

SARAH E. STOLLER. *Inventing the Working Parent: Work, Gender, and Feminism in Neoliberal Britain*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2023. Pp. 304. \$55.00 (paper).

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Since the Covid-19 pandemic, issues around childcare, the division of domestic labor, and flexible work have generated a vast array of think-pieces and commentaries worldwide. Sarah E. Stoller's debut monograph is an important historical contribution to these conversations, reminding commentators of the feminist visions imbued into contemporary debates.

Stoller begins *Inventing the Working Parent: Work, Gender, and Feminism in Neoliberal Britain* by outlining the radical visions of flexible work and childcare arrangements of white Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) activists in the late 1970s and 1980s. By the 1970s, state childcare in Britain was minimal, despite the growing number of mothers entering paid work. White feminists believed in the importance of childcare not merely as beneficial for the child, but an important issue for working mothers as well. Indeed, it was the struggle to find appropriate childcare that prompted many of the women in Stoller's book, like Pat Calder, to envisage a new type of parenting. The first chapter charts these visions, exploring the rise of community-based childcare arrangements, like Maxilla, a playgroup based in West London whose management committee was made up of both staff and parents. For any historian of mothering and the WLM, these issues and initiatives are familiar, but the chapter does help to situate these stories within broader historical developments, particularly the creeping neoliberalism of the state.

While flexible working arrangements are familiar in the language of work today, in 1980, this was hardly the case. In chapter 2, Stoller illustrates the evolution of the job share through tracing the work of the organization the Job Share Project, which then became the charity New Ways to Work (NWW). Crucially, Stoller argues that job sharing was viewed by activists as important for all working parents, not necessarily mothers. While this may have been the case, in chapter 3, in which Stoller primarily charts the introduction of flexible work in the public sector, women were still at the center of discussions around job sharing and flexible work. Focusing primarily on job sharing and equal opportunities policies in Camden, the chapter shows the rise and fall of job sharing, as initial enthusiasm for flexible working was hampered by the 1990s by financial pressures. Regardless of the successes of these initiatives, the first three chapters expertly highlight the little-known story of how the language of working parenthood transformed from a radical feminist vision to a depoliticized issue occupying the minutes and newsletters of Trade Unions and public sector offices alike.


By the 1990s, private businesses were beginning to, slowly, understand the importance, nay advantages, of making the workplace suitable for working parents. Attempts by organizations such as Women in Management and Women in Banking to implement equal opportunities practices—like inviting mothers back into the workplace after childbirth—were met with resistance and skepticism from male executives. Female equal opportunities spokespersons stressed the need for corporate employers to recognize that losing their pool of female workers through poor maternity schemes was cutting off career-focused, skilled employees, not simply “women with a job with no horizons” (135). When childcare initiatives were introduced—like at Boots pharmacy—they were proven not to be cost effective, and were generally only given to some high-level staff who were costly to replace. The chapter can sometimes feel grim: equal opportunities initiatives appear like a painstaking and futile act of convincing reluctant male executives of women's value as workers. Ultimately, when it came to equal opportunities for women in the workplace, it had to be financially beneficial and stripped of any overt feminist language.

Stoller does stress that this history doesn't just concern women. Chapter 4 discusses the ways in which men also sought to job share with their wives or apply with unpaid paternity. The picture for men was bleak, as fathers looking to create flexible working styles were met with

isolation and unchanging attitudes around working fatherhood. With the arrival of New Labour in 1997, there seemed to be a greater attempt to help parents with childcare, albeit while bolstering the private sector: childcare vouchers were expanded and tax credits were created that enabled working parents to purchase private childcare. Through Tony Blair's equal opportunities policies, discussions shifted away from right-wing "family friendliness" and toward promoting a "work life balance" (155). However, as Stoller argues, this new balance didn't necessarily emphasize working less, but working smart: the gap between work and life was narrowing regardless. That said, by the 1990s, having an equal opportunities policy was a business agenda: retaining staff and promoting loyalty rested on, for example, giving both women and men opportunities to take parental leave.

By the late 1990s, Stoller argues that there was a renewed enthusiasm about working parenthood and the promise of "having it all" (163). The final chapter of the book—undoubtedly the most fascinating of the book—is a study of the rise of working parenthood as a cultural ideal among white middle-class heterosexual families. Focusing on magazine coverage of working parents, Stoller includes stories of parents, in particular mothers, whose ability to balance work and childcare meant they were lauded as "success stories." But the success of these parents is debatable. Stoller draws attention to the fact that by the 1990s working parenthood was a necessity rather than a step toward equality, as parents argued that without a dual income, they wouldn't afford their mortgage. As such, Stoller suggests that working parenting may have led to a more equal division of labour in the household, with men assisting with childcare (which they included as domestic labor). That said, in the 1990s and early 2000s, women still, unsurprisingly, did the lion's share of the housework. What's more, the depoliticization of working parenthood had individualized efforts at balancing work and life. Mothers felt that if they buckled under the pressure they were personally failing at "having it all."

If it wasn't already obvious, *Inventing the Working Parent* tells one side of the complex, heterogeneous, and deeply personal history of parenting in post-war Britain. But Stoller is conscious of this. Job sharing, community childcare, working parenthood—these were issues that occupied, as Stoller stresses, white middle-class Britons, and particularly women. In fact, as Stoller notes, the balance of work and childrearing had always been a necessity for black and working-class mothers in Britain, which begs the question as to whether working parenthood was a really an "invention" during this time, or simply a middle-class rebrand. These questions aside, *Inventing the Working Parent* is a critical history of the development of flexible work as a viable and important goal for mothers and fathers, employees and employers, in late twentieth-century Britain. It is story about how the utopian visions of Euro-American white feminists helped to inspire the flexible working arrangements of tech industries in the Global North today. And finally, as Stoller reminds us, it is an urgent reminder to continue to valorize caregivers and care work.

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SIMON TOPPING. *Northern Ireland, the United States and the Second World War*. London: Bloomsbury, 2022. Pp. 311. \$115.00 (cloth).
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This well-researched and extremely informative book is a useful addition to a growing body of work examining Northern Ireland and the Second World War. Much of Simon Topping's account focuses on the experiences of the American troops who began to arrive in the province