I would say that the small, affective, close-knit and substantial family that is characteristic of our society and that arose at the end of the eighteenth century was constituted on the basis of the caressing incest of looks and gestures around the child’s body. It is this incest, this epistemophilic incest of touch, gaze, and surveillance that was the basis of the modern family.

—Michel Foucault, Abnormal

In his work of the mid- to late 1970s, Michel Foucault analyzed various social phenomena: abnormality, sexuality, neoliberalism. He rendered these objects of inquiry problematic by, in part, giving detailed descriptions of various figures—the masturbator, the hysteric, the physiocrat—whose emergence was made possible within what Foucault called dispositifs or problematizations, i.e., complex intersections of various practices.

With respect to Foucauldian research concerning sexuality, the implications of Foucault’s recently-published lectures at the Collège de France have as of yet been only minimally explored. It is the aim of this chapter to contribute to this growing body of scholarship, particularly through articulating latent content in the material from this period. When this lecture material—especially Abnormal—is read alongside Foucault’s first volume of The History of Sexuality, a particular figure may be described as a key figure in the deployment of sexuality without being explicitly described as such. While she herself

---

1 This project was funded in part through a 2010-2011 Graduate Student Research Award from the Center for the Study of Women in Society at the University of Oregon. Additionally, I wish to thank the editors of this volume, Prof. Naomi Zack, Asst. Prof. Colin Koopman, and the members of the Critical Genealogies Collaboratory at the University of Oregon (http://uocge.blogspot.com/) for valuable feedback on earlier versions of this chapter.

2 The term “figure” is used following Andrew Dilts (2008). I take a “figure” to be an individual who is targeted as an object of disciplinary or biopolitical power.

3 “Dispositif” is often translated as “deployment,” but also as “apparatus.” I will use “deployment” in this chapter.
was only passively figured as relevant to the deployment of sexuality, she was essential to the emergence of sexuality as a form of *assujetissement*. This figure was the *mother* or, more specifically, the *modern* mother.

This essay redescribes Foucault’s genealogical analyses of this period for the purposes of taking the mother as a key figure in the deployment of sexuality, so as to begin to tell the Foucauldean story of the development4 of the modern mother. Foucault argues that the deployment of sexuality was intimately bound up with (and within) the family. However, when Foucault refers more generally to “the family,” we ought to take this as lacking its necessary specificity in terms of the way that the members of the family are individuated with respect to the deployment of sexuality. In an attempt to make Foucault’s own analysis more specific, I argue that, within the family, the mother can be described as a central figure, and maternal power a central mechanism, in the deployment of sexuality. While the mother is necessarily linked to the father within the sovereign realm of the family (Taylor, forthcoming), the mother ought to be regarded as having been quite distinctly individuated with respect to familial participation in the deployment of sexuality. In short, maternal practice underwent a significant transformation within this deployment, such that some of those practices that we now take to be part of being a “normal” mother can be traced back to this deployment.

Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this article to address the vast body of literature, both feminist and otherwise, on the mother and the family. Furthermore, I will not attempt to develop the genealogy of the mother beyond the primary indications that I develop out of Foucault’s more general observations on the family. Instead, I have the far humbler aim of making visible the “fragmentary genealogy” of the mother that is implicit in Foucault’s accounts of normalization and the deployment of sexuality. As such, I do precisely what Foucault advised against—scholarship on Foucault—for the sake of beginning the project that Foucault himself might approve of instead: a genealogy of the mother (Sawicki 1991, 15).

4 It is inappropriate to speak of the genealogical “emergence” of the mother, given that “the mother” pre-existent the deployment of sexuality, and thus only developed new characteristics with the deployment of sexuality; it might be most appropriate to speak instead of the “transformation” or “evolution” of the mother.
Before becoming absorbed in the details of this latent and fragmentary genealogy, however, it will be helpful to provide an overview regarding what I take the purpose and promise of a genealogical analysis to be. Here, I follow Colin Koopman in his description of genealogy as problematization, rather than subversion (2009). Rather than understanding genealogy of a way of subverting norms, genealogy as problematization uses “history to show the way in which certain practices have structured the core problematics which a given period of thought, most notably our own modernity, must face” (100). Put differently, a genealogical analysis employs historical material for the purposes of clarifying the problems that we face in our own time.

