



Inside the socialist nursery: welfare maternity and the writing of Denise Riley

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Abstract

This article considers Denise Riley's contribution to a feminist history of the British welfare state apparatus, with a focus on maternity and reproduction. Drawing attention to the inter-locking of historical method with the emergence of feminist theory, the article comments on the importance and originality of this encounter. There is also an abbreviated attempt to convey a line of argument subsequent to Riley's early work, with reference to the power of the vernacular language of the popular media as purveyor of morality and harsh judgement of women.

Keywords

Maternity, welfare, reproduction, media, unhusbanded

Feminist times in Thatcher's Britain

'At 12 .30 three hundred little children are fast asleep in little cots where the sun, the blessed doctor in the sky, who cures rickets, can rest on the sleepers. In winter of course they are wrapped warmly in red blankets' (Margaret McMillan, 1927, cited in Riley, 1983b: 145).

I met Denise late in the day, in fact in 1983, by which time there was a formidable second-wave British feminist social history already accumulated. She was about to leave for the US and our paths crossed primarily in the milieu of motherhood, neighbourhood and the challenges women like us, me aged thirty-two, Denise just

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a few years older, faced in confronting the hurdles of academia and earning a living. Not the writing and doing of research, and not the publishing, but the securing of a stable income in the guise of a job that did not mean commuting up and down the country for the sake of a one-year appointment. I would like to open this short article, then, with a preamble, one which takes a brief look back at the socio-political landscape in Britain in the late 1970s and through the 1980s which somehow, despite what we perceived as adversity, permitted feminist research to come to fruition and to make a mark in the life of the academy. Alongside such considerations, I would also like to make the rather obvious point that in the UK the work of Denise Riley (along with figures such as Jacqueline Rose, Juliet Mitchell and Laura Mulvey) inaugurated what came to be known as feminist theory, with reference to the roles of both psychoanalytic feminism, which was less central to Riley's thinking, and post-structuralism, which surely was central to her writing. For Denise, this emerged out of her theorising of history and her querying, not uncontroversially, of what it meant to be doing feminist historical work. Voices of women which came to light did not do so transparently. After *War in the Nursery* came *Am I That Name?* which proved pivotal in its critique of any stable idea of identity. Paying meticulous attention to the multiple and always contradictory processes by which subjects are formed, Riley looked to the categories which history creates for us and their requirements that we recognise ourselves therein (Riley, 1983a, 1988). Riley then moved towards a philosophy of language which in turn permitted a marvellous entwinement with the poetic writing that has won such accolades of late. These earlier works came into being in a time of remarkable productivity within Marxist-feminist circles, something evident in a flurry of journal production. Denise published in an early issue of the cultural studies journal *New Formations*, and she was invited to produce a teaching text on maternity and citizenship for the Open University for one of the key modules led by Stuart Hall (Riley, 1992). At the same time, there was a sudden flourish of exchanges between the UK and the USA. Where British cultural studies found common ground at UC Santa Cruz and at the University of Illinois in Urbana Champagne, as a feminist historian Denise was invited to Brown University, as described by Joan Scott in her contribution to this volume.

Back then we had our children at a much younger age and so there were toddlers in tow while we went about our daily lives, holding down a couple of part-time teaching jobs, carving out time late at night to see the end in sight of our theses or dissertations, somehow finding the money for childcare, while also reliant on any number of informal arrangements. Many of us, myself included, were almost, in today's parlance, 'estranged' from our parents who lived many miles away: we had broken their rules, we had married outside the faith, had followed the wrong career route, we espoused left-wing radicalism as well as feminism, and this had consequences, being cut off from support and truly left to our own devices. Such circumstances as these could have broken us; maybe they did. But at least we had benefited from free university provision, and won small grants here and there on

