'Mommy Wars' Redux: A False Conflict

The "mommy wars" have flared up once again, sparked most recently by the publication of the English translation of Elisabeth Badinter's book, "The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women." In it, Badinter argues that a certain contemporary style of mothering — a style that requires total devotion of mother to child, starting with natural childbirth and extending through exclusive and on-demand breastfeeding, baby-wearing and co-sleeping — undermines women's equality. Badinter claims that it does this in several ways: by squeezing fathers out of any meaningful role in parenting; by placing such high demands on mothers that it becomes nearly impossible to balance paid work with motherhood (especially once fathers have been sidelined); and by sending the message that day care, bottle feeding, sleep training and the other things that allow women to combine motherhood with paid work are harmful to children, and that the women who use them are selfish.

A post in The Times' Room for Debate forum earlier this month described the conflict staked out in Badinter's book as one of "motherhood vs. feminism." But what this discussion failed to capture is something that Badinter actually discusses in her book at some length, namely, that the debate over mothering is not just a conflict between feminists and women in general but rather a conflict *internal* to feminism itself.

Despite the fact that Badinter is frequently described in press coverage as "a leading French philosopher," the book could hardly be called a sophisticated philosophical analysis, especially not when compared with the kind of scholarship that is produced by feminist philosophers these days. The argument of the book is rather thin and much of the empirical evidence marshaled in support of that argument is unsystematic and anecdotal. Moreover, serious questions have been raised about Badinter's objectivity, particularly having to do with her arguments against breastfeeding, in light of her financial ties to corporations that produce infant formula, including Nestle and the makers of Similac and Enfamil.

Nevertheless, Badinter's book — and the discussion it has provoked — does manage to shed light on some profound challenges for feminist theory and practice.

Much work in second wave feminist theory of the 1970s and 1980s converged around a diagnosis of the cultural value system that underpins patriarchal societies. Feminists argued that the fundamental value structure of such societies rests on a series of

conceptual dichotomies: reason vs. emotion; culture vs. nature; mind vs. body; and public vs. private. In patriarchal societies, they argued, these oppositions are not merely distinctions — they are implicit hierarchies, with reason valued over emotion, culture over nature, and so on. And in all cases, the valorized terms of these hierarchies are associated with masculinity and the devalued terms with femininity. Men are stereotypically thought to be more rational and logical, less emotional, more civilized and thus more fit for public life, while women are thought to be more emotional and irrational, closer to nature, more tied to their bodies and thus less fit for public life.

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Where second wave feminists diverged was in their proposed solutions to this situation. Some feminists argued that the best solution was for women to claim the values

traditionally associated with masculinity for themselves. From this point of view, the goal of feminism was more or less to allow or to encourage women to be more like men. In practical terms, this meant becoming more educated, more active in public life and less tied to the private sphere of the family, and more career-focused.

Other feminists, by contrast, argued that this liberal assimilationist approach failed to challenge the deeply problematic value structure that associated femininity with inferiority. From this point of view, the practical goal of feminism was to revalue those qualities that have traditionally been associated with femininity and those activities that have traditionally been assigned to women, with childbirth, mothering and care giving at the top of the list.

While both of these strategies have their merits, they also share a common flaw, which is that they leave the basic conceptual dichotomies intact. Hence, the liberal assimilationist approach runs the risk of seeming a bit too willing to agree with misogynists throughout history that femininity isn't worth very much, and the second cultural feminist approach, even as it challenges the prevailing devaluation of femininity, runs the risk of tacitly legitimating women's marginalization by underscoring how different they are from men.

This is why the predominant approach in so-called third wave feminist theory (which is not necessarily the same thing as feminist philosophy) is deconstructive in the sense that it tries to call into question binary distinctions such as reason vs. emotion, mind vs. body, and male vs. female. Among other things, this means challenging the very assumptions by means of which people are split up into two and only two sexes and two and only two genders.

This short detour through the history of second wave feminism suggests that the choice that has emerged in the debate over Badinter's book — that we either view attachment parenting as a backlash against feminism and or embrace attachment parenting as feminism — is a false one. Neither vision of feminism challenges the fundamental conceptual oppositions that serve to rationalize and legitimate women's subordination.

Even if one accepts the diagnosis that I just sketched — and no doubt there are many feminist theorists who would find it controversial — one might think: this is all well and good as far as theory goes, but what does it mean for practice, specifically for the practice of mothering? A dilemma that theorists delight in deconstructing must nev-

ertheless still be negotiated in practice in the here and now, within our existing social and cultural world. And women who have to negotiate that dilemma by choosing whether to become mothers and, if they do become mothers, whether (if they are so economically secure as to even have such a choice) and (for most women) how to combine mothering and paid employment have a right to expect some practical insights on such questions from feminism.

This brings me to the question of the conflict to which Badinter refers in her title. Many discussions of the book have focused on the internal psychological conflict suffered by mothers who work outside of the home — either by choice or by necessity — and feel guilty for not living up to the unrealistic demands of the contemporary ideology of motherhood. As a working mother of four children who has juggled motherhood with an academic career for the last 16 years, I am all too familiar with this particular conflict, and I agree that it is pernicious and harmful to women. But Badinter's book also points to another kind of conflict, one that isn't primarily internal and psychological but is rather structural. This is the conflict between economic policies and social institutions that set up systematic obstacles to women working outside of the home — in the United States, the lack of affordable, high quality day care, paid parental leave, flex time and so on — and the ideologies that support those policies and institutions, on the one hand, and equality for women, on the other hand.

This is the conflict that we should be talking about. Unfortunately this is also a conversation that is difficult for us to have in the United States where discussions of feminism always seem to boil down to questions of choice. The problem with framing the mommy wars in terms of choice is not just that only highly educated, affluent, mostly white women have a genuine choice about whether to become über moms (though the ways in which educational, economic and racial privilege structure women's choices is a serious problem that must not be overlooked). The problem is also that under current social, economic, and cultural conditions, no matter what one chooses, there will be costs: for stay at home mothers, increased economic vulnerability and dependence on their spouses, which can decrease their exit options and thus their power in their marriages; for working mothers, the high costs of quality child care and difficulty keeping up at work with those who either have no children or have spouses at home taking care of them, which exacerbates the wage gap and keeps the glass ceiling in place. (Families with working mothers and fathers who are primary care givers avoid some of these problems, but have to pay the costs associated with transgressing traditional gender norms and expectations.)

If the "the conflict" continues to be framed as one between women — between liberal and cultural feminists, or between stay at home mothers and working women, or between affluent professionals and working class women, or between mothers and childless women — it will continue to distract us from what we should really be doing: working together — women *and* men together— to change the cultural, social and economic conditions within these crucial choices are made.

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