

80 | feminism as femininity in the nineteen–fifties?

Birmingham Feminist History Group

introduction

This paper has grown out of an attempt to do some collective research. Last year we were all involved in an adult education class on women in the forties and fifties. We were very struck by the absence of feminist writing on that period and the vast amount of available material which could be worked on. We decided to form a research group and attempt by pooling the limited amount of time we have to build up an account of some aspects of women's experience in the 1950s. It has not been altogether easy; the transition from being a class to becoming a research group, the differences between us both in the time we have to offer and the experience we have to bring, and the problem of focusing on a limited enough area in a relatively uncharted field have all presented considerable problems, but we remain committed to the enterprise.

In this paper, we want to begin to interrogate what, as feminists, we have commonsensically considered the quiescence of feminism in the fifties. We argue that we can only understand the political activity described by those involved as 'feminism' by placing it in the context of the particular and dominant version of *femininity* in operation then. If in the Women's Liberation Movement today we see feminism as transforming femininity in a fundamental way, feminism of the fifties seemed to be more concerned with the integration and foregrounding of femininity in a masculine world. Those aims demanded certain modifications of femininity, to be implemented, but not a thorough appraisal. Feminism was, therefore, bound by femininity in such a manner that we as feminists today do not easily recognize its activities as *feminist*. It is primarily the understanding of this ideology of femininity which constitutes the main element of this paper. We examine it in three domains: 'education', 'motherhood' and 'sexuality', and in its dominant construction – woman as wife and mother performing essential work in the home. On the whole, we do not look at how women contradictorily lived within this femininity in their everyday lives, but focus on *representations* of femininity in specific kinds of

1 Since this paper was written we have continued to work on forms of feminist activity in the fifties. A lot of our discussion has focused on the problem of how we define feminism. We have tended to operate with a series of nineteen-seventies assumptions about what feminism means and increasingly have wanted to question this.

writing; in what might be described as popular sociological and educative literature – some of which was directed at women themselves – and in some official, government publications. Against this background we finally discuss fifties feminism. Here we are brief and tentative, offering preliminary clues on how to think about it, but not setting out the comprehensive study which, hopefully, further research will deliver.¹

The fifties was a period characterized by consensus that the family was *the* central unit in society. It was a period when the after-effects of the war combined with affluence and the boom to spread an aura of confidence and Optimism, a belief in the future and in the possibility of solving the problems that remained in the society. It was a period that, in Elizabeth Wilson's terms, saw an end to the class war and an end to the sex war – both class antagonisms and sex antagonisms were out of fashion. The war, the post-war reconstruction and the rapid development of the cold war, all contributed in different ways to a diminished emphasis on class divisions and an increased emphasis on areas of agreement. The way forward was open to a new and better society – 'we've never had it so good' became the slogan of the times. But this appearance of unity and consensus should not be taken too literally – one of the main tasks of ideology is to give the appearance of unity and coherence. Ideologies in the stressed fifties agreement, the promise of the future, and economic expansionism; the continued existence of class divisions, poverty and inequality were forgotten. Sociologists such as Richard Titmuss had to fight for the recognition of poverty as a structural problem in the late fifties; an ideological onslaught had to be made. So if the appearance of unity is more closely examined, the contradictions, tensions and divisions soon become apparent.

A great deal was written about the family in the fifties; a lively debate was going on about that institution. This debate was made necessary by the war and postwar years that saw important changes taking place in the structure of the family. The signposts to the public nature of that debate can be seen, for example, in the number of government commissions and reports, which related to the family – the Beveridge Report in 1942, the Curtis Committee in 1946, the Royal Commission on Population in 1949, the Morton Commission on Divorce in 1951 and the Ingleby Commission in 1956. Several of these inquiries were followed by legislation. There were also a multitude of conferences held on the family by such important bodies as the church, and a number of influential books were published such as those by John Newsom and John Bowlby. All of this activity and discussion suggests that important changes were in some sense being worked out. Those changes can be connected with three developments. The first is the entry of women into production during the war and the steady increase in the employment of married women after the war. The war effort had called for a massive increase in women's employment, and contrary to most expectations, this trend was not completely reversed in the period after 1945. The second is the increased number of marriages, the earlier age of marriage, the reduced size of the family and, crucially, the increased

availability and use of contraceptives, all of which combined to compress women's child-rearing years. It is this change which is very much stressed by the sociologists of women and the family in the fifties such as Alva Myrdal, Viola Klein and Pearl Jephcott. The third factor is the increasing importance of consumption, especially centred around the home. Consumption was held in check by the restraints on wages and the maintenance of rationing until the Conservative victory of 1951. After the Tories came into power they abandoned restraint and encouraged the consumer boom of the late fifties. It was individual consumption which was facilitated, and the spending on commodities primarily for the home significantly increased in the period. Women were central to this development, since it was their labour that was being used in the expanding industries producing consumer goods – foods and electrical industries, for example. But, additionally, it was their wages that were often buying those goods, and they who were choosing the brands. The increasing importance of home consumption to the whole economy is signified by the massive expansion in advertising in this period, which stresses domestic life. These three factors, which have been mentioned – the expansion in the number of married women working, the 'compressed fertility' typical of the period, and the increasing importance of home consumption – all called for a new view of the role of women and their place in the family.

