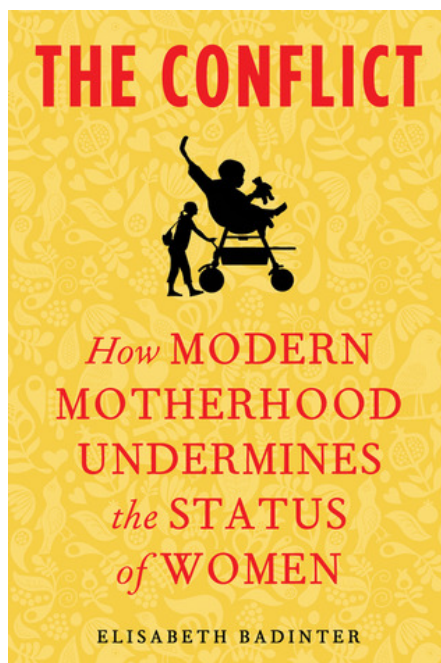




The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women

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In the pathbreaking tradition of *Backlash* and *The Time Bind*, *The Conflict*, a #1 European bestseller, identifies a surprising setback to women's freedom: progressive modern motherhood

Elisabeth Badinter has for decades been in the vanguard of the European fight for women's equality. Now, in an explosive new book, she points her finger at a most unlikely force undermining the status of women: liberal motherhood, in thrall to all that is "natural." Attachment parenting, co-sleeping, baby-wearing, and especially breast-feeding—these hallmarks of contemporary motherhood have succeeded in tethering women to the home and family to an extent not seen since the 1950s. Badinter argues that the taboos now surrounding epidurals, formula, disposable diapers, cribs—and anything that distracts a mother's attention from her offspring—have turned childrearing into a singularly regressive force.

In sharp, engaging prose, Badinter names a reactionary shift that is intensely felt but has not been clearly articulated until now, a shift that America has pioneered. She reserves special ire for the orthodoxy of the La Leche League—an offshoot of conservative Evangelicalism—showing how on-demand breastfeeding, with all its limitations, curtails women's choices. Moreover, the pressure to provide children with 24/7 availability and empathy has produced a generation of overwhelmed and guilt-laden mothers—one cause of the West's alarming decline in birthrate.

A bestseller in Europe, *The Conflict* is a scathing indictment of a stealthy zealotry that cheats women of their full potential.

The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women Details

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Luisa Fer says

Before reading this book, I had read an interview in a Quebec newspaper where Elisabeth Badinter outlined the book's main ideas. I found her incredibly lucid and courageous.

It is true that we live in a child-centric society, how we got here is to some extent explained in *Le Conflit*. The feminist waves had a peak and then they crashed. She argues that right now, the new generation of women are caught between the environmentalist movements, the anger at their own mothers who fought to achieve equality "at the expense" of not being full time with their kids and the politics of several international organizations that seem to define who is a good mother and who is a bad mother, dictaminated by whether the woman breastfeeds, uses disposable diapers and spends at the very least a year at home tending to their children full time. She describes it in two chapters: L'enfant d'abord (the child first) and l'imperium du bébé (the baby's empire).

She talks about all aspects of motherhood and how these provoke great conflicts in women; breastfeeding is one of them. She examines how the act of breastfeeding has become a nearly dictatorial issue by demanding women in western countries to "breastfeed upon demand and as long as the baby wants". She describes the policts behind La Leche League and lists the 10 breastfeeding commmandments including "You will not quit [breastfeeding:]" and Badinter adds a comment "Not in two days, nor in two weeks, nor in two months. If your breasts hurt, find help before your breasts begin to bleed".

Maternal instinct, the desire of NOT having children, the stigma against childfree or childless couples, the neverending and always valid female aspirations, the high statistics that show that couples separate before the child turns three, the constraints set by the environmentalists, doctors and nurses that listen to international organizations but do not listen to the individual woman and her individual needs, all these are issues described and supported with an impressive bibliography by Badinter.

