

---

Book Review

## Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract

Mariana Thomas <sup>1\*</sup>

**Published:** September 10, 2019

**Book's Author:** Petra Bueskens

**Publication Date:** 2018

**Publisher:** Oxon & New York: Routledge

**Price:** £105 hardcover

**Number of Pages:** 334 pp.

**ISBN:** 978-1-138-67742-5

*Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract* presents an innovative and necessary intervention into a central dilemma in late modernity: the contradiction between western women's maternal and individualised selves. By identifying and examining the origins of the sexual contract, Petra Bueskens effectively demonstrates that its structural legacy acts to simultaneously constrain and liberate women.

The principal insight of the book lies in the author's contention that women's freedom in the contemporary West is implicated in their continued subjugation as mothers under the 'new sexual contract'. This marks a theoretical evolution beyond existing feminist research which has established the existence of the polarity between maternal and autonomous selves as well as the perpetuation of gendered private and public spheres. Through an astute interpretation of sociological history and by conducting interviews with a group of 'revolving mothers', Bueskens is able to put forth a proposal for 'revolutionary change in the social order' (p. 304).

The book can be organised into two complimentary approaches: firstly, an historical, theoretical and philosophical investigation and, secondly, a thematic case study of ten working mothers. Bueskens presents a detailed analysis of the birth of the modern social contract and the 'individual': an historical point from which, the author contends, Western society still draws its basic structure. Developed by the classical Western philosophers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the foundational principles of social contract theory or classical liberalism dictated that all men are born free; that they are free and equal to each other; and any government should be determined by democratic consent and the rule of law. The establishment of sovereignty for each man marked a departure from traditional, feudal society in which the rule of the father was hierarchically implemented by the domains of the church, state and family. In classical liberalism, the rule of the father was intended to be passed down to the rule of the son, and, thus, the social contract was born. Bueskens builds her theoretical position largely on Carole Pateman's assertion that the social contract from its inception relied upon the existence of the sexual contract and, therefore, the subjection of women as wives and mothers. Although the social contract granted a natural right to egalitarianism for both sexes, it was based on what Pateman terms 'fraternal patriarchy' which continued to perceive the patriarchal family and women's subjection to male rule as the 'natural' order of civilised society. This asymmetry was fixed not just by 'natural laws' but by institutionalised legality as women's subjugation to men was written into property rights and the prohibition of full citizenship, including suffrage. In Bueskens' phrasing:

---

<sup>1</sup> University of Southampton, UK

\*Corresponding Author: [meh1e15@soton.ac.uk](mailto:meh1e15@soton.ac.uk)

...it was never a matter of mere exclusion that guaranteed women's specifically modern subjection; rather, it was the way women were included [as wives and mothers] that constituted the central obstacle for participation in society (p. 81).

According to Bueskens, the groundwork of contractual theory and the introduction of the 'individual' eventually allows women to demand the equal rights which lay at the heart of classical liberalism. Whereas Pateman states that the social and sexual contracts, by definition, exclude women and preclude female individualisation, Bueskens theorises that over time women have appropriated the category of the 'individual' in order to gain entry and participation in the patriarchal public sphere and labour market. Yet, the public sphere may only exist alongside its counterpart - the private-domestic sphere - which continues to be a female gendered space. The 'individual' is only free to leave the home on the caveat that somebody remains to perform domestic and care work. For Bueskens, herein lies the root of the contradiction in contemporary women's lives.

The book embarks upon a 'sociological history' of over 300 years of western women's duality, transitioning from its birth in the proto-industrialisation era to its contemporary transmutation. Bueskens draws a vital connection between the gendered spheres which persist today and the separation of the household/family from the economy which took place during the industrial revolution. Although many women did begin to enter the waged workforce, which developed outside the home during the move to industrialisation, all women continued to be excluded from full citizenship and the vast majority did not earn a sufficient wage to ensure economic independence as single women. As production began to leave the home in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, childcare and domestic work became the solitary pursuit of the stay-at-home mother. This is the point at which we see the creation of the early nuclear family and the gendered division of labour. Alongside the privatisation of motherhood, there was an increase in 'Woman rights' and a prominent rise in the educated, middle-class 'new woman'. Her 'nemesi's', the archetypal 'moral mother' grew out of a wider 'surge of sentiment' caused by an increase in space and resources which allowed for further familial privacy and intimacy, an economic growth which saw an increase in single-earner households, and a cultural shift towards marriage on the basis of romantic love.