The historicization of the problem via genealogical analysis does two things for us. First, in detailing the emergence of some object of inquiry—sexuality, for example—we will develop an account of the ways in which certain practices simultaneously emerged or developed as part of a complex solution (or a complex of solutions) to the problem posed. For example, with respect to sexuality, we find that there is a tendency to think that conventional social norms are repressive. In other words, we take our sexuality to be a problem for which the solution is liberation. Yet Thomas Laqueur, in trying to point to exactly what is at issue in the modern obsession with sexuality, and especially masturbation, suggests that:

masturbation became . . . the particular form of sexuality in which the success or failure of moral self-government was most apparent—not through the work that the state did, or even what professionals with strong links to the state did, but through the work of civil society on its members. (2003, 276–7)

In other words, sexuality is problematic, and masturbation in particular, because it was through the disciplinary control of these practices that the individual’s relationship to civil society, that is, his or her liberty, was negotiated. Rather than civil society merely acting to repress one’s already pre-existing sexuality, it was in fact the rise of liberal civil society—and its demand upon its members that they be sufficient to govern themselves, that is, to maintain liberty—that was productive of some of the disciplinary practices which were then taken to be repressive and in need of liberation. With respect to the genealogical analysis as “problematization,” then, when
sexuality and its “corollary conceptions of what might count as a solution” are problematized, we find that precisely what is at issue in sexuality is our own freedom (Koopman 2009, 101).

Through genealogical inquiry into the problems that we face—for example, the need for the liberation of our sexuality—we are “able to open these problems up to more rigorous forms of critical scrutiny” (ibid.). As in the example above, thoughtful consideration of the problem sexual repression leads us into a far more complex problem space. Furthermore, in opening up this expanded, historicized, critical field for inquiry, we begin to recognize the contingency as opposed to the necessity of the “hybrid networks of problems and solutions” with which we are faced (ibid.). Sexuality, it turns out, is not something that merely pre-existed our demand for liberty in civil society. In fact, sexuality is one of those aspects of modern subjectivity in which the very means by which we are to define our freedom is produced alongside of restraints upon our freedom. The result of the problematization of sexuality, then, is not the “subversion” of the repressive hypothesis and, thus, the notion of freedom as liberation (ibid.), but is instead the further specification of that initial problem such that we become capable of reflecting upon the very conditions for the possibility of our demand for liberation. As such, that which we take to be repressive, e.g., the prohibition of masturbation, is shown to be a disciplinary practice that was also constitutive of our freedom in civil society.

This is not an account of genealogy, however, that is incompatible with the destabilization of problematic practices. On the contrary, this form of genealogical inquiry “brings into critical focus the problems which further critical work must attempt to develop solutions for.” In other words, genealogy as problematization is a process of inquiry in which a critical field is opened up for the sake of more adequately specifying the problems with which we are faced, as well as those places within the “hybrid networks of problems and solutions” which might hold out promise for targeted intervention (103).

It is in relation to this notion of genealogical inquiry that I hope to situate a fragmentary, Foucauldian narrative regarding the modern mother so as to draw out some pointers, some indications as
to how we might problematize the mother in our own time. In other words, a genealogical analysis that adequately problematizes the mother will indicate, as a matter of course, some of the specific points at which we might resist the domination or restraint that befalls mothers, while in turn recognizing the ways in which the modern mother developed as figure whose activity was integral to the development of freedom in civil society.

The Mother and the Abnormal Individual

Foucault goes so far as to say that it is the deployment of sexuality that gave rise to the close-knit, nuclear, middle-class family:

What is now being constituted is a sort of restricted, close-knit, substantial, compact, corporeal, and affective family core: the cell family in place of the relational family; the cell family with its corporeal, affective, and sexual space entirely saturated by direct parent-child relationships. In other words, I am not inclined to say that the child’s sexuality that is tracked down and prohibited is in some way the consequence of the formation of the nuclear family, let us say of the conjugal or parental family of the nineteenth century. Rather, I would say that this sexuality is one of the constitutive elements of this family. (2003, 248)