It is no mystery as to why Elisabeth Badinter has been demonized, ridiculed and discredited. Women who abide by the rules do so in a firm belief that they are doing what is best for their babies but forgetting themselves. It must be painful to have their loving intentions questioned like this.

They have read the reviews but have not read the actual book, and so they call Badinter an old feminist hag. In fact, she is not discrediting any of it, what she is doing is to raise awareness about the emprisonment of women in these, in my opinion, insane corsets that are pulled tighter and tighter. She argues that a woman does not need to feel guilty over her decisions and she should not be made to feel guilty by external "experts".

I believe that what she is actually saying is: if you want to breastfeed you should, but if you don't want to then that's ok too. If you want to use disposable diapers because it makes life easier for you it's ok, if you want to use washables, fine. If you want to stay home and you are sure of that, then go ahead, but if you will be happier at work, leaving you child in childcare is also fine. What she's saying is that enough with the guilt. It is the XXI century after all, for better or for worse, but if women don't thread carefully, they will entrap themselves (or maybe they already have) in a corner where no matter what they do, it will never be good enough.

Ay?enur says

Kad?nl?k ve annelik kavram?na farkl? bir pencereden bak??. Toplumlar, h?k?metler, ?rg?tler ve en ?nemlisi kad?nlar?n anneli?e bak??. Nerde hata var, kim der ki ?ocuksu?lu?u se?mi? kad?n eksiktir diye? Erkek egemen yap? d?zeltilemeden neden ?st?ne bir de ?ocuk egemen yap?n?n alt?nda ezilsin kad?n soyu? ?ocukla ilgili b?t?n sorumluluk anneye y?klendi?i s?rece kad?n erkek e?itli?inden s?z edilemeyecektir.

Pavol Hardos says

Ve?mi d?le?it? (hoci miestami mo?no pr?l?š povrchn?) anal?za fenom?nu modern?ho materstva, ktor? svojimi totalizuj?cimi po?iadavkami podkop?va ?a?ko-vydobit? pr?va ?ien. D?le?it? pr?spevok do debaty o rodi?ovstve, o spolo?ensk?ch a kult?rn?ch o?ak?vaniach toho, ?o znamen? by? "dobr? matka", guilt-trippingu s t?m spojen?ho a ak? regres?vne m??u by? d?sledky takejto ideol?gie. Aj na Slovensku, kde sa to hem?i biomatkami, predpismi o kojen? do maturity, diskurzom o 'obeti' de?om, a kde sa v?seobecne g?y?e o rodine hojne vy?u?ivaj? ako n?stroj politick?ho boja, n?m tak?to knihy treba (v preklade) ako so?.

Stephanie says

Thought provoking ideas about modern feminism, exhaustively researched and presented in 113 pages. I'd love to be able to point my friends, dates, and coworkers (I'm talking to you, Mr. "Women Get Stupid After They Have A Child") toward this book for a better understanding of the economic and social realities a woman faces as she attempts to hammer out her identity as a woman and a mother. Unfortunately, the book's lackluster translating and editing takes much of the thunder out of the rhetoric-- frequent French idioms and too-literal translations are a distraction, and worse, Ms. Badinter's deadpan irony often reads as literal. As a result, there are important stretches of this book that might be completely misunderstood if the reader didn't already have a good idea of where Ms. Badinter was going. If you are in any way worried about the social confines of motherhood, of losing your job or identity to parenthood, of "being a slave to the child at your breast", this book will resonate. Otherwise, the rhetoric might easily miss its mark.