The ideological movement towards the 'cult of motherhood' developed from the Rousseauist view that the infant required love and nurturance given by the mother alone in the private setting of the home. This quickly became an influential ideology in the culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and one that was used as reasoning behind the separation of women from the 'outside world' of production. Bueskens demonstrates that by the fin de siècle the 'new woman' or the 'woman who leaves' had entered mainstream cultural dialogue and were deemed to represent a serious threat to the existing order, despite their relatively small numbers. These women wanted love, freedom, education and liberation from economic dependence; this marked a change in attitude which manifested in declining birth rates during the decades before and after the fin de siècle - a 'silent strike' against the conditions of marriage and motherhood. At this point in the analysis, the author takes a substantial chronological leap from the fin de siècle to late modernity as she begins to offer her observations of contemporary society. For the sake of thorough analysis, it would have been useful for Bueskens to present her critical insight into the changes that took place during the mid-twentieth century, to elucidate the effects of the first and second world wars as well as the struggles and gains of the feminist movement during this time.

In the following section, the author surveys a wide range of sociological literature in order to produce a varied account of the modern Western woman in terms of her education, employment and position within the domestic/familial realm. All of this is framed within recent sociological debates regarding the decline of the traditional concept of society, defined by 'hard' structures such as the state, the economy and the family, which has been replaced with the fluid networks of globalisation and late-stage capitalism, and a dissolution of the institutional sovereignty associated with the old social contract. Running in parallel to this is the narrative of individual choice and responsibility; the advancement of individual mobility and freedom in neoliberal society has allowed both men and women to practise 'self-making', continually electing who they are and how they will live. Within this landscape, there have been radical gains towards women's equality; to a certain extent, women have been released from the patriarchal order which confined previous generations and can now pursue love and work under the same (or similar) conditions as their male counterparts. Bueskens agrees that women are now free to act as individuals in ways that were not possible within the old social contract, but argues that these free choices, such as, to delay marriage and motherhood, gain an education or develop a career, are being performed alongside a host of responsibilities that remain or increasingly fall upon women.

Despite unprecedented movement out of the home and into the workforce by women, the vast majority of women still choose to become mothers and, additionally, to undertake the majority of the parenting and domestic duties while their husbands or partners return to work. The 'new scenario' produces a complex discord between the woman who is free as an individual and constrained as a mother. In this scenario, a manipulation of the narrative of individual 'free choice' has created a culture in which the social contract has transformed into the individual contract. Bueskens argues that as society has become more fluid and less structured, patriarchy too has become deinstitutionalised and 'deregulated'. While women may no longer be legally subordinated, there is a

societal subjection in the form of 'individual' female problems, motherhood being one of them; the diminishment of welfare support and neo-liberalism's contempt for dependency compounds an individualisation of care. The sexual contract, which relied upon women's domestic labour, not only persists but, in fact, flourishes in an unregulated form and so the 'deregulation of social structure and increasing individualisation reveals the sexual contract more clearly than before' (p. 168). Women may now successfully enter the workforce as de facto men – or, in social contract vernacular, as 'individuals' – but not as women, and certainly not as mothers.