Here, we ought to hear echoes of Foucault’s critique of “the repressive hypothesis” in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. Foucault is arguing that, rather than pointing to the nuclear family as repressive of sexuality, we ought to see the increasing normalization of sexuality, i.e., the deployment of sexuality, as that which was (at least in part) constitutive of the transformation of the “relational” family into the nuclear family. In other words, we ought to take the normalization of sexuality as a process of the normalization of the family, as well. Yet, despite Foucault’s detailed attention to the family in the work of this era, he fails to draw any explicit distinction between paternal practice and maternal practice with respect to the deployment of sexuality. Given this failure, it falls to his successors to draw out the implications that are to be found in his accounts of familial responsibility in the normalization of childhood sexuality for a description of maternal practice and, thus, the development of the modern

---

5 For an account of the “fragmentary genealogy of the family” in the work of this period, see Lenoir and Duchinsky in this volume. For a similar account that is concerned with already-extant feminist Foucauldian work on the family, see Taylor (forthcoming).
mother. It is to this project that I now turn, by exploring and elaborating upon Foucault’s account of sexuality in *Abnormal* and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*.

In his course lectures of 1974 to 1975, Foucault analyzes the emergence of the “technology of human abnormality” which began in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and crystallized in the nineteenth century as a result of a “regular network of knowledge and power” being established that united three figures who came to be known as “abnormal” (61). The third of these figures was the “masturbator,” i.e., “the child masturbator,” a figure who emerged as a central impetus to a reorganization of the family in which the intimate concerns of the family “become the domain of investigation, the point of decision and site of intervention for psychiatry” (59, 146).

There are three chief features of the masturbator that marks him or her out as a specific target for the discipline of abnormality. First, the masturbator was that abnormal figure whose abnormality issued within the frame of reference of the body, and whose constant surveillance was necessary in order to prevent this abnormality (61). Second, the masturbator and thus masturbation are figured, of all the forms of abnormality, as “the possible root, even as the real root, of almost every possible evil” (59). Finally, the prohibition of masturbation, given that it was an abnormality that occurred within the narrow frame of the body and its immediate environs, demanded a form of intimacy between parents and children that was heretofore unexpected within the strict confines of the bourgeois family: “The parent’s body envelops the child’s and at this point the central objective of the maneuver or crusade is revealed: the constitution of a new family body” (248). Whereas the family was once a diffuse network of extended relations and household help, the parents are now invested with “absolute power over the child,” except to the extent that “the internal parental control that fathers and mothers are required to exercise is necessarily plugged in to an external medical control,” and due to which the family “must become an agency for transmitting medical knowledge” (249–251).

These features of the child masturbator have substantial implications for the development of modern maternal practice. First, the masturbator, in contrast to the “monster” and “the individual to be corrected,” possessed a frame of reference that immediately brings to mind the apparatus of disciplinary
power: “His frame of reference is . . . a much narrower space. It is the bedroom, the bed, the body; it is the parents . . . it is a kind of microcell around the individual and his body” (59). In other words, the family became the site for the constant surveillance of the young child, in which the “child’s body must be the object of their permanent attention,” and through which the child will learn to maintain control over his or her own autoeroticism (245). Foucault indeed draws a connection to disciplinary power as method employed for the purposes of achieving oversight of abnormality. This relationship is established when criminal individuals come to be regarded as possessed of a kind of illness:

The question of the illegal and the question of the abnormal, or of the criminal and the pathological, are now bound up with each other, not on the basis of a new ideology that may or may not arise from a State apparatus, but according to a technology defining the new rules of the economy of punitive power. (92)

In other words, with the pathologization of criminal behavior, methods for the punishment and oversight of criminals now become tools for managing other pathologies.

For the masturbator, then, the parents are the agents of oversight in the campaign against the evils of masturbation. In contrast to a form of family in which responsibility for a child’s care might have been dispersed among various family members and household help, the form of family that emerges as a result of the interdiction of masturbation is one in which surveillance is a parental imperative. For the mother, then, to the extent that her productive role within the family demanded her presence in and oversight of the private rather than the public sphere, it is reasonable to assume that the burden of the responsibility for the oversight of the child’s abnormal sexuality would have fallen to her. In other words, maternal practice is transformed to include the responsibility for disciplinary surveillance of children: the mother is invested with a familial form of disciplinary power.

---

6 While Foucault does not explicitly state that he takes the mother to be primarily invested with this responsibility for familial exercise of the “technology of human abnormality,” he does state in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* that it was the mother, rather than the father, who was required “to be a substantial and functional element” within “the family space” (1990, 104). He describes this process as the “hysterization of women’s bodies” (ibid.). I will say more about this later on.