Andrew says

A One-Minute Review

Elisabeth Badinter's *The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women* will delight and annoy all points of the political spectrum. This usually indicates a great book. From page one, Badinter launches a reasoned, but powerful, feminist critique at the worrying results of the cult of all-encompassing motherhood. She describes a society pushing mothers to be mothers. Mothers aren't mothers and workers, mothers and women, or even mothers and lovers. Mothers are mothers, and those who step out from this identity immediately encounter guilt-laden social judgment. At the heart of this pressure is the re-invention of "traditional" motherhood underscored by naturalism – no epidural, no formula, and definitely no daycare. "No way," says Badinter. Such motherhood excludes fathers, breaks up families, and pressures women to forego careers, social life, and equality, she argues. Badinter isn't against women choosing 24/7 motherhood, but she is alarmed at the social pressure that presents this as the only acceptable choice. Society may judge

childless women selfish, but it's even harsher on guilt-ridden working moms. Choice emerges as Badinter's rallying cry, and she sees its absence, particularly in North America, undermining women's equality. Arguing for choice, freedom, and also responsibility, The Conflict grasps a social third rail – wait for the sparks to fly.

Kathleen says

I had heard how awful this book is, but I figured that it couldn't be so shrill and reactionary as people claimed. I wanted to read it, both as a feminist and as someone considering having kids.

Holy god, this book is awful. Seriously. Before I get into how awful this book is, there's one good point that Badinter makes that I want to acknowledge. Women who don't have children are looked at as selfish or narcissistic or otherwise dysfunctional in some way for not having children. However, many if not most childfree women spend a good deal of time thinking about their choice and attempting to make a responsible decision. So, what's looked at as an immoral or abnormal decision is most likely actually a quite thoughtful and considerate decision. Fair enough. That's a good point.

But the rest of this book? What a bunch of shrill, 1960s-1970s reactionary feminist bullshit. Seriously.

Badinter seems to think that women will achieve the feminist "goal" when they are equally engaged in making money and pursuing career status as men. Equality or justice for women is about achieving parity with men in a capitalist order. Children stand in the way of that "goal" to the extent that they remove women from the labor market.

For Badinter, women who started having kids in the 1990s and later are nothing more than the ungrateful children of those 1960s and 1970s feminists like herself. People of her generation struggled for their freedom and how dare those younger women not want to succeed in the way their mothers chose for them?! How dare these younger women not value status in the work place over other forms of life?!

If her implicit endorsement of capitalism and all the hierarchy that comes along with it weren't bad enough, she also seethes with disdain for nature. Her language choices drip with sarcasm and condemnation when discussing the fact that many women are divesting themselves from medical systems that treat pregnancy as a disease rather than a natural occurrence. This devaluation of nature, the implicit endorsement of the idea that we are more advanced to the extent that we remove ourselves from nature, combined with her valuation of participation in the capitalist order is just too much masculinist bullshit for me to handle.

I will never understand "feminists" like this lady who insists that we're equal to men to the extent that we all become masculine and value the kinds of things that have been valued in patriarchal, capitalist societies. Turns out I think all that economic achievement, status driven, nature devaluing stuff is fucked. I don't want to be a part of that. And if that makes me a bad feminist, then so be it. I'd rather be a good person than the kind of person that Badinter would recognize as a good feminist.

AngryGreyCat says

The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women by Elisabeth Badinter is a non-fiction read. While I didn't agree with all of her conclusions from her data, the points that she raises are thought-provoking and an important consideration, not only for feminists, but for mothers and fathers. The

connections to Rousseau's naturalism as a school of thought are interesting as is the historical perspective on motherhood in France contrasted with other countries.

Miri says

Very interesting topic, makes some really good points, kind of annoyingly written (almost a little sarcastic). Also, quite short and with weirdly large text and margins. Like... There's obviously a lot of information here, and this seems to be deliberately just skimming the surface.

Focuses on the naturalist movement of the last few decades (co-sleeping, attachment parenting, increased emphasis on breastfeeding, etc.) and on how government policies and cultural norms about motherhood are related to each other. On the contradictions women face:

"The first... is social. While boosters of the traditional family condemn working mothers, companies resent them for their children. For many, motherhood is held as the highest form of fulfillment for women even as it is devalued socially. Full-time mothers are unpaid, suspected of doing nothing all day, and deprived of a professional identity because their work requires no qualifications...