In the West, this is evidenced by the sharp decline in women's economic and career success after they become mothers – the author shows that women who have a financial 'breadwinner' when they become mothers suffer the least economic penalties, while single mothers are among those who suffer the worst. Bueskens points to a worldwide 'fertility strike' which sees women either delaying motherhood or opting out entirely in order to avoid an economic and career drop-off post-childbirth. The increased gender equality and opportunity open to individuals who are willing to operate as ideal neo-liberal subjects closes when these individuals become mothers and cease to fulfil models of self-sufficiency, flexibility and independence. On becoming mothers, women experience a 'traditionalisation process' which sees a sharp increase in a gendered division of labour within the family, with women undertaking a larger share of the care and domestic workload even when their husbands or partners participate more actively in the household than the average (between 80-95 per cent of couples have a highly unequal division of labour). A complicating factor is that most women want to stay at home during their child's early years, even in the rare circumstances in which they would have adequate support to return to work. Mothers mainly attempt to manage the contradictions between their family work and paid work, their 'maternal self' and their 'individualised self' respectively, by undertaking a 'second shift', more accurately described as multi-tasking, during which time they undertake paid work as well as the majority of childcare and domestic work. The conflicting dual identities inherent within the figure of the contemporary woman as well as the burden of exhaustion and stress placed on mothers is deemed to be the inevitable price of 'wanting it all'; it is what Bueskens identifies as the 'current struggle' of feminism - the final site of emancipation.

Through her case study of ten mothers, Bueskens develops practical solutions to the problems presented by the 'new sexual contract'. The research focuses on 'revolving mothers', defined by Bueskens as women who have chosen careers or creative pursuits that take them away from the home for periods of time that exceed the standard working day – from several nights to months at a time. These women fit into the category of 'outsider', they are social innovators, and can therefore potentially teach us new ways of undertaking motherhood which challenge the conventions of the 'new sexual contract'. Without exception, the women practise 'strategic maternal absence' which provides them with practical and psychological relief from their domestic work and child-care, and which serves the radical purpose of restructuring gender relations in the home (p. 48). Bueskens has intentionally chosen women for her sociological case study who fit into the ideal 'individual' role – well-educated, professional, ambitious, middle-class - prior to becoming mothers or in tandem with motherhood and, therefore, are more likely to have experienced an exaggerated 'traditionalisation' of gender roles with their partners.

Bueskens recognises the privilege of her participants and concedes that the case study is not applicable to the experience of the majority of women. Although the empirical research does present valuable insight, at times it feels out of step with the author's claim to variegation and inclusivity in the rest of the book. As a result of this, the empirical research remains rather limited in scope in comparison to the critical reach of the rest of the text. On the other hand, the author's case study has the consequence of highlighting that it is currently only women in a significantly privileged position who are able to choose shared, flexible parenting through extended maternal absence. As Bueskens acknowledges, most of the participants work in a freelance capacity, an option which is not generally available to women who are not as well-educated or socioeconomically secure. Through demonstrating that this parenting practice is not available to most women, Bueskens highlights the need for greater structural support in order to free mothers from the 'default position' within families. The book concludes with a rallying call for a massive restructuring of our existing models of work and welfare regimes, although, rather disappointingly, this point is not significantly elucidated. Bueskens has written passionately elsewhere on the subject of the reformation of state welfare for mothers and specifically on the potential advantages of a universal basic income, so the reader may have benefitted from the author's further valuable insight on this topic.

Overall, this study marks an exciting development in motherhood studies, as well as in the fields of gender studies and social and political theory. Perhaps its most impressive contribution to the field of motherhood studies lies in its willingness to effectively return to past social and feminist theory that may have been disregarded in order to present new understandings of the contemporary female dilemma. Arguably this is a brave and worthwhile decision by Bueskens, as it allows her to implement innovative analysis of the modern 'sexual contract' and to consider strategies that can disrupt it. The book will appeal to a wide range of readers who are interested in or familiar with the experience of the contemporary woman and mother. Undoubtedly, it will become a significant theoretical addition to the feminist debates and existing research on modern motherhood and women's dual identities.

**Citation:** Thomas, M. (2019). [Review of the book *Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract*, by Kaitlyn Mendes]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 3(1-2), 17. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/5923>

Copyright © 2019 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.