The writing and thinking on women in the fifties by feminists and non-feminists alike tends to take place within a framework, which accepts the primacy of the woman's role as wife and mother and which assumes that other aspects of women's lives must be fitted into that. The emphasis on the dual role of women as wives and mothers and as paid workers is very characteristic of the period, but it is always insisted that the family must come first. Women's entry into employment is understood in the context of a secondary job, preferably to be done part time, so as to fit in with the needs of husband and children. The tensions and difficulties, which women experience in trying to combine these roles, are seen as something that can be sorted out.

Women, it was said, have basically achieved equality – but they have also received recognition as different from men. Ideologies about women in the fifties are underpinned by the notion of 'equal but different' – men and women have their special spheres, and women bring different qualities, feminine qualities, to the society that men could not provide. The notion of separate spheres is by no means new – indeed, it has a long history – but the conditions in which it appears in the fifties are quite specific. Women should no longer need to aspire to be like men since they are a special variety of individual in their own right. The new generation of women can successfully combine the loving and caring role of the mother, so insisted upon by the post-Freudians, with an ability to run their own homes probably without domestic help and to work in the public sphere as well. Needless to say, the 'new woman' as she appears in the literature has a distinctly middle class appearance!

The proliferation of ideologies about women in the fifties seem to indicate the importance of the discussion about gender roles in that period. Within the three areas of ideology that we have looked at most carefully – that is, education for girls, motherhood and sex in marriage – there are many alternative views about the position of women, but each debate is framed by common assumptions about the primacy of the role of wife and mother. The ideological representations were never so clearcut as to exhort an unconditional confinement to the home for all married women. However, marriage, home and family remain the privileged sphere. It is this ideological hegemony that provides a necessary framework for understanding feminist politics in the fifties.

Betty Friedan's characterization in the United States of the woman question as 'the problem that has no name' seems highly relevant to England as well – there is no language for questioning the definition of femininity as centrally to do with marriage. Consequently, the critique of women's position rests at the level of piecemeal reforms.

The dominance of particular ideological representations can be elucidated by reference to the ways in which they were underpinned by state institutions and apparatuses. In the three areas, which we have examined, the degree and level of state intervention varied. Recognition by the state in legislative terms of the importance of the availability of birth control to married couples did not take place until the late sixties for example, whereas for some groups this had long been accepted as a necessary part of a good marriage. In relation to motherhood and childcare, on the other hand, the state was playing an innovatory role, confirming and consolidating the stress on the importance of the family. From the Beveridge Report onwards, some government departments at least were focussing on the importance of a proper home, though they were in contradiction with other departments whose stated objective was to encourage more married women to return to work. The state was subject to those contradictory representations of women available to the society, but the record of social work legislation on the family, starting with the appointment of a Ministry of Health adviser on parentcraft in 1946, going on to the expansion of the Child Guidance Service and the increased emphasis on preventive work with juveniles to keep them at home rather than relying on institutional care, all point to the concern of welfare agencies to support the family.

the education of girls

Both official and popular ideologies of girls' education throughout this period stress the primacy of women's domestic role. The centrality of this concept and its justification through an appeal to one of the main educational orthodoxies, of the period, child-centred education, facilitated an unproblematic acceptance of the continuing use of women as untrained, low-paid labour. The interaction of these

three factors is succinctly revealed, for example, in the Norwood Committee's comments on the teaching of domestic science.

The grounds for including domestic science in the curriculum are variously stated in the evidence submitted to us; briefly they are, first that knowledge of such subjects is a necessary equipment for all girls as potential makers of homes; secondly that the subjects have the advantage of offering a practical approach to theoretical work; they teach thinking through doing and help to awaken interest in other subjects; thirdly that for girls who are likely to go to domestic science colleges or to take elsewhere courses which may lead to a variety of posts, they are necessary subjects and should be taught in schools.

(Norwood, 1941: 127)

Five years later Newsom accepted as unproblematic '... the fact that the duality of women's social function as wife and mother meets the modern employer's need for labour of a semi-skilled variety' (Newsom, 1948: 36).

Just as a gender-differentiated notion of child-centred education was brought into play to hold together the tensions between education's stated commitment to the interests of the individual and the needs of the economy, so a series of assumptions about the lives of *most* women were used by writers on the education and training of girls to absorb any residue of tension between women's paid work and their domestic role. *Either* they assumed, as did Kathleen Ollerenshaw, that the woman would see her work as less important than the man's, 'not because society may deem that this is as it should be but because she will usually want it this way' (Ollerenshaw, 1961: 124) or they assumed that women would want to and be able to work mainly in areas that reflected their domestic role or could be happily assimilated into them because of the low-level commitment required. 'A girl', said the Norwood Committee, 'is going to take up some occupation in which a knowledge of domestic science is necessary' (Norwood, 1941: 128). In 1959 the Crowther Committee while discussing part-time further education seemed to accept the reluctance of employers to offer opportunities for training to girls.