completion of the various dissertations. We could pay the rent, and in my own case even managed to buy a small terrace house in Birmingham while still studying. The state might have been the subject of our various feminist critiques, but we were not faced with homelessness or destitution if we had periods without work or if a relationship broke down. Since we had only the foggiest of ideas of what an academic career might entail, we were, as I recall, mercifully free of the idea that we must aim for jobs only in the top universities. And given the interdisciplinary nature of what we were doing this was fortuitous since the kinds of jobs on offer were mostly in the then-expanding polytechnic sector or in the art schools. The good thing here was that these were local city institutions so it might be possible to have an academic job without having to uproot children and partner and move across the country, for a temporary post. There was precarity then, for sure, as there is indeed today, and there is no line of progress from past to present for the feminist academy. But neither is it a question of everything about today's neoliberal academy marking a newly intensified state of hardship and exploitation. In many respects, we were more inhibited; few of us then (as young feminists do today, mostly on social media) 'called out' appointment committees when we did not get onto the short list. There was no exposing of the endless streams of jobs going to the bright young, male and white 'talent'. These discontents did not surface in the wider public sphere such as the liberal press or the BBC as they do today on a regular basis. How many times did we almost get a job but, in the end, it went to the safe candidate who would be untrammelled by domestic responsibilities? The passage, then, of feminist scholarship through the doors of academia over the past decades has been slow, and for women of colour abysmally so, and for black women today this includes the art and design schools as well as the former polytechnics, such that we could say that what became possible for white women was shamefully never extended to our ethnic minority colleagues. And these endemic and sustained racist inequalities account for the current explosions of anger and frustration on the part of black and ethnic minority young women in the academy today, as well as for the recent de-colonising analytic of pedagogic critique (Bhopal, 2019, 2020).

Welfare imaginaries

Let me now pursue a line of thought running through the writing of Denise Riley, which is an idea of 'the social' re-imagined as a more generous and capacious space of hospitality open to irregular or 'unhusbanded' familial arrangements.¹ *War in the Nursery*, published in 1983, is a historical account of the social policies which came into play during and after WW2 in the UK to oversee issues arising from women's involvement in the war effort, particularly in the munitions factories, and the need to provide organised care for their children. But the book goes well beyond this remit, also examining the many expert bodies and organisations called upon by government to define what was needed to ensure the stability of family life after the disruption of the war. In showing how certain ideas of 'the

social' were stitched together as the outcome of vociferous interest groups and government agencies but lacking any feminist voice as such, Riley suggests that this could have been otherwise. By showing the busy work of departments of the state, as they set about, with the help of so many experts, especially psychologists and also psychoanalysts, establishing the place maternity was to occupy as a kind of ideological anchoring which would frame nuclear family life for years to come, Riley implies the fluidity and contingencies of these very designating powers. She also emphasises the breadth of thinking and the diverse opinions, as if to make the point that this was not a matter of simple collusion of these experts who were spread out across so many different organisations such as the Anna Freud Centre in London's Hampstead. By these means, post-war Britain comes to define itself, through this building up of 'the social' as a kind of monumental even triumphal achievement. Riley shows how this new 'society' was conceived of as quite separate from the field of the political. It was a feminised container-space for matters pertaining to not just maternity and family life, but also education, youth, health and welfare. The management of family life was planned so as to reproduce prevailing gender hierarchies. The fine-grained attention Riley pays to the language of social policy in the post-war years also sheds critical light on the development of sociology at the time. Instead of engaging with the discrepancies which Riley points to, for example the fact that from 1948 onwards there were in fact large numbers of married women working, and thus in need of well-funded nursery provision and after-school care, sociology traded in journalistic clichés about maternal deprivation and about how delinquency could be blamed on 'latch-key' kids. It thus served the cause that did indeed propel (white) working-class unskilled women in particular back in the direction of the home.

We can read Riley for sociological purposes and indeed for feminist cultural studies. Riley's early work on language and interpellation shared with Stuart Hall not just an intellectual trajectory which paid due attention to Althusser (indeed his topographical model for the ideological state apparatus finds some echo in Riley's early account of the family) but also a debt to Marx, which is scattered throughout her work. *War in the Nursery* fits firmly within the landscape of emergent Marxist-feminist concerns, without being afraid to point to the limitations of Communist Party approaches to women in the workforce in the post-war years. *War in the Nursery* can be seen as serving three functions at once – firstly, a hugely significant intervention which raises the question of motherhood and social reproduction at a point in time when the Marxist left was preoccupied with labour, the State and capitalism.² By bringing family life, reproduction and gender to the table, Riley unsettles bids on the part of the male left to marginalise these feminist issues. Riley stands out here for the vast range of historical source material she commands to develop her argument. And this leads to my second point, which is that the methodology which she adopts refutes the possibility of a linear narrative of socialist progress undertaken by a vanguard of the party bringing the workforce towards some more glorious future, which would of course entail subsuming any concerns with women and family until this moment was