The second contradiction is conjugal. Couples tend to expect and desire children, yet, as many have noted, a child is not conducive to a couple's love life... A good number of young couples admit that they only realized the demands of the job after the fact ("no one warned me," they say). Increasingly, partners are taking a hard second look before launching on this adventure.

The most painful contradiction is personal, affecting every woman who does not identify with motherhood, every woman who feels torn between love for her child and personal desires, between wanting the best for her baby and wanting the best for herself. A child conceived as a source of fulfillment can, it turns out, stand in the way of that fulfillment. And, if we pile up a mother's responsibilities to the point of overload, she will feel this contradiction all the more keenly.

These contradictions are rarely given serious consideration. And by expecting ever more of mothers, the naturalist ideology not only fails to offer solutions, it makes the contradictions untenable. Wherever the prevailing ideal conflates [womanhood with motherhood], women who cannot fulfill the expectations pinned on them are increasingly likely to turn their backs on motherhood. [This is in reference to low and dropping birth rates in industrialized countries, and an increase in couples who are "child-free by choice".] In countries where being a woman and being a mother are seen as distinct identities, where the legitimacy of multiple women's roles is recognized, and where motherhood does not overwhelm all other possibilities, women do want to have children, even if it means falling short of the ideal of motherhood."

Donna Linklater says

While this book has some points I agree with (church of la leche league anyone??) and points out some of the restrictive aspects of "attachment parenting", it misses a few key points.

First off, a lot of women will tell you that they turn to attachment parenting because it's easier and more convenient-- if you've ever had a baby who wakes several times in the night, you know that it's an enormous challenge to take them out, nurse them, wait until they're settled, and then place them back in their crib. Bedsharing eliminates these issues. Breastfeeding is much cheaper and easier than bottlefeeding.

Babywearing is less cumbersome, allows the mother to go wherever she pleases, and less fussy than using a stroller. Attachment parenting is about parenting naturally and conveniently, and is mutually enjoyable for mother and baby.

Which brings about a second point missed. While I agree that there are many societal pressures on mothers these days, and that they may even be increasing, I still think that many women must simply be following their heart. There's nothing wrong with wanting to make your baby the centre of your life-- for a while-- if it's your heart's desire.

But I absolutely agree with her that in order to carry out the trendiest parenting styles these days, we need to create a social safety net that give women their own funds. At the moment, a parent who decides to stay home for more than a year (in Canada, and even for the duration of her parental leave since she only receives 55% of her income) is dependent on her partner for financial security. This means that the quality of life for stay-at-home mothers, who all carry out the same work, varies wildly and is dependent on father's income. There's no question that our current policies do not support full-time motherhood, and I absolutely agree with Badiner on this point.

All-in-all, it's a very clinically written account from a narrow perspective with some helpful points.

Sonia says

"elisabeth badinter points her finger at a most unlikely force undermining the status of women: extreme motherhood, in thrall to all that is "natural." attachment parenting, co-sleeping, baby -wearing, and on-demand breastfeeding— these hallmarks of contemporary motherhood have succeeded in tethering women to the home and family to an extent not seen since the 1950s. badinter argues that the taboos now surrounding epidurals, formula, disposable diapers, cribs —and anything that distracts a mother's attention from her offspring— have turned child rearing into a singularly regressive force."

este es el comentario en la contraportada. un comentario atractivo que me invitó a querer conocer la opinión de la autora esperando fluidez entrelazada con cuestionamientos acerca de su propia perspectiva -a fin y al cabo el comentario recuerda que badinter es feminista y filósofa... << ese combo me sugiere que no será sólo encontrar enlazar a su conveniencia sino hacer el ejercicio de cuestionar sus bias, percepciones, etc.

desafortunadamente me encontré con pensamientos que me resultaron interesantes pero su defensa estaba más basada en si x entonces y lo cual no necesariamente es una línea de pensamiento atinada. "y" puede responder también a otros factores.