The ideology of sex education in particular, reflected this narrow preoccupation with the woman's future role within the family, The need for schools and youth organizations to provide some form of sex education was first acknowledged in 1943 when it formed an ideological response to the alleged increase of venereal disease among both males and females. However, it was not until 1956 in *The Handbook of Health Education* that sex education began to be discussed by the schools inspectorate as a school subject in its own right. Underpinning the handbook's approach to sex education was a conservative Freudian view of sexuality as a series of stages ultimately resolved in heterosexual monogamy, with motherhood as an additional obligation for mature femininity. This obliteration of any tension between the sexual drive and its socialization into marital love – the implication being that if you desired where you could not marry it was because you were sexually immature – reinforced the view that adolescent sexuality was a

social problem rather than a valid expression of sexuality. True sexuality was only achieved within the context of a reproductive marriage. It was on this, therefore, that sex education was to focus, and 'the ways of sex' were not to be mentioned once conception and childbirth had been dealt with, in most cases by the biology teacher and often in relation to rabbits. No mention was made of sexual pleasure, even mutual sexual pleasure blessed by marriage. Clearly, girls' sexuality was seen to be for the 'other', whether husband or child.

Despite the overall acceptance for educational purposes of girls as a homogenous group primarily concerned with marriage, there are indications towards the end of this period that this formulation was increasingly open to question. A growing awareness in industry of the failure of the post-1944 education system to keep pace with the increasing demand for technologists and technicians and among the teaching profession of the shortage of science teachers in girls' schools is reflected both in the Crowther Report and in the London School of Economics report which was funded by a group of industrialists and published in 1964 as *A Career for Women In Industry?*.

The Crowther Report, for example, while it adhered to the idea that girls' interests focus on appearance, marriage and the family, did concede that 'for intellectually abler girls there is not much scope, in school hours at least, for giving them an education specifically related to their special interests as women' (Crowther, 1959: para. 50) and was aware of the problem of some science subjects being seen as boys' subjects and the need to counteract this. This shift at the ideological level, however, had implications only for a limited part of the school curriculum and only for the more academically orientated girls. Although in the following year, the Albermarle Report on the youth services did mention the lack of day release opportunities for unskilled workers in general and for girls in particular, it did not have the brief in this area to go beyond mere passing comment. When it discussed girls in more detail, as it did in examining the relationship between them and the youth service, it was clear that marriage remained the essential concern and informal education to promote 'social maturity and technical competence at her job as home-maker' one of the 'specific needs' of girls (Albermarle, 1960: para. 57). Quite what this vague reference to social maturity meant in general is hard to say. But certainly in youth clubs where the newly initiated Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme was functioning, it was much more explicitly dealt with. The girls' award, for example, involved a compulsory section on design for living, and in the words of one girl who took part in the scheme in the early 1960s, the syllabus included not only techniques for applying make-up but also

How to eat asparagus, delicately dipping the ends in melted butter. How to keep your dignity when a nervous waiter spills hot soup in your lap. How to cope with a battery of knives and forks at a formal dinner. The correct way to eat lobster, snails, oranges and bananas and other awkward food. How to cook crepes suzettes on the table, how to lay the table correctly. Which sauces and vegetables to serve with different fishes and meats.

Which wine to serve and which glass to put it in. How to sit and rise gracefully and to get in and out of a car with a minimum of leg show.

(Carpenter, 1966: 39)

For the majority of girls, then, and particularly for the majority of working class girls – for as the Robbins Report was to show, working class girls were doubly handicapped educationally – the main educational ideology of the period continued to be one which defined them as equal but different. Equal by virtue of their humanity, but different by virtue of their new role as consumers. The Hadow Report in 1926 focused on ‘the efficient care and management of the home’. In 1963 the Newsom Committee stressed a careful display of affluence rather than thrift, and called for an education in ‘the wider aspects of homemaking and family life’ (Newsom, 1963: para. 113) – interior decoration, entertaining, and ‘as much actual spending and budgeting within the school as can be done’ (Newsom, 1963: para. 119).

motherhood

The fifties is a period well known for its writings on motherhood. The 19th-century ideologies about women tend to stress the woman as wife rather than as mother, though there are, of course, many manuals on the duties of the mother. From the beginning of the 20th century, however, there was an increasing stress on the mother, which reached one of its best known moments in Beveridge’s argument that ‘the small families of today make it necessary that every living child should receive the best care that can be given to it.’ (Beveridge, 1942: 154). As Titmuss has pointed out, one of the common effects of war is to encourage a greater concern with the lives of women and children – the second World War was no exception. The combination of the loss of life on the front and at home, the consistent fall in the birthrate over a period of time, and the revelations as a result of evacuation both about the separation anxieties of children away from their mothers and the inadequate standards of childcare amongst the working class in middle class eyes, all led to a concern with motherhood. This concern was of a specific kind, stressing the importance of the quality of maternal care and the need to think beyond the question of the physical care of the child. The early 20th century emphasis had been on the physical care of the child – how to safeguard the health of the nation – and had of course drawn on the oppositional traditions of the eugenics movement and the feminist movement, particularly such sections as the Co-operative Women’s Guild. By the end of the war attention was being more systematically directed, both in England and the United States, to the psychological aspects of maternal care. Ideologies about motherhood in the fifties need to be set in the context of the rapid growth of the child welfare movement on various fronts – to take one example, the work of the Curtis Committee in the immediate post-war period and the connections being made between juvenile delinquency and broken homes. This concern with the woman as mother was exclusive of her other roles. Unlike the writing on women’s

work, which constantly recognizes her other and primary role as mother, books on parentcraft assume a sexual division of labour where the father is the breadwinner. Whereas Myrdal and Klein, for example, see combining work and home as a central issue for women and discuss in detail ways of making employment possible within the constraints of the responsibilities entailed in marriage and family life, the writers on motherhood never question that to be a mother is what every woman wants and is her primary occupation.

