

BOOK REVIEW

Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract. Petra Bueskens, New York: Routledge, 2018 (ISBN 978-1-138-67742-5)

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The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2022 highlights, once again, the many preexisting inequalities and sources of oppression cutting across and throughout our societies. Petra Bueskens's *Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract* examines the foundations and manifestations of one of these fractures, that is, the continued oppression of women. Although written before the global pandemic, Bueskens's analysis helps us to understand both the theoretical and structural roots of women's oppression in modern societies and in doing so sheds light on why the pandemic hit women so hard. So hard that *UN Women* concluded in 2020 that "while everyone is facing unprecedented challenges, women are bearing the brunt of the economic and social fallout of COVID-19" (UN Women 2020). Moreover, Bueskens claims to offer insight into one possible pathway for disrupting this continuing oppression and for rewriting the sexual contract that underwrites that oppression.

Bueskens traces the theoretical and structural roots of women's oppression in modern society to a "conundrum of duality" (91). It is through this duality that liberalism and capitalism promise women freedom while capturing them in gender roles and institutions enforcing those roles and their continued subordination. In Bueskens's words, this conundrum produced conditions in which "women's freedom as individuals simultaneously produced their constraints as mothers and wives" (91). In this way, Bueskens returns us to the rallying cry of the second wave of feminist activists and theorists: "the personal is political." She demonstrates the essential relevance of this assertion for understanding women's oppression today and also points to the immense unfinished work that remains if women's oppression is to be, or can be, addressed within liberal or capitalist societies.

Bueskens focuses on Carole Pateman's pivotal work, *The Sexual Contract*, in which Pateman powerfully argues that the illusive freedom, autonomy, or fairness promised by the fiction of a social contract actually masks the subordination and domination realized in supposedly private relationships (Pateman 1988). Bueskens retraces the historical foundations of the sexual contract to the forces of industrialization and capitalism in early and current modern society. She retraces the theoretical foundations of this sexual contract to the thought of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Through existing research in psychology and sociology and through empirical, qualitative data that she gathered herself, Bueskens offers a comprehensive view of that sexual contract as it is lived today. Her examination of this contract from so many different perspectives and disciplines elucidates the multiple connections between spheres of activity and

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relationships. For example, the denseness and complexity of Bueskens's analysis illustrates how psychological, sociological, historical, economic, and theoretical forces all converge to create a duality and contradiction between women's sexual (for Bueskens, maternal) and individualized selves (3). This duality enforces a sexual contract in which any promise of autonomy or fairness is curtailed by women's maternal roles.

Bueskens adopts Pateman's concept of a sexual contract but perceives in it a hitherto (in her perception) undetected potential for disrupting the oppressive duality of the roles in which women are caught. Bueskens, unlike Pateman and many other feminist critics of the liberal private/public divide, finds emancipatory potential for rewriting the sexual contract to advance women's equality and freedom. Whereas Pateman finds liberalism and social contract theory inextricably connected to subordination and domination, Bueskens points to the unprecedented progress women have made in liberal societies. Bueskens finds not only "historic movements out of the home into education and paid work" by women, but also "emerging strategies for combining dual loads . . . for moving past coping and into transformation" (22). Bueskens observes that "this may be the first time in history that women hold an independent legal status, have access to reliable birth control, can choose when or if to marry and become mothers, can enter any educational institution or profession and earn independent wages" (144).

In this way, Bueskens breaks down any binary conception of the relationship between private and public spheres of activity and reveals the multiple, interlocking, and mutually reinforcing interactions between these spheres, most particularly the economic and familial spheres. She persuasively illustrates the "mutually constitutive duality" of liberal exclusions and inclusions as realized in women's lives as "wives and mothers" and as "citizens and breadwinners" (6). I think she overstates how this mutuality is "largely missing from the literature" (7, see also 145), however. After all, liberal feminists, beginning with theorists such as Susan Moller Okin, have often evaluated and elaborated both the oppressive and the liberating potential of what Bueskens calls the mutuality between the private and public roles that women play in modern, liberal society.

Ultimately, Bueskens reframes the sexual contract Pateman articulates to focus much more sharply on women as mothers, as opposed to women and their more broadly assigned sexual roles. She argues that in contemporary liberal society, "Motherhood rather than gender per se is the key stratifier between men and women" (295). For Bueskens, the gains women have made in contemporary society are largely overshadowed by the structural and cultural impediments that confront them once they become mothers. This focus on women as mothers enables insight into the "role complexity" and "cultural contradiction" that women face as caregivers *and* breadwinners, as mothers *and* citizens, as free *and* profoundly encumbered by their relationships in the family. Bueskens, at some points, paints a picture of a "temporary holiday of equality" (13) that women enjoy before motherhood and an oppression that slams down when "a woman becomes a mother," and "the sexual contract extracts its due from the ledger of her freedom" (14).

Although Bueskens notes that this oppression based on motherhood diminishes the possibilities of all women, I am concerned that this focus on motherhood neglects the many painful and impactful aspects of women's oppression tied to women's sexuality more broadly construed. As the #MeToo movement so publicly exposed, the objectification of women remains a dominant force in women's lives. This objectification reduces women to their appearance, body parts, or sexual function and may

dangerously affect young girls and women in regard to their perceptions of self-worth and future roles. Also, many women alter their behavior and their choices as a result of their fear of rape; indeed, perhaps, they should. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that “nearly 1 in 5 women have experienced completed or attempted rape during her lifetime”—one third of these before the age of seventeen (CDC 2020). By reducing the “key stratifier between men and women” to motherhood as opposed to gender or sexuality, Bueskens’s analysis and her proposed identification of a pathway to redress women’s oppression misses this core dimension of women’s oppression.