7 There is more to be said about the differentiation between the mother and the father, though it is outside the scope of this essay.
This responsibility takes on considerable importance because masturbation was considered, while still a form of illness, an illness that might betoken the development of all manner of evil: “It is the secret all possess that never emerges into self-consciousness or universal discourse. . . . This secret . . . is posited in its quasi universality as the possible root, even as the real root, of almost every possible evil” (59). The prevention of masturbation—that amoral and infantile source of evil—thus demands from parents, and especially mothers, the utmost kind of vigilance. The child, who innocently engages in this abnormal and ill-fated behavior, cannot be held responsible: “it is the average and unhealthy household that is blamed more than the child. . . . The parents are ultimately guilty since these problems occur because they do not want to take direct responsibility for their children” (244). To the extent that the mother, whose oversight of the household is her primary vocation, is primarily responsible for caring for, attending to, and exercising the utmost vigilance in the prevention of the child’s masturbation, she is thus also guilty of allowing evil to flourish at its source if she avoids this responsibility. Because of this tendency of the mother to be the primary caregiver, I now begin to substitute “mother” for “parent,” in order to see how far we can go in redescribing Foucault’s genealogical analyses for the sake of making the development of the modern mother visible.

The caring, attentive, concerned, and vigilant mother, who is routinely valorized as the source of our earliest comfort and security, is here implicitly figured as having developed those characteristics for the sake of policing and staving off the earliest signs of malevolence in the development of each individual human being. Furthermore, the mother is now the subject of surveillance herself; she either effectively polices herself and provides adequate oversight of her child’s tendency to a wayward sexuality, or fails to do so effectively and thus becomes subject to

---

8 Foucault is not arguing that the control of masturbation is the cause of the woman’s increasing importance as the primary caregiver in the nuclear family, though he does appear to blame the “hysterization of women’s bodies” for this increase in responsibility (see below). However, it bears remembering that, given that Foucault’s object of analysis was not the family or the mother, the genealogy of the mother that is to be articulated out of Foucault’s work on abnormality and sexuality ought only to be considered fragmentary. For more on the development of the mother in this period, see, e.g., Badinter 1981, who argues that “mother love” became important because of an increasing appeal to “maternal instinct.” This implies a need for a critical engagement between Foucault and Badinter, which is outside the scope of this article.
blame by those agents of public health who must then intervene to ensure that the child’s masturbation is effectively curtailed.

The mother’s responsibility to discipline herself and her child for the sake of curtailing an abnormal sexuality thus demands a deeply embodied, affective form of maternal control:

There is the instruction for the direct, immediate, and constant application of the [mothers’] bodies to the bodies of their children. . . . There is extreme closeness, contact, almost mixing; the urgent folding of the [mothers’] bodies over their children’s bodies; the insistent obligation of the gaze, of presence, contiguity, and touch. . . . The [mother’s] body envelops the child’s. (248)

This form of maternal control necessitates a narrowing of the sphere of influence over the individual child. The mother’s responsibility for and intimate enforcement of the prohibition of masturbation demands a “new organization, a new physics of the family space,” which entails “the elimination of all intermediaries and the suppression, if possible, of domestics, or at least a very close supervision of domestics, the ideal situation being the infant alone in a sexually aseptic family space” (244–5). In her vigilant struggle against the potential evil of childhood masturbation, the mother must divest herself of a substantial support network in her broader household responsibilities. She does so for the sake of ensuring that her children are not daily exposed to anyone who is not equally committed to this project or, even worse, would encourage the child’s precocious sexuality.

Furthermore, this new family space, in its “little cultural involution of the family around the [mother]-child relationship,” leads to the investment of this space with an affective and physical potency that demands a shift in familial intimacy away from its extended members (including household help) and toward a primacy of the affective bond between mother and child. Proper nurturance and the bodily intimacy that this requires now becomes the sole responsibility of the “parents.” However, once again, to the extent that the management of the household is the mother’s primary vocation, it is implied that the mother will become the chief bearer of the responsibility for this intensive, bodily, and exclusive relation to the child.