señalar que la mayoría de las mujeres realmente no quieren reproducirse y ejercer una maternidad pero deciden hacerlo porque temen optar por ese "no" o "child-free" que culturalmente es rechazado por tirarlo de hedonista, egoísta, et al... defender este punto poniendo como ejemplo a Francia como el país vale-madrasta en donde señala, en varios de sus ensayos, el que las mujeres prefieren sus senos "perfectos" antes de lactar y entonces expresar cómo instituciones como La Liga de la Leche van ganando "batalla" en llenar de culpabilidad a las mujeres que deciden por cesáreas, no lactar, regresar al trabajo etc para entonces justificar "hey, las mujeres están sucumbiendo al paternalismo sin que éste tenga que abrir la boca si quiera"... me resulta simplista.

si francia es el ejemplo de una sociedad que "no se deja arrastrar por el sentimiento de culpa de ser mala madre" me parece que es igual de peligroso señalar como hedonista la "libertad sexual" y los "senos perfectos" y no como lo que pudieran ser: el reflejo del ejercicio sexista sobre mujeres que se han

convencido de desearse como objeto aunque para ellas, y parece que para badinter también, digan que ESO es la expresión hedonista (materialista en pro del feminismo) que el naturalismo que pone en riesgo el trabajo pro equidad de género.

es cierto que el sentimiento de culpa en la mujer es grande pero igual el rollo del hombre que se encuentra en querer o no ser padre... peor aún porque socialmente "el hombre tiene que hacerse responsable" de la criatura. hmm.... ¿cómo le sacas ese rollo a la sociedad que le hace sentir culpable también al hombre de "abandonar" a esa criatura y a su madre? tsk tsk.

me parece muy limitado el libro y sólo acomoda a su conveniencia sin cuestionar si ese hedonismo no es un disfraz, el efecto paternalista sobre el hombre y la mujer, etc.

¿alguien conoce algún libro de la autora en donde recoja de modo más amplio estos puntos?

Edina Rose says

This book says loud some of the things I believe in. There shouldn't be unnecessary conflict between being a good mother and being an accomplished woman who fulfills her potential. Juggling motherhood and family, social and professional duties is challenging enough as it is. Why should excessive demands be put on mothers in the name of the children's well being?

Well, I think lots of these demands are really unnecessary. If you don't want to breastfeed, then don't. If you want to use good childcare for a baby and go back to work (or not), please do. It's one thing to do things that are undoubtedly harmful to the baby, like smoking while pregnant. It's another thing to be made to feel guilty for not breastfeeding the baby when good hygiene and vaccines work just fine to keep baby healthy.

I do not agree with the whole book, at some point Badinter seems a bit excessive. However, the general idea of stopping unreasonable demands on mothers seems quite reasonable to me. The saddest thing is that it's not even men who are the biggest advocates of this "ultra motherhood" nonsense.

On a lighter note, I wish men could get pregnant too. Male Pregnancy would make this issue much more interesting, though pregnancy is a privilege I don't think we women want to share, or do we?

Alana says

I finished reading less than a minute ago, so a very fresh reaction: everyone should read this book. The thesis is essentially that by expecting too much of mothers, motherhood becomes so heavy a burden that it is unreconcilable with women's obligations to their careers, to their partners, to themselves. I am constantly irritated by the ever-growing list of pseudo-scientific recommendations that pregnant women and mothers of young children are exhorted to abide by, and so it was incredibly refreshing to read this book. Badinter not only articulates this, but explores the consequences - for women's happiness, for women's professional attainment, and for birthrates.

One particularly inflammatory theme is the ideal of 'naturalism' as opposed to feminism. Badinter takes issue with 'maternal instinct' (and so do I), and pushes back against breastfeeding, cloth diapers, organic food - not because these things are evil, but because guilting women into doing these things has massive negative externalities.

Should I have kids, their lives will be a little rougher because I read this book. And my life is going to be a lot better.