There are at least three distinctive schools of thought on the subject of mothering. The first and most influential are the Freudians, the second their archenemies, the behaviourists, and the third a more eclectic group who pride themselves on their common sense. The best known of the Freudians is John Bowlby whose book, *Child Care and the Growth of Love*, became a byword in the period. Bowlby argued that one of the most significant developments of psychoanalysis was the evidence it provided of the importance of parental care in the child's early years to future mental health. Bowlby set out to publicize the view that 'mother love in infancy is as important for mental health as are vitamins and proteins for physical health.' The book was designed as an intervention in a public debate about kinds of maternal care – it was in no sense an orthodoxy when it was first written but rather a crusading polemic aiming to influence public policy and the provision of care. As is by now well known, it was a study of institutionalized children, but it was taken as a general report on the effects of maternal deprivation, it argued for proper support for mothers in the form of improved child guidance services and increased family allowances, since mothers should not work while they had young children; it also argued for more trained psychiatric workers. It concluded that the

proper care of children deprived of a normal home life can now be seen to be not merely an act of common humanity but to be essential for the mental and social welfare of a community. For when their care is neglected, as happens in every country of the Western world today, they grow up to reproduce themselves. Deprived children, whether in their own homes or out of them, are the source of social infection as real and serious as are carriers of diphtheria and typhoid.

(Bowlby, 1975:182)

Feminists in the last ten years have been quick to seize upon the reactionary elements in Bowlby – the denial of an independent life for the mother, the exclusive stress on maternal care, and the exaggerated view of the necessary effect of maternal deprivation, without taking the question of alternative forms of childcare seriously enough. But we have perhaps been less ready to recognize the positive elements – Bowlby's insistence on the importance of the child's feelings and rights, for example, the importance of emotional care as well as physical care, and the status, which he gives mothers as vital members of the community. There was much in his own work and the work of his school which clearly appealed to women in the fifties, and it would be wrong to see the influence of Bowlbyism

either as entirely negative or as foisted upon unwilling women by the dominant ideologues.

There is a considerable body of Freudian writing on infancy and childcare in the fifties, and attempts were made to speak not only to the ever-growing body of experts on the subject – the professionals who were becoming increasingly important, partly as a result of the developments in the welfare state – but also to mothers themselves. Winnicott's series of talks on the radio during and after the war were aimed at 'the ordinary devoted mother' and consistently attacked those doctors and nurses and other professionals who placed too much stress on physical care at the expense of a concern with the emotional development of the child. Winnicott's stress on the individual rights of the mother and the child is interesting in the context of the whole development of the post-war social democratic ideology – a new importance is insisted on for both mother and child in the private world of the emotions, which is seen as a characteristically feminine world. As has been suggested before, one of the attractions of the Freudian position has undoubtedly been the status which it gives to women as mothers – their femininity carries with it special kinds of knowledge and love, which are essential for the well-being of the child. It is impossible to imagine women not wanting to be wives and mothers, since that is the area in which they can really find themselves. As Winnicott said: 'Talk about women not wanting to be housewives seems to me to be just nonsense, because nowhere else but in her own home is woman in such command. Only in her own home is she free, if she has the courage, to spread herself, to find her whole self.' (Winnicott, 1957: 88).

The middle class assumptions of this literature are very clear here – there is little space for the discussion of the problem of those women in Birmingham, for example, who were investigated in a piece of research done by a church body in the late fifties, which concluded that homelessness was a major source of marital tension and that the very common pattern of young couples living with their parents was not conducive to a successful marriage (Christian Economic and Social Research Foundation, 1959).

The wealth of pamphlets and books in the period, which were used by our mothers and friends draw heavily on Freud in a popularized version but at the same time reject 'psychoanalytic jargon'. The late forties and fifties saw a proliferation of cheap, mass-produced pamphlets some produced by child welfare clinics, with the aim of improving the standards of parental care. There was a general optimism about 'the age of the child'. Dr John Gibbens' *The Care of Young Babies*, which was a popular childcare manual, picks up many of the Freudian emphases such as the importance of breastfeeding and the influence of the mother. Breastfeeding has always had 'expert' support in England and its treatment in the childcare manuals of the fifties provides us with a good example of the way in which Freud was used when it fitted in with an established body of thinking, but not when it challenged such received ideas as the asexuality of the child. Gibbens catches some of the

connections between the development of notions of the individual child and the increasing importance of consumption in the period when he recommends fathers to think of the child as a joint project – ‘Run the baby together, see how he shapes, think what you’re going to do with him later on in life, and you and your wife will enjoy the baby and get some of the greatest pleasures the world has to offer you.’ (Gibbens, 1940: 22).