Furthermore, although Bueskens acknowledges the “important intersectional differences” that the lives of women as individuals and as mothers manifest, with the exception of class, she never examines any of these in any detail. In doing this, she marginalizes the experiences of many women and diminishes her own insights. After all, the key problem, according to Pateman, is the fiction of volunteerism through which contract theory disguises and maintains oppression. This fiction supports the oppression of many, many people in a great variety of relationships. As Pateman explains, “My analysis was designed to help an understanding of how certain concepts and ideas allow an institution of subordination (say, employment) to be seen as constituted by free relations” (Pateman and Mills 2007, 203). In focusing so sharply on the sexual contract itself, Bueskens misses this core insight.

In the latter half of the book, Bueskens elaborates her own empirical research into the sexual contract, which leads to her identification of an emancipatory pathway for subverting the oppression of that “conundrum of duality” women face as mothers. She identifies a pathway toward both maternal and paternal transformation. Bueskens’s empirical analysis benefits and suffers from the same sharpened and narrowed focus of her more theoretical and historical examination. Bringing theory together with practice, Bueskens interviews ten women whom she claims to be “rewriting the sexual contract.” These mothers, whom Bueskens calls “revolving mothers,” practice periodic absence from their childcare responsibilities and as a result reconstruct their own family dynamics. Bueskens finds that “periodic absence from the home, involving separation ranging from a few days to a few months, ruptured the ‘default position’ assigned to mothers in families” (299). According to Bueskens, this disruption enables women to realize both their individualized and maternal selves and illustrates one pathway for disrupting oppressive gender roles and for rewriting the sexual contract.

Bueskens acknowledges that the ten women she interviewed are not representative of the great variety of women and their experiences. Indeed, all ten women appear to have or be working toward advanced educational degrees. Bueskens notes, “Clearly the revolving mothers in this study are a rare group of well-educated professionals with, in most cases, willing husbands or partners” (300). Even the two single mothers among the ten women appear to have extraordinary support systems or resources. Even Nina, whose story Bueskens describes as perhaps “more clearly” revealing “the sexual contract than the others” because she was unable to redistribute childcare labor to a partner, and because “she had to work and mother in a gender-structured system that presupposed the existence of two parents who role specialize” (226), appears to have material resources well beyond those of many single mothers or mothers with partners. Nina is described as occupying a senior, high-powered, high-paying corporate position whose career and mothering goals cause enormous stress in her life (206–7). It is only by stepping back to part-time work, employing the services of a part-time nanny, and sometimes sacrificing time with her son that Nina accommodates the periodic

absences required by her work. But these periodic absences do enable her to realize her “individualized” self. Rebecca, the other single mother among the group of ten, shares her parenting responsibilities with her own mother: Rebecca’s mother became “the other—and at times primary—carer” (242).

This focus on women with privileges resulting from their higher incomes or higher educations does offer insight into the oppression of women overall. It becomes apparent that no degree of privilege shelters women from the conundrum of duality that oppresses all women. It also offers insight into the possibilities for active resistance by women in their own homes and lives, as well as a vision of what that might look like. But the picture of these women as a “small pocket of women who are subverting” the contractions of the gendered division of labor and “forging new pathways out of ‘contradiction’ and ‘impossibility’” (298) is, perhaps, overdrawn. Although Bueskens ends her book with a reminder of the societal transformations required to address women’s oppression, including revolutionary change in the economic order, and although she points to policies such as a universal basic income as instrumental to the support of women as mothers and as individuals, the focus on women of privilege misses how profoundly intersectional women’s oppression is, not only in terms of women’s various identities but also in terms of the dynamics between spheres of relationships. Individual resistance in the family doesn’t touch the structures throughout society that advantage some people (in this case, men) and disadvantage others (in this case, women). Indeed, Bueskens calls for “a reconstruction of the social and sexual contracts” (178). But the pathway she offers stresses the reconstruction of the latter (sexual) while missing how superficial, or impossible, that reconstruction might be without the former (social).

More succinctly, Bueskens overdraws the power of individuals to rewrite the sexual contract. Bueskens argues, contra Pateman, that confronting the remaining impediments to women’s freedom requires increasing individualization in the family and conceptions of the maternal that enable “ongoing growth and development of the individuated self . . . through periodic absence” (266). Whereas Bueskens looks toward a rewriting of the sexual contract, Pateman rejects the possibility of a conception of a contract for understanding or addressing how women suffer as women, throughout multiple spheres of relationships. If women suffer oppression because of their membership in an oppressed group (Young 1990, 42), then a focus on individual action and transformation within some families elides this core feature of women’s, indeed of all, oppression. Maintaining the fiction of an original, social, or sexual contract continues to obscure the dynamics of domination and subordination embedded throughout society.

In sum, Bueskens’s book provides a thought-provoking, timely, and invigorating articulation and reclaiming of the concept of a sexual contract. The multidisciplinary examination of a sexual contract sheds light on the historical, theoretical, economic, and sociological roots of women’s dual and often contradictory roles in modern society. The merging of theory with empirical data offers a refreshing perspective on women’s lived experiences and also the possible routes for addressing women’s oppression.

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