



Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965

Ruth Feldstein

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The apron-clad, white, stay-at-home mother. Black bus boycotters in Montgomery, Alabama. Ruth Feldstein explains that these two enduring, yet very different, images of the 1950s did not run parallel merely by ironic coincidence, but were in fact intimately connected. What she calls "gender conservatism" and "racial liberalism" intersected in central, yet overlooked, ways in midtwentieth-century American liberalism.

Motherhood in Black and White analyzes the widespread assumption within liberalism that social problems--ranging from unemployment to racial prejudice--could be traced to bad mothering. This relationship between liberalism and motherhood took shape in the 1930s, expanded in the 1940s and 1950s, and culminated in the 1960s. Even as civil rights moved into the mainstream of an increasingly visible liberal agenda, images of domineering black "matriarchs" and smothering white "moms" proliferated.

Feldstein draws on a wide array of cultural and political events that demonstrate how and why mother-blaming furthered a progressive anti-racist agenda. From the New Deal into the Great Society, bad mothers, black or white, were seen as undermining American citizenship and as preventing improved race relations, while good mothers, responsible for raising physically and psychologically fit future citizens, were held up as a precondition to a strong democracy.

By showing how ideas about gender roles and race relations intersected in films, welfare policies, and civil rights activism, as well as in the assumptions of classic works of social science, *Motherhood in Black and White* speaks to questions within women's history, African American history, political history, and cultural history. Ruth Feldstein analyzes representations of black women and white women, as well as the political implications of these representations. She brings together race and gender, culture and policy, vividly illuminating each.

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