A third group of writers on motherhood and childcare in the fifties were the behaviourists perhaps the best known of whom is C.W. Valentine, a prolific writer and broadcaster. Reading behaviourist books on child development is guaranteed to make even the most hardened anti-Bowlbyite rush into the arms of Freud! The behaviourists believed that each child was born with innate impulses which could then be acted upon by the power of suggestion and imitation. Unlike the other groups, they do not seem to see the mother as particularly important in the development of the child – obviously both parents are likely to be the most important influence since they are most frequently with the child, but the development of the child is essentially seen as following from his or her innate qualities. Valentine (1956) and others like him completely disagree with Freud about the importance of infantile sexuality and generally mount a considerable invective against the Freudians.

All the writings of this time, however, whatever their internal disputes, share certain assumptions. All of them work within a middle class paradigm, expecting, for instance, that they are dealing with parents with their own homes and gardens, and seem to share the consensual view that class distinctions are increasingly irrelevant. All of them also assume that mothers of young children should stay at home with them and that, if a mother is to work, it must be in a way that will fit in with her primary responsibilities to her home and family. The behaviourists take this as natural but attach no particular significance to the role of the mother as the others do. From the mother’s point of view, therefore, it is pretty clear why the pro-Freudian position would be more attractive. If you have to be at home, you might as well be important! The emphasis on motherhood does not stop when the child goes to school either – the moral panics over latch-key children and juvenile delinquents bear eloquent testimony to that. All of them are also agreed on trying to improve the status of the expert in childcare – this is a relatively new area of scientific expertise, which needs recognition. Consequently, the overall impact of the motherhood literature is to assume that women will stay in the home, to give primacy to the family and to play down the effects of the entry of married women into employment.

women’s sexuality

Our third area of study is the ideologies around female sexuality and reproduction in this period. Since the thirties there had been fears that Britain faced the

likelihood of a declining population, the birth rate having reached its lowest point in 1933. Although by 1942 the birth rate was on the rise again, concern with this fear was explicit in the Beveridge Report in December of that year. The immediate post-war period saw a whole proliferation of articles, pamphlets and books on this theme, often speaking wildly of the road to race suicide! (See, for example, Abrams, 1945; Hubback, 1945; Mass Observation, 1945; McCleary, 1945.) The prevalent idea that births were well below replacement level had led to the appointment of a Royal Commission on Population in 1943, which reported in 1949. What was so interesting about this report was that although it was concerned to encourage both larger families as well as women's entry into the labour force (in the light of the post-war labour shortage), it was also the first official recognition of voluntary fertility control, recommending that 'advice on contraception to married persons wanting it should be accepted as a duty of the National Health Service.' The report appeared to accept firstly that birth control need not imply smaller families, if there was adequate provision for mothers and children (such as greater financial assistance), and secondly, that having larger families would not necessarily restrict women's entry into the labour market if there was both sufficient provision of childcare facilities and access to contraception in order to space births rationally.

Although, as we have already mentioned, the Royal Commission's recommendations on birth control were not put into law until 1967, the report acted to make contraception more legitimate. The Anglican church had, in fact, in a guarded statement, come out in support of birth control back in 1930 (at the Anglican Lambeth Conference) 'in circumstances where there was a clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood.' By the 1950s Rev. Sherwin Bailey of the Church of England Moral Welfare Council could say: 'Christians are generally agreed upon the need for responsible family planning' (Bailey, 1957: 214).

Through the fifties, birth control was increasing in availability. By the mid-fifties, there were over 200 Family Planning Association clinics, more than two-thirds of which were on local authority premises. However, the birth control clinics only gave contraception to married women or 'brides-to-be'. For the Family Planning Association, as the name of course implies, it was the regulation of family size rather than a woman's control of her own fertility that was their central concern. The main forms of contraception offered were the cap (three varieties) and the sheath, both to be used with pessaries. A study in 1956 (Florence, 1956) of patients at the Birmingham Family Planning Association indicated that many women did not like using the cap as it involved 'messing with myself', a particular bother if, as many implied, they could not tell in advance whether their husbands might 'feel inclined'. (The FPA's response, incidentally, was not in terms of inquiring as to the *women's* sexual inclinations, but a plea for husbands to give wives prior notice as to *when* they might feel inclined for a 'spot of loving'.) The author of the study claimed that 'many women feel resentment that, 'they', have not invented,

'something', yet'. (There is no awareness that the pill is just around the corner.) But many women did not see birth control as a 'right' and choice to which they were entitled. It was seen more in terms of a palliative to poor health or overcrowding, or a way of raising one's standard of living.