reached, at which point gender equality would prevail. Riley's historiography bears traces of the influence of Foucault, for his critique of the concept of ideology in its Althusserian formulation as too directed, as if driven on by some mysterious force pushing from behind. She refers instead to Foucault's studies of 'discourses in their specificity' (Riley, 1983a: 13). Indeed, what she describes as a process of 'discursive spreading' in regard to Foucault's account of the vocabularies of psychiatry could as easily refer to the debates on maternity.³ The spreading process suggests a more dispersed and micrological theory of power, and it also provides some idea of spaces for intervention, a potential for change. We can see possible sites where feminist voices might have had a chance of being listened to. Despite misgivings about his theory of ideology, nevertheless Riley finds in Althusser's concept of interpellation an opportunity to analyse the hailing power of language. The third feature, then, of why *War in the Nursery* was so valuable for feminist sociology and cultural studies lies in Riley's account of how language called its subjects into being, in punitive ways. The language of the call, where one is required to recognise oneself within the terms set out by that linguistic action, for fear of harsh punishment, is indeed an injurious act of naming. Riley argues that through the 1950s, despite a sizeable presence in employment, nonetheless 'women who went out to work became shameful'. This shaming process echoed across various popular channels of the press and media, including the mass readership magazine the *Picture Post* where one journalist asked 'Is it really necessary in this Welfare State for women to go out to work or do they do it for the ice cream and the TV?' (Riley, 1983b: 137).⁴ Stuart Hall also wrote about the power of the *Picture Post*, and this comment quoted by Riley echoes Richard Hoggart's argument about the dangers that the new consumer culture of the 1950s posed to working-class culture (Hoggart, 1957; Hall, 1973). There is a disparaging presumption of female frailty, with women being particularly lured by these false consciousness-inducing products of the new consumer culture. On the one hand, shameful interpellations directed towards the figure of the mother are facilitated by long historical and religious traditions that cross the boundaries of social class and ethnicity; they roll off the tongue of our moral guardians with great ease. On the other hand, in this 'war effort' instance and its aftermath the need for female labour gave rise to conflicting ideas of women's role in society, fears perhaps of women retaining a taste for economic independence. The accusation of being a bad mother for going out to work so as to be able to enjoy the guilty pleasures of 1950s consumer culture punished women thrice over: first on moral grounds for preferring the feminine distractions conjured by mass culture to the duties of being a virtuous housewife; second on economic grounds by shaming those working-class mothers for whom paid employment put food on the table and paid the rent; and thirdly for political reasons which stifled the desire of those who yearned to earn a living and find personal reward in economic independence. The only chink of light here is that the charge of being a negligent mother, or one who prefers her own freedoms over the wellbeing of her children, becomes – is, to at least some

of its addressees, and possibly their daughters – an accusation so blatantly inattentive to material realities and also so baseless in its moral condemnation that, repeated over time, it has the capacity to trigger an angry political response in the form of a new feminist politics of family life. This would permit us to make a claim that it was the experienced and observed injustices of familial life which played a significant role in precipitating the feminist politics of the 1970s.

Inside and outside the state

Riley's historical work on the war nurseries must also be set alongside the wider feminist attention in the UK in the early 1980s to the field of social policy and to the welfare state. There was a high level of activity amongst young scholars at the time often traversing various academic disciplines as they attempted to make sense of questions of family and sexuality. Sociology flowed into and intersected with history; literary memoir and feminist autobiography overlapped with cultural studies and media studies. One volume to which Denise contributed comprised pieces which were largely autobiographical recollections by feminists about growing up in the welfare state. They describe attending the free but highly competitive grammar schools of the time, recalling the milk break mid-morning at school where everyone was required to polish off the whole bottle, often lukewarm because the crates had been deposited alongside the 'pipes', i.e. large old-fashioned radiators (Riley, 1985). This was Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, and not only did us girls benefit from these exceptionally academic schools where the entire year was being educated to gain a place at an ancient university, but we were also the recipients of any number of free health provisions including daily milk and orange juice. But if the milk and orange juice were part of the universalism aimed at improving the health of the nation's children, the selection process which underpinned the grammar school ethos was detrimental to the vast majority of children from working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds.