Following this line of reasoning, Foucault is led to conclude that “the child’s nonrelational, autoerotic sexuality . . . was one of the factors in the constitution of the close-knit and interdependent
family, of a physical and affective family. . . .” (249). On this analysis, much of what is taken to be natural to expect from the mother—sensitivity to her child’s physical and psychological well-being, physical affection, vigilance with regard to the child’s moral development, and so on—at least in part⁹ owes its emergence as a novel necessity to a time when prohibition of the child’s masturbation became a matter of significant public concern. Furthermore, the mother’s isolation in the home, with minimal reliance upon household help and limited influence by extended family, ought to be at least partially attributed to this emergent importance of control over the child’s sexuality, a control which was to be directly exercised by and thus became the primary responsibility of his or her most immediate family members, that is, the parents and, more specifically, the mother.

**The Mother and the Deployment of Sexuality**

We may further extend this description of the development of the modern mother via Foucault’s account of the family’s deep imbrication with the deployment of sexuality in his first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. The family is described as the privileged site of the “interchange of sexuality and alliance: it conveys the law and the juridical dimensions in the deployment of sexuality; and it conveys the economy of pleasure and the intensity of sensations in the regime of alliance” (108). The family’s historical importance as the source of sexual alliance (through birth and by blood)¹⁰ comes to be entangled with the deployment of sexuality. The historic sense of sex (reproduction) becomes newly invested as the site of the origin of sexuality. Here, the family’s apparent centrality to the emergence of sexuality renders the family as . . .

. . . the crystal in the deployment of sexuality: it seemed to be the source of a sexuality which it only reflected and diffracted. By virtue of its permeability, and through that process of reflections to the outside, it became one of the most valuable tactical components of that deployment. (111)

---

⁹ Again, for more on the development of the modern mother, see Badinter 1981.

¹⁰ See Taylor, forthcoming: “the kinds of bonds in which the family is entangled, involving property as well as personal and collective commitments, are in many ways closer to the conflictual and heterogenous bonds of sovereignty than to discipline. Family bonds are in fact familial: they are intimate, they involve blood and birth and shared histories, which means that they are not reducible to the anonymous and interchangeable mechanisms of a disciplinary apparatus, however infiltrated by these they may be.”
In other words, the family becomes an ideal locus for the deployment of disciplinary power with respect to sexuality. As such, we might expect Foucault to remark upon the ways in which individual members of the family are disciplined or serve as the disciplinary agents in the deployment of sexuality.

In fact, it is here that Foucault explicitly speaks with respect to the subject formation of the mother. It is in the newly-constituted and thoroughly sexualized nuclear family where the mother becomes fully invested by her own form of sexuality as a result of the medicalization and subsequent “hysterization of women’s bodies,” bodies which were analyzed “as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality. . . .” (104). While Foucault states that all women are affected by this process, he also claims that it is the mother, “with her negative image as ‘nervous woman,’ [who] constituted the most visible form of this hysterization” (ibid.), and this sexualization of the mother came with at least two normative constraints on her behavior. The first was within family space, in which “[her body] has to be a substantial and functional element. . . .” The second was in the life of children, who “[her body] produced and had to guarantee, by virtue of a biologico-moral responsibility lasting through the entire period of the children’s education. . . .” (ibid.). Maternal sexuality demanded that the mother’s body is a primary target of sexuality within the family, taking on particular functions relevant to sexuality. One of the most important aspects of this was that, due to the biological and moral imperatives of motherhood, the mother must work to ensure that her children grow to become healthy, responsible adult members of society.

Furthermore, based upon other aspects of Foucault’s genealogy of sexuality, there are two more significant features of the modern mother, both of which indicate that the modern mother serves as a norm that only serves to represent a portion of the social reality pertaining to the ways in which mothers have enacted their relationships to their children. In other words, the modern mother is a norm to measure other mothers against. Firstly, she is middle-class. Foucault makes the point that it was, in particular, the “idle woman” of the middle-class family who was “assigned a new destiny charged with conjugal and parental

---

11 One might assume that “maternal instinct,” which figures largely in Badinter’s study (1981), is the “biologico-moral responsibility” to which Foucault refers.
obligations” (121). This implies that motherhood was differentially developed across class lines, and that the particular norm that was developed for the ideal mother was also essentially “racist” along class lines:

The works, published in great numbers at the end of the eighteenth century, on body hygiene, the art of longevity, ways of having healthy children and of keeping them alive as long as possible, and methods for improving the human lineage, bear witness to the fact: they thus attest to the correlation of this concern with the body and sex to a type of “racism” . . . a dynamic racism, a racism of expansion . . . (125)