But with birth control becoming an accepted and acceptable part of family life, the space was opened for the possibility of non-reproductive sexuality within marriage. And there was Kinsey's second report, *The Sexual Behaviour of the Human Female* (or the K-bomb as it was known by the media), which appeared in Britain in 1953 and forcefully challenged the myth that women did not or could not enjoy sex. Extracts were quoted at length in the popular press and it became a best-seller overnight. Indeed, throughout the fifties popular books on sex education, adolescence and various marriage manuals all stressed the possibility and desirability of sex within marriage being pleasurable and guilt-free. (We must note here the disjunction between the official ideology on sex education for schools, which we have already described, and the popular literature available.) In such popular literature, there was a call for more sex education for the tabooed subject of the 'sex act' or 'sex drama', as it was called, to come out into the 'clean open air'. (See Wright, 1930; Chesser, 1941; Chamberlain, 1952.) So long, of course, as it was couched in terms of marital love. As Jeffrey Weeks remarks: 'There was a new stress on the duty of the married couple to provide each other with sexual pleasure as a cement of the relationship' (Weeks, 1977: 158). This was also reflected in the attitude of the Church. As Rev. Dr. Sherwin Bailey (in Rolph, 1957: 222) observed:

In promoting marital, and therefore domestic harmony, regular coitus normally plays an important part ... In so far ... as contraception makes possible between husband and wife at all times the relational acts of coitus which cement and deepen their love, relieve their natural sexual tensions, and bring to a focal point of their realization the meaning of their common life, it may justly be regarded as assisting rather than frustrating the procreative purpose of marriage.

Here, with the stress on sexual pleasure, was the glimmering of recognition that sex might involve techniques or methods that needed to be *learned* (by the man, of course) if the woman was to gain sexual satisfaction. Enjoyable sex was not totally instinctive.

A woman is a delicate instrument, and men need to learn delicacy before they can play truly upon that instrument. Her full womanhood waits in the background. It is her husband's great privilege as well as his essential duty to beckon it into full vitality.

(Wright, 1930: 15)

The fifties' growing number of marriage guidance counsellors (by the mid-1950s there were 80 local Marriage Guidance Councils with 500 trained consultants, backed by specialist advisers) started to pay attention to pleasurable marital sex,

but holding to their fifth principle that 'the right basis for personal and social life is that sexual intercourse should only take place within marriage'.

Yet, as Jeffrey Weeks (1977) points out, stress on petting in sex literature underlined the ambivalence of the period: recognition of the need for sexual outlet, but fear of promiscuity, for example, as one sexologist put it:

it is unwise to allow the love-making [of engaged couples] ever to lead to more than mutual masturbation. It is very poor feminine tactics to permit the pleasures of marriage without any of its responsibilities, quite apart from the probable tragedy of unwanted pregnancy.

(Chamberlain, 1952: 55)

However, by the end of the fifties pre-marital sex was the great debate in all the books on morality, adolescence and sexuality. Two chapters of the British Medical Association's popular booklet *Getting Married* were entitled, 'Is Chastity Outmoded?' and 'Marrying with a Baby on the Way'. The commercialization of sex was spiralling, Soho and a pornography market developing, James Bond books and other violence-and-sex paperbacks selling widely and the media were trumpeting the horrors of teddy boys' and beatniks' sexual promiscuity. Brigitte Bardot, Jayne Mansfield, Marilyn Monroe and Diana Dors were the sex symbols of the day.

Yet it is perhaps dangerous to over-emphasize the break. Although *Lady Chatterly's Lover* won its trial of 1960, the line of defence, for eminent literary figures and respectable left clerics alike lay in the claim that the book was both a work of art and an expression of the wonderful sacrament of marriage, with sex religiously viewed as an act of communion. Thus the trial's outcome can in no way be seen as a straightforward victory for the proponents of pre-marital sex.

feminism

Turning to feminism in the late fifties and in particular to feminist writers, we found a similar emphasis on the centrality of motherhood and marriage. Sexuality in particular remained confined and defined not only by marriage, as it is in the work of Vera Brittain, but sometimes even by its procreative functions. In *Wives who went to College* Judith Hubback believed that motherhood fulfilled women's 'emotional and biological nature' and imagined that once a woman had produced the required number of children she would have to try to prevent the creative aspect of sex from featuring in her reactions; 'If she is wise she will direct her creativeness into other channels'. Fortunately, she considered that a number of these were available, 'from minor activities such as cake or jam-making through knitting and house-decorating to the more permanent types of craft and art' (Hubback, 1957: 3). Even the relatively progressive *Feminine Point of View* (pp. 37–58) while it gave more serious consideration than the other texts to what it called

'unlegalized unions', firmly stated a belief in 'the ideal of a faithful and lifelong union', believed the wish not to have children to be 'a rather unnatural state of affairs' and felt that 'sex talks' in schools were incomplete unless accompanied by talks on marriage. Needless to say, feminist writers remained silent on the sexuality of the unmarried woman. When considering education, feminist writers again saw the need to consider the girl's future role as mother. While Vera Brittain stressed the importance of a sound education 'for women no less than men' and recognized the need to question the education given to boys, she also implied that domestic training for boys could be most efficiently carried out in the home or, at a later date, in fathers' classes, while for girls special training in motherhood was placed firmly with the main school curriculum (Brittain, 1953: 93).