Beberouge says

I struggled with Badinter's theories in this book, at times becoming angry at her and wanting to scream that being a stay at home mother by choice is no less honorable than working up the corporate ladder. Giving all to my children does not make me less of a woman or put those woman who wish to climb the corporate ladder back many years in the fight for equality.

Gail says

In her latest feminist missive, Elisabeth Badinter seems determined to conceal a number of extremely important points with wandering discussion; layers of dry, sarcastic vitriol (particularly directed at La Leche League); sweeping generalizations; and an almost tangential conclusion. Her message: thanks to changes in feminist theory and the vaunting of all things natural, a new "high ideal of motherhood" as full-time and all-embracing (i.e., the belief "that a good mother takes constant care of her children round the clock and cannot pursue personal fulfillment at the same time") leaves women with "two options: exclusive motherhood or remaining childless," and that we will see more women choosing the latter. In several respects, I can't say that I agree.

Why do I recommend the book nonetheless? First, it's mercifully short. Second, she delivers aforementioned golden nuggets like, "[i]n a civilization that puts the self first, motherhood is a challenge, even a contradiction. Desires that are considered legitimate for a childless woman no longer are once she becomes a mother." True. "The irony of this history is that it was precisely at the point that Western women finally rid themselves of patriarchy that they acquired a new master in the home." Well put. Third, I like the global perspective. Finally and most importantly, I can take strands of her thoughts and weave them into material that's more relevant for me, discarding the scraps.

Badinter's bottom line observation - that mothers these days are held to a new unrealistic ideal (taking primary responsibility for domestic chores as well as their children's basic physical needs, education, stimulation, and future psychological well-being) - is astute and forceful. And she provides every one of us with an extraordinarily valuable touchstone when she writes that "a mother cannot allow herself to be consumed by her baby to the point of destroying her desires as a woman." My primary problem with Badinter's book is that she doesn't stop there or offer ideas to reform "vocational motherhood," instead suggesting the employment route (along with bottle feeding and utilizing child care) and opting out of motherhood entirely as our sole means of salvation. In so doing, she unnecessarily narrows the desires mothers relinquish down to one: professional ambition.

In my opinion, the key to stay-at-home mothers escaping their "new master[s]" is not necessarily work. One can refuse to "give her child everything" by consciously and consistently making time for her social life, sexuality, vanity, and intellectual curiosity. She can be "both mother and woman" simply by changing her approach to the first role. At least that's what I've done lately, refusing to feel contrite about skipping infant enrichment opportunities, asking my two toddlers to play independently for chunks of time throughout the day, and hiring college students to babysit (or arranging child care swaps with other moms) for a few hours a week so that I can read, shower, drink, socialize, spend time with my husband, and write book reviews. How do I skirt the guilt at not being able to do it all single-handedly? In part, thanks to the support Badinter

provides.

Molly Westerman says

This book is like a collection of missed opportunities. It addresses hugely important questions, but in so few words (160 page in huge type) that the analysis is surface-level at best and often downright nonsensical. It's about vital and deeply personal issues but manages to be quite boring. It critiques contemporary parenting culture's use of "the natural," which really is incredibly problematic, but in ways that more like pot shots at women (the ones who parent in ways that annoy or disgust the author) than like thoughtful or productive feminist critique. It falls into super-lazy and tiresome habits, like assuming that breastfeeding and cosleeping ruin everybody's sex life. Its structure feels utterly haphazard. It takes on the troublesome ideological backdrop of La Leche League but uses such poor logic, such little evidence, and such a tone of sarcasm and loathing that the whole thing is alienating (even to a reader who's also suspicious of LLL). And, cherries on top!, it's heteronormative + preoccupied with a version of "the mother" who is a professional woman, high-earning, with an interesting job.

Also, *nothing* is new here; it feels like rehashed polemics from various mainstream newspapers and magazines.

Sigh.

[There's a longer, more detailed review of this book at my blog, in two parts: part 1 & part 2.]