Here, Foucault refers to the “racism” of the middle-class, and this form of middle-class dominance thus extends to the mother as well. Mothering, as it developed into its contemporary form, has always been deeply implicated with class differentiation, racial differentiation, and so on.12

Secondly, this mother cannot be easily replaced. By virtue of the bonds that inhere in familial relations by virtue of the deployment of alliance, which are only strengthened by the class dominance that is established through the middle-class family, the modern mother is one whose children belong to her by birth. It is for them that she will perform all those “backward-looking rituals, such as birthdays,” that solidify those family bonds (Taylor, forthcoming). It is through this bond that the mother's irreplaceability is established at birth, and it is through her subsequent enactment of the duties of motherhood that her irreplaceability is reiterated in the daily life of the family. While in a certain sense the importance of the family as a whole can be described as being put into question through disciplinarization of the family, as is argued by Lenoir and Duchinsky in this volume, it could be said that the bond between mother and child is only strengthened. As the mother enacts the requirements placed upon her through the disciplinarization of her blood-relation to her children—her more substantial and functional place within the family, her biologico-moral responsibility to her children (Foucault 1990, 104)—the necessity of her care for her own children becomes more deeply entrenched.

---

12 For more on the deeply racialized nature of the development of the family in recent history, see Feder 2007a, Feder 2007b, and McWhorter
While it is only once that Foucault takes the emergence of sexuality as his analytical target that he specifically addresses the conditions of the subject formation of the mother, it is only by simultaneously taking into view his analysis of both abnormality and sexuality that we can fully draw out the implicit description of the development of the modern mother. We have, finally, made visible the characteristics of this figure who is transformed from her position within the “network family” into her modern form as the locus of responsibility with respect to all matters pertaining to child development: she is the primary agent of disciplinary power within the familial milieu; she is responsible for the direct oversight of children; she is primarily to blame when children go awry; she exercises her authority over her children by deeply embodied and affective means; she must defer her authority and expose her own behavior to evaluation by experts; she must entrust her children to these same experts if her children do not respond to familial discipline; she is primarily responsible for the successful education and moral development of her children, such that they become productive members of society; she is the agent of the perpetuation of her own “race”; and she cannot be easily replaced. As such, as the central figure in the familial milieu with respect to the deployment of sexuality, the mother is individuated in unprecedented ways in modernity: she develops a relation to civil society that renders her publicly visible as never before, and she is invested with a power over her children\textsuperscript{13} that is not equally wielded by the father.

**Conclusion: Some Notes toward a Genealogy of the Mother**

Having now articulated a Foucauldean account of the modern mother, I now turn toward the consideration of some of the many implications that can be drawn from this account for the sake of generating a genealogy of the mother. Rather than begin with some aspect of the description of the modern mother as given above, I will consider only one example in which the mother is taken to be problematic today, drawn from the very small body of literature on Foucault and the mother. In so doing, I demonstrate how the above description already indicates that we are some distance on our way to a genealogy of the mother.

\textsuperscript{13} See the conclusion for consideration of the “empowering” role of the mother in her relationship with her children.
Jon Simons’ essay, “Foucault’s mother,” is notable for both providing a maternally-oriented, feminist critique of the androcentrism of Foucault’s thought and, at the same time, utilizing a Foucauldian orientation to suggest the means by which the domination of mothers might be addressed in our own time. Simons was right to claim that it is “regrettable” that Foucault’s project did not more explicitly address the conditions of the mother in the deployment of sexuality because, as he points out, “some feminist theories have developed a notion of power that could supplement or refine the notion of empowering subjectification that is needed for Foucault’s affirmative project” (1996, 187). Indeed, Foucault’s affirmative project relies deeply on the notion of self-creation for the sake of an ethical transformation of those aspects of our subjectivity that are effects of dominance. Foucault is thus led to privilege the friend, or the homosexual way of life, as the relational means by which we might achieve the most freedom with respect to practices of domination (Foucault, 1981). Simons points out that this move is unnecessary if we take a feminist notion of empowerment, which has been most significantly developed within the care ethics tradition, as a non-dominating power relation: “Women as caretakers, like teachers, occupy subject positions in which they exercise the power available to them over others for the benefit of those others, empowering them and enhancing their subjective capacities” (187).