We would not want to argue, however, that feminism in the fifties can be wholly understood in relation to the dominant ideologies concerning the education of girls, motherhood and sexuality. Equally limiting, for example, was the cold war climate of the fifties. Under its constraints, it is perhaps hardly surprising that feminists dissociated themselves from other radical groups. Writing about the women's peace march and rally in Trafalgar Square in 1957, the *Manchester Guardian* (12/5/57) commented: 'The first of the women speakers said that they represented ordinary housewives and mothers who were not communists or fellow-travellers but who wanted to stop the tests on Christmas Island in the interests of humanity' (Summerskill, 1967). This political isolation is paralleled in feminist writing which either ignored or misunderstood class. Underlying the work of Myrdal and Klein, for example, is the assumption that middle class professional women are the vanguard in the fight for equality and the optimistic belief that gains made by them would eventually percolate down.

The educated elite is more articulate and hence its problems are more widely discussed. This minority creates the patterns which are later adopted by the community as a whole. By their successes and failures the outcome of women's emancipation will be judged and the question of how much equality decided.

(Myrdal and Klein, 1956: 150)

Three years earlier Vera Brittain had accepted that the welfare state had marked 'the beginning of a profound change from power politics to welfare politics' and that 'the woman question' had been subsumed within it. 'The Welfare State', she wrote, 'has been both the cause and consequence of the second great change by which women have moved within 30 years from rivalry with men to a new recognition of their unique value as women' (Brittain, 1953: 224). Although as she pointed out, 'rights once won cannot be guaranteed against loss until the equal status achieved by some has become the possession of all', she understood this not in relation to the class structure of British society, but as an indication of the need for international feminism with educated women from civilized countries taking up the cause of their more 'backward' sisters (Brittain, 1953: 77). No doubt

this political isolation was also reinforced by the left's lack of interest and sometimes its hostility to feminist issues. An instance of this is the failure of the most militant unions, the Amalgamated Engineering Union, the National Union of Railwaymen and the National Union of Mineworkers to give their support to the equal pay struggle.

In locating fifties' feminism, some emphasis has also to be placed on the semiautonomous tradition of feminism itself. So that, for example, although some notable feminists such as Vera Brittain and Edith Summerskill were active in a number of areas, the fragmentation of feminism in general into a series of single-issue campaigns can be seen not as a phenomenon specific to this period but as a continuing strand in the history of feminism. From the time of the 1948 pay freeze until the late fifties, when the National Women's Advisory Committee again began to support demands for day nurseries, there seems to have been little understanding at the level of practical politics of the inter-relatedness of different experiences in a way that cut across marital status or linked women's position at home with her status in the workforce. This limitation is reflected in Anne Goodwin's speech to the 1953 Trade Union Congress when she said: 'I do not think this movement has ever accepted an obligation to maintain the children of those mothers who go out to work' (Lewenhak, 1977: 255). It is also reflected in the terms of reference within which the Equal Pay Campaign was fought and in the disbanding of a number of groups – the National Association of Women Civil Servants in 1959, the National Union of Women Teachers in 1961 – once equal pay had been achieved in the civil service and teaching profession.

Practical feminist politics in the fifties, then, were based essentially on the middle class notion of the pressure group rather than on the belief in building a mass movement working on a number of inter-connected levels and issues. At the same time, while feminist writers did seem aware of the limitations of piecemeal reform, their ideas as to how to go beyond this were also limited. Some stressed the need for changes in attitude, particularly among women themselves, and always on an individual basis. Judith Hubback wrote:

Social democracy and all that it carries in its train imposes on her the duty of evolving a philosophy of life and a way of living. She must not fret at being cut off from contributing to and being refreshed by a wider life than that of her family alone, but must take active steps at every stage of her life to keep her outside contacts, to remain a whole person and not to be engulfed by the temporary business of being female.

(Hubback, 1957: 82)

Other feminist writers realized the social nature of the problems faced by women and the need for something more than individual solutions. Yet the municipal restaurants, creches and communal laundries which they demanded were presented as essential humanizing additions to the welfare state rather than as a radical challenge to its assumptions about the family and the lives of women. As

the authors of the *Feminine Point of View* wrote, 'The argument that the country is too busy at present for developments of this kind is not acceptable since better servicing would reduce waste of labour and free new workers' (Campbell, 1952: 46).

With a belief in equality achieved and unproblematically confined within a separate sphere, feminists understood their relationship to mainstream politics as being complementary – the feminine point of view that would humanize existing society without challenging the bases of power. As Judith Hubback wrote:

Reasonable modern feminism builds on the diversity of the sexes. It is not crudely egalitarian. It takes differences into account not with the aim of over-emphasizing them but with the sole purpose of seeing what *contribution* each sex can make to the *common good*.

(Hubback, 1957: 83)

conclusion

We have tried to argue in this paper that feminism in the fifties was constructed through dominant notions of femininity. Feminists in the period could not escape from the social democratic stress on the 'equality' already achieved and the rights won – 'mopping up' was all that was required. Girls and women were surrounded by representations of themselves, which focused on the satisfactions they would achieve through their marriages and their children. The three areas we have looked at vary in their levels of ideological coherence – the tensions are there. As we have stressed, there was no one representation of women; but the struggle for primacy of one set of representations concerned with marriage, home and family is systematically victorious throughout our period. The contradictions, however, were present, and by the end of the fifties and beginning of the sixties were less successfully contained. The acceptance of the tensions of women's two roles, for example, once explained in individual terms, may well have been challenged by the women who read *The Second Sex* in one of its 14 reprintings in paperback between 1961 and 1962. The setting up of the Housewives Register in 1961 through the women's page of *The Guardian* was undoubtedly related to the frustration and isolation experienced by women alone at home with small children. The language that had not existed – which was to challenge the dominance of husband and children in a woman's life – was beginning to develop. The problem was about to be named.

