

# A mother's thought

Sara Ruddick, 1935–2011

**I** speak about a mother's thought' wrote the feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick, who has died in New York at the age of 76. Along with Adrienne Rich, Ruddick was probably the most important philosophical thinker to address the issue of mothering and motherhood since second-wave feminism, and, in a similar spirit to that of Grace Paley, to extend her analysis of mothering under patriarchy to the development of the values necessary to oppose militarism and war. Professor of philosophy and women's studies for nearly forty years at the New School for Social Research, her major contribution to both involved a radical rereading of reproductive labour through the development of a notion of 'maternal thinking' that has fostered a wealth of feminist and maternal scholarship and critique, including valuable debates about the universalism and ethnocentrism that some have argued underpins her own work.

In her early paper 'Maternal Thinking' (1980) and her seminal work *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (1989), Ruddick was concerned to provide an alternative interpretative frame to reproductive labour by dwelling on the intellectual capacities a mother develops, 'the judgments she makes, the metaphysical attitudes she assumes, the values she affirms'. It is possible to read this shift in emphasis from labour to thinking as a response to the earlier devaluing of maternity in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, in which reproductive labour remains immanent, and the mundane and monotonous labour (as opposed to productive 'work') of turning infants into human beings is characterized as meaningless biology. Ruddick's intervention was therefore to transform an earlier feminist rendition of motherhood and domestic labour understood as non-productive and unable to accrue value. By articulating the values themselves that are necessary for maternal practice to develop, she revalues maternity without recourse



to biology, essentialism or romanticism. For Ruddick, maternity is not simply labour, but a discipline. Drawing on Habermas to situate thinking as a collective practice that develops in response to certain demands, a practice that is shaped by interests in preserving, reproducing, directing and understanding individual and group life, Ruddick homes in on the specific demands, and therefore the specific social practices, that give rise to maternal thinking.

For Ruddick, maternal practice involves a response to the tripartite demands of the 'child' to preserve their life; to foster their growth; and to instil processes that allow a child to become acceptable within a community. The unity of reflection, judgement and emotion that arises in relation to these demands is what she calls 'maternal thinking'. Although the kinds of skills necessary for maternal thinking may include certain psychological processes and attributes, maternity is only ever a social practice, one that can be performed by men and women alike, and with a range of 'others' that may or may not be our biological children. However, due to ongoing conditions of patriarchy that skew women's relation to power and powerlessness, the development of maternal thinking in women remains particularly nuanced. Ruddick locates her own work as part of an ongoing shared feminist project to construct an image of maternal power that is 'benign, accurate, sturdy and sane', as an attempt to stop the task from being misdescribed, sentimentalized and devalued.

Ruddick famously described a child as 'an open structure' whose acts are irregular, unpredictable and often mysterious. Because the demands of a child are mostly contradictory, and always on the move, and because mothers have a relation to maternal practice that they mostly fall short of, Ruddick had additionally to develop an account of the dynamic and relational components of maternal thinking. To do this she turned, in a wonderfully eclectic way, from Habermas to Simone Weil. Ruddick draws out an account of the capacity for resilient good humour and humility, derived from Weil's notion of attentive love. Here Ruddick is most in danger of the kind of sentimentalization of motherhood from which she was at great pains to distance herself, going to lengths to distinguish attention and love from the self-effacement and cheery denial which are their degenerate forms.

Ann Snitow (1992) argued that Ruddick instigated a third wave of feminist engagements with the maternal, the first being the 'demon texts' of the 1960s and early 1970s – such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) – and the second being the flowering of feminist maternal scholarship in the mid-1970s that included the seminal work of Rich, Dinnerstein, O'Brien, Lazarre and Chodorow, as well as that of Kristeva and Irigaray. An integral part of this third wave has involved the feminist essentialism debates of the 1990s in which Ruddick's work was explicitly identified as harbouring an ethnocentrism, and a universalizing tendency that ignored the situated 'thinking' that arises out of located social practices that develop in relation to classed experiences, the experiences of maternal and child disability and histories of enslavement, colonization and racism. Ruddick attempted to respond to these critiques in the 1995 edition of *Maternal Thinking*, but how successfully she was able to enter fully into an interactive engagement with them remains an open question. However, this did open the way to what we might describe as a fourth wave of maternal scholarship that attempts that interactive engagement through interdisciplinary dialogue with the legacy of Ruddick's work and the complexity of situated and diverse maternal experiences.

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