Once again, Simons is right to remark that it is regrettable that Foucault did not pay more explicit attention to the power relations that mothers occupy with respect to their children. This is all the more regrettable given that, as noted in the introduction to this chapter, our freedom is at stake in the development of our ability to moderate our own sexuality. To the extent that the mother is involved in empowering her children to moderate their own sexuality (among other things), she ought also to be considered responsible for empowering her individual children to enjoy their rights as free citizens within a civil society.

However, given the analysis of the modern mother that becomes available to us when once processes of the normalization and sexualization of the subject are taken into consideration, the empowering role that mothers play in the lives of their children is not without need for criticism. To abstract the mother’s context away from the power relation that she holds with respect to her children is to
allow for the possibility that the mother will simply empower her children to take up their own subjugation in society. Indeed, this is what is implied in Foucault’s analyses: the mother, in her affective and largely total responsibility for the child’s development, is the primary agent in the daily installation of norms in the formation of her child’s early subjective development. To the extent that these norms are dominating or inegalitarian—racist, for example—the mother’s exercise of her authority over her children results in the reproduction of injustice.

The mother’s caring and empowering relation to her child only becomes laudable within a social context in which non-dominance and equality are already normatively embedded or, alternatively, when the mother herself takes her position of authority over her children as an opportunity to resist unjust societal norms. The first possibility indicates that the achievement of social justice will require the critical analysis of parenting practices that reinforce unjust norms. The second possibility is one that has already received much attention from theorists and activists, as well as ordinary people, who privilege the mothering relation as one in which social transformation must begin. This is, given the enormous influence that mothers have over their children’s development, a necessary strategy. However, too much emphasis on the transformative potential of the mother-child relation has the unfortunate side effect of privatizing social transformation, leaving the mother’s vulnerable position within the family and social milieu unanalyzed. It is in this way that an overwhelmingly unqualified affirmation of the mother, as is characteristic of Simons’ essay, does not lend itself to a sufficiently nuanced account of the potential for societal transformation that lies in an analysis of the mother.

Indeed, it is this valorization of the empowering nature of the mother-child relation that must explain the overwhelmingly conservative nature of Simons’ later attempt to suggest the ways in which we might begin address the inequality that mothers continue to face in a society where their primary role in the child’s development is left unreconstructed. Simons seems to get off to good start, when considering the feminist ameliorative strategies that avail themselves to mothers: “In general, the [Foucauldian] option for those who struggle against their subjection is to use the capacities and resources available in their particular subject position” (196). Rather than outright rejection of norms governing the subject
position of the mother in society, which would “[disempower] many women,” Simons suggests that there is a Foucauldian/Butlerian alternative that will lead to lesser inequality for mothers (201). This does indeed sound promising.

Yet, once Simons gets into his description of “subversive mothering as a feminst strategy,” he goes so far to say that “(s)ubversive motherhood should aim, as far as possible, to focus on actions in which children are not directly involved” (201). This is because “the notion that each child should be reared in a stable domestic environment in which his or her development is optimized, is deeply embedded and would thus be difficult to displace by head-on assault” (201). Simons is right to point out that the “scope of playfulness” isn’t particularly broad (201). Nevertheless, given the above analysis of the mother that can be developed alongside Foucault’s analyses of the deployment of normalization and sexuality, it strikes me that it is precisely the mother-child relation that must be met head-on, if not “debunked” or “subverted,” if we are to effectively address the barriers to equality that mothers face as a result of their enactment of modern maternal practice.

The benefit to a genealogical analysis is that it denaturalizes and problematizes the mother-child relation, indicating that the characteristics of the mother that have come to be the norm are contingent and are embedded in a complex network of practices that produce both egalitarian and inequalitarian effects. Thus, Simons unnecessarily forecloses the possibility of the transformative potential that exists in questioning the mother-child relation and thereby pointing out the ways in which mothering is both empowering and disempowering, for both the mother and the child. In so doing, Simons is led to offer the rather conservative suggestion that social equals might undertake a subversive practice of mothering their peers, which he notes is analogous to Foucault’s emphasis on an ethic of friendship, as a primary means to unseating the intrusiveness of maternal subjugation (204). It is possible, of course, that the maternalization of friendship may be one of the many ways by which we may lessen the inequalitarian effects of maternal practice. However, given that the vast majority of women do become mothers at some point in their lives, and that the mother-child relation is precisely the point at which maternal subjectivity,
and subjugation, is constituted, then the suggestion that those who are not mothers are those best suited to transform the position of the modern mother seems off-target.