Feminist scholars such as Elizabeth Wilson and then later Gail Lewis pointed to the policing of families, especially working-class and ethnic minority mothers, carried out by the various state professionals in the fields of health, welfare and education (Wilson, 1977; Lewis, 1993). Gail Lewis's work over the decades has argued forcefully that the UK post-war welfare state was predicated on brutally enforced modes of racial exclusion. Caribbean migration to the UK was encouraged in response to labour shortages and reconstruction during the 1950s, but arrivals found themselves shunted into manual work irrespective of qualifications and, if female, concentrated in the lower echelons of domestic and care work. At home, black working-class women found themselves more harshly judged as mothers and subject to more intense scrutiny by various authorities, by teachers and social workers and also by the police (Lewis, 1993, 2004, 2017). More recently, Shilliam has extended this analysis. He makes the argument that the post-war

British welfare state (and with it the upskilling of the white male working-class population) which led to higher wages and a higher standard of living, and thus access to the new consumer culture of the 1950s, comprised a profound act of institutional and state-led discrimination. This left the recently arrived Windrush population to fend for themselves in the housing market while being forced into jobs with fewer rights and protections than those of their white counterparts (Shilliam, 2018).

There was always some margin of ambivalence on the part of feminist academics, since the welfare state did provide opportunities for female employment and for career pathways, especially in health and social work, and in youth and community work. In addition, the public sector by the 1980s was also an increasingly well-unionised employer, with the gains of anti-discrimination legislation on gender and race bringing about at least some improvements. (By the late 1990s, this was being reversed with the rise of the New Public Management and its attendant subcontracting of services to competitive tendering.) It is more difficult to chart the extent to which the underlying ethos of economic redistribution made women more well-disposed to this set of institutions. The benefits system was the key primary state apparatus for alleviating poverty, for making some provisions for times of unemployment. Feminist scholars might have been supportive of the welfare state for the reason that on an almost daily basis they themselves made great use of it; as mothers, they used its hospitals and clinics, childcare centres, libraries, schools and so on. The scale and capacity of this state apparatus has been at the heart of so many feminist debates over the years. There have, after all, been provisions instituted that permitted some freedoms; for example, family allowances and then later child benefit being paid direct to the mother. These were ways of guaranteeing money for food in families with an absent, unreliable or indeed alcoholic father. The NHS also provided young women with contraception from the late 1960s with no questions asked about marital prospects. Some decades later, there have been equally progressive policies in place, including IVF treatment available for single women and for lesbian couples, and likewise rights on the part of single people to adopt and foster children. Some accommodations have therefore been made to what were once seen as irregular family arrangements. The UK welfare state has been, since the late 1970s, a site for intense feminist activity, with some leading figures such as Ruth Lister pursuing, over a course of decades, a fierce defence of lone parents from low-income backgrounds who were pushed by one government after another to move into full-time work according to the ages of their children (Lister, 2004). Lister has been a key figure in winning some concessions in the implementation of workfare which would otherwise follow the US highly punitive model.

Riley's writing on the British welfare state recognises its contradictory status for feminists, as a large constellation of social institutions which almost from their inception took it upon themselves to draw up the parameters within which subjects designated as women, wives and mothers might be expected to live and bring up