The break in the consensus was, we would suggest, connected to the radical political break that occurred around Hungary and Suez as well as to the changes, which were taking place by the late fifties and the early sixties in the material conditions of women's lives and the representation of those lives. Consumerist ideologies were no longer simply addressing women in their domestic setting – new styles of advertising were stressing women, both single and married, as both sexual

objects and subjects who could choose to spend a great deal of money on fashion and cosmetics. Work for married women had clearly come to stay and as more and more educated women experienced the tensions of their complicated dual roles or the frustrations of staying at home, it became evident that this was not simply an individual 'feminine dilemma' but a social problem. In 1964, the contraceptive pill had arrived and the real possibility of sex free from the fear of pregnancy became apparent. Cracks were appearing at every point and the way was being opened for the development of another, new style feminism – the Women's Liberation Movement.

acknowledgements

The paper was written by Lucy Bland, Angela Coyle, Tricia Davis, Catherine Hall and Janice Winship. With special thanks to Leah Shaw and Jenny Ash, Angela Lloyd and Yvette Rocheron for discussions which they were involved in. We initially gave the paper at the Ruskin History Workshop and found the discussion there very helpful, as it was also at the West Midlands Feminist Research Group.

references

- Abrams, M.** (1945) *The Population of Great Britain*, London: Allen & Unwin.
- Albermarle** (1960) *The Youth Servicer in England and Wales*, London: HMSO.
- Bowlby, J.** (1953) *Childcare and the Growth of Love*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Brittain, V.** (1953) *Lady into Woman*, London: Andrew Dakers.
- Campbell, O.W.** (drafted by) (1952) *The Report of a Conference on the Feminine Point of View*, London: Williams & Norgate.
- Carpenter, P.** (1966) *Challenge: The Duke of Edinburgh A ward Scheme in Action*, London: Ward Lock & Co.
- Chamberlain, V.** (1952) *Adolescence to Maternity*, London: Bodley Head.
- Chesser, E.** (1941) *Love Without Fear*, London: Rich & Cowan.
- Christian Economic and Social Research Foundation** (1959) *Symptoms of Strain Among Young Housewives*, London: Christian Economic and Social Research Foundation.
- Crowther** (1959) *15 to 18: A Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education*, London: HMSO.
- Department of Education and Science** (1956) *The Handbook of Health Education*, London: HMSO.
- Florence, L.S.** (1956) *Progress Report on Birth Control*, London.
- Gibbens, J.** (1940) *The Care of Young Babies*, London: Churchill.
- Hostler, P.** (1953) *The Child's World*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Housden, L.S.** (1943) *The Parents' Responsibility*, London: National Association of Maternal and Child Welfare Centres.
- Hubback, E.** (1945) *Population Facts and Policies*, London: Allen & Unwin.
- Hubback, J.** (1957) *Wives who went to College*, London: Heinemann.
- Kinsey et al.** (1953) *The Sexual Behaviour of the Human Female*, Philadelphia: Saunders.
- Lewenhak, S.** (1977) *Women and the Trade Unions*, London: Ernest Benn.

- Mass Observation** (1945) *Britain and Her Birthrate*, London: John Murray.
- McCleary, G.F.** (1945) *Race Suicide*, London: Allen & Unwin.
- Myrdal, A. and Klein, V.** (1956) *Woman's Two Roles*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Newsom, J.** (1948) *The Education of Girls*, London: Faber & Faber.
- Newsom, J.** (1963) *Half Our Future: A Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England)*, London: HMSO.
- Norwood** (1941) *Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools*, London: HMSO.
- Ollerenshaw, K.** (1961) *Education for Girls*, London: Faber & Faber.
- Rolph, C.H.** (1957) editor, *The Human Sum*, London: Heinemann.
- Royal Commission On Population** (1949) *Report of the Royal Commission On Population*, London: HMSO.
- Sears, N., Roberts, V. and Brock, J.** (1964) *A Career for Women in Industry?*, London: Oliver Boyd Ltd.
- Summerskill, E.** (1967) *A Woman's World: Her Memoirs*, London: William Heinemann.
- Valentine, C.W.** (1956) *The Normal Child and Some of His Abnormalities*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Weeks, J.** (1977) *Coming Out*, London: Quartet Books.
- Wilson, E.** (1977) *Women and the Welfare State*, London: Tavistock.
- Winnicott, D.W.** (1957) *The Child and His Family and The Child and the Outside World*, London: Tavistock.
- Women's Group on Public Welfare** (1948) *The Neglected Child and His Family*, London: National Council for Social Service.
- Wright, H.** (1930) *The Sex Factor in Marriage*, London: Noel Douglas (and frequently reprinted).

doi:10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400221