Certainly, the adoption of maternal practice into the everyday lives of peer relations would undoubtedly mean that peer relations would benefit by it, as Simons suggests: “Friends who perform mothering subversively can constantly individualize each other without a totality of power developing” (205). Wonderful. We should do this, too. However, we live at a time when middle-class mothers, for example, feel themselves compelled to adopt “natural” mothering practices as a means of resisting the barrenness of a life lived in the “rat race,” where the rejection of feminism, the imperative to breastfeed, the benefits of homeschooling, the maintenance of an extraordinarily demanding schedule of enrichment activities for one’s children, and the “choice” to leave one’s comfortably middle-class profession after giving birth have become common topics of concern for the most socially advantaged mothers. A comparison of these facts against the fragmentary genealogy of the modern mother elaborated out of Foucault’s works would suggest that today’s middle-class mothers (especially those with careers) continue to find themselves compelled to maintain the norms expected of good mothers, even after “women’s liberation” movements. And rightly so: it is through good mothering in their earliest years that the next generation will achieve their fullest potential, that is, their full freedom as members of civil society. In other words, “women’s liberation” did not account for the ways in which middle-class mothers experience themselves as achieving freedom in their work as conventional, middle-class mothers. In other words, middle-class mothers take themselves to be doing meaningful work when they nurture their children, and they are. In fact, they could rightly take themselves to be performing a service for civil society in their work as mothers. Nevertheless, middle-class mothering stands in need of criticism. For instance, the rate of poverty of divorced mothers suggests that middle-class mothers put themselves at risk when they decide to take up a position of financial dependency in order to mother their young children.

Contemporary middle-class mothering needs to be scrutinized for the ways in which it perpetuates other

---

14 See, for example, “The Opt-Out Revolution” in the October 26, 2003 edition of The New York Times Magazine. There is a substantial literature that critically engages this article. Nevertheless, the women interviewed for the article report that they left their middle-class professional careers for the sake of full-time mothering.
inegalitarian norms, such as racism. Middle-class mothering needs to be analyzed regarding the extent to which biopolitical power is exercised through disciplinary means in maternal practice: it may be the case that some discipline is constitutive of freedom in civil society, but how much? What, for example, is the best way to negotiate medical oversight of one’s own child? There are numerous questions that arise when considering the experience of middle-class mothers against even a partial genealogy of the modern mother.

And this represents only a small portion of the experience of mothers in our contemporary situation. As such, the suggestion that the disruption of the inegalitarian aspects of modern maternity should neither question nor disrupt norms surrounding the mother-child relationship seems unjustifiable. This is not to say, of course, that mothering and mother-child relationships are deeply suspect and thoroughly unjust. Rather, this indicates that a Foucauldian genealogy of the mother promises to deliver nuanced ethical and political implications.

It is, in fact, a thorough genealogy of the mother that is most necessary, as a fragmentary genealogy indicates that there are many more aspects of the development of the mother that have yet to be articulated. For example, how might we incorporate work like Elisabeth Badinter’s into a genealogical account of the mother? How might we describe the ways in which norms surrounding the middle-class mother are at work in contemporary work-life policies? How are these policies differentially articulated across class lines? How do norms for the mother govern our policies regarding impoverished mothers? What is the role of racism in contemporary mothering practice? How are our children disempowered by contemporary mothering practice? How important is biological sex to the performance of mothering? How intractable is the familial bond with respect to mothering practices? How is caregiving linked to the mother (or not) across class lines, and race lines, and so on?

A thorough genealogical account of the mother will be one that denaturalizes the mother-child relationship and suggests alternatives for “optimizing” the child’s development while diminishing the inegalitarian effects that mothering has on the development of individual mothers. We must utilize all of the resources available to us—research on early child development and childcare best practices,
descriptions of maternal practice at a wide diversity of social positions, sociological studies on the unjust workload of mothers, research that offers ameliorative strategies for work-family conflict, and so on—in order to fill out the analysis of the mother that is made visible by unearthing latent content in Foucault’s work on the deployment of normalization and sexuality. The genealogy of the modern mother still has yet to become a coherent and effective means for reconstructing the unjust conditions under which mothers must live out their lives today.
References