their children. (Marriage guidance clinics were set up during this time.) It has been a force for instigating the idea of a separate sphere of domestic life predicated on a sexual division of labour, which for decades to come also destined women for a gender-segregated labour market and correspondingly life-long low wages and dependence on the male breadwinner – unless presumably middle class and highly educated and thus able to contemplate a family life ‘unhusbanded’. This same state apparatus has been charged by the Conservatives as being the very embodiment of socialism. In their various attempts to demolish the welfare state and its systems of social insurance, the Conservatives have argued that social protection leads to dependency and a passivity on the part of those sectors of the population who it is claimed come to see welfare as an entitlement or, as the tabloid press puts it, a matter of ‘handouts’. Predictably, this torrent of scapegoating undertaken by the tabloid press and dramatised in so many reality TV shows and directed towards so-called profligate and work-shy mothers ‘living off the state’ with their ‘feral children’ has played a key role in gaining popular consent for the evisceration of the entire system of support right down to payments for the disabled, including disabled lone mothers forced into workfare programmes. Even with the recently reignited feminist campaigning around these very issues, the demise of welfare marks out the terrain of almost unequivocal success for neoliberalism. Despite a few recent gestures by the Labour Party to reverse some aspects of the welfare reform already implemented by the Conservatives, any idea of return of a widely accepted re-distributionist ethos based around universal social insurance is hard to envisage; the idea of a generous welfare system is unimaginable. Who will speak up for lone mothers being deserving of more rather than less support when the very idea of support nowadays is almost entirely negative and what remains of it is buried deep within the field of gainful employment as in-work tax credits? Looking back at Riley’s account of Beveridge’s (albeit deeply paternalist) support for ‘holidays for exhausted housewives’, as well as his stated commitment to adult education and lifelong learning (which incidentally are exactly what low-income mothers in the UK at the moment desperately need and which under the conditions of the current labour market are made impossible), we can surmise that the UK welfare apparatus has remained a site of deep and ongoing ambivalence for feminists (Riley, 1992). In our current neoliberal times the very notion of the ‘social’ is imperilled, and as it is dismantled its cuts are frequently targeted at women and their families. The higher costs for childcare and after-school programmes, the closure of libraries and youth centres and the exorbitant cost of care for the elderly are punitive changes for all except those in dual-income comfortably off households.

A politics of/for the unhusbanded?

Riley shows how in the early post-war years working mothers were completely overlooked, barely meriting the status of a category of persons. It took several decades to reverse this situation, with Britain currently having the highest

percentage of mothers in the workforce of any of the advanced economies. Nowadays, it is increasingly normal to return to work after nine months of maternity leave. There have been vocal campaigns for better nursery and after-school provision, with grandparents drafted in to fill gaps in care. There have also been demands for flexible employment, and alongside this of course the battle for equal pay. From being shameful to be a mother in work, it has now become shameful to be an out-of-work mother. Even for well-off mothers at home, thanks to the high earning power of their partner, there is a sense in which this will be a temporary state since women's status nowadays depends on having a career. But these kinds of judgements about status emanate not directly from the ranks of the politicians or from policy-makers but instead are produced on a daily basis in the media and in popular culture, in genres that encompass reality TV shows, popular women's magazines, the tabloid press and of course the unregulated spaces of social media. It is here that the moral guardians ply their trade, mercilessly shaming mothers reliant on welfare, taking great pleasure in exposing that miniscule number of women who make false claims and are branded as 'benefit cheats' (in comparison to the large numbers who do not claim what they are entitled to), while at the opposite end of the social spectrum upper middle-class and typically white young mothers are the subject of so many glamorous lifestyle genres about 'having it all'. The moral guardians have never been so busy endorsing the right kind of motherhood while castigating those who cannot achieve this happy state (McRobbie, 2020).

I have flagged up words such as generous, hospitality and capacious in regard to both a new welfare settlement that might be imagined as a desirable outcome of an anti-capitalist movement and also a re-configured idea of family life and of maternity. In Riley's writing, there are low-key and oblique but longstanding gestures in both of these directions. There is also, as I hope to have shown, a sociological thread across the books and articles, indeed a feminist sociology of language. This alerts us to the power of vernacular (as in the tabloid press) and the dire political consequences which can accrue from the repetitive use of denigratory language aimed at, in our case, poor and multiply disadvantaged women, and used by the media and then by the offices of the state to lessen the likelihood of their being able to participate on equal terms in family life, in work and in community. There is nothing extravagantly hopeful in Riley's writing; indeed, it often seems that it is in being utterly undeluded about the lives we can lead that her distinctive voice is most enduring (Riley, 2004).⁵

Notes

1. The phrase runs: 'For where does it leave the single parent: the unhusbanded women who prefers that state, and all of those who whose lives do not happen to encompass potential sharers in the upbringing of their children?' (Riley, 1983b: 153).
2. See Mitchell (1971).

3. However, Riley does upbraid Foucault for his rendering of power as so generalised, and in the end she says his refutation of Marxist functionalism is unconvincing (Riley, 1983a: 14).
4. This is a quote from an article in the widely read *Picture Post* from 1956 by Venetia Murray, referred to in Riley (1992).
5. I am thinking here of her essay in *Impersonal Passion* titled 'The Right to Be Lonely'.

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