigration schemes of Canada, and the political-economic foundation of this racism. For example, at the same time that Dutch immigrants were being encouraged by the Canadian state to come to Canada, female domestic workers from the Caribbean were systematically being deflected from entering (Calliste 1989).

Many of the Dutch families, having derived from an agrarian economy, were large with twelve children or more. Structured on a gerontocratic and patriarchal order, as is characteristic of peasant families, these were semi-subsistent families, producing their own foods, clothes and other sundries. As van Aaragon Hutten illustrates:

My grandfather sheared sheep that my grandmother spun into yarn and knit into socks and sweaters to clothe her children. My father sowed grain by hand as was done in bible times, and took the harvest in jute bags to the local miller so that we might have flour and cereal. My mother, an expert seamstress, could take a man’s worn out over coat apart at the seams, turn the fabric over and cut out the good pieces to make a sturdy coat for one of her children (p. 282).

The switch in Holland from peat to coal and oil, the mechanization of farming and the industrialization of Holland made it hard for these big farming families to survive after World War Two. Thus, the Dutch parents left with the hopes of establishing a new economic base, and believed