

#regrettingmotherhood in Germany: Feminism, Motherhood, and Culture

In April 2015, Orna Donath's *Signs* article "Regretting Motherhood: A Sociopolitical Analysis" provoked a storm of controversy in mainstream and social media in Germany that continues to resonate. The #regretting-motherhood debate—so called because of tweets using the English-language hashtag to highlight their contribution—illustrates the intense public interest in motherhood in contemporary Germany. Our article analyzes the debate within the German context and uses the controversy to raise broader questions about the impact of maternal myths on women's experiences and fertility decisions.

Donath's article draws on interviews with twenty-three women of varying ages, familial situations, and backgrounds who unequivocally regret their decision to become mothers. It thus broaches a topic considered taboo not only by mainstream society but also by motherhood researchers. As Donath (2015) emphasizes, regret is not an emotion usually associated with maternal experience; it runs counter to a conventional script of motherhood that asserts that all mothers eventually embrace the role. Her interviewees repeatedly stress that their regret is not directed at their children but at the institution of motherhood, which they perceive as having placed limits on their time, freedom, and autonomy (355). Donath makes no claims to representativity; in fact, she describes her struggle to identify interview partners. Nevertheless, her study attests that, despite social and cultural expectations to the contrary, some mothers do experience regret. Donath therefore calls for regret to be integrated into the already rich repertoire of maternal emotions. Perhaps more important, she argues that expressions of maternal regret illuminate the systems of power that compel women to see motherhood in positive terms and as the only available script for femininity.

While Donath's article is fascinating in and of itself, equally remarkable is the controversy it provoked in Germany. On April 5, 2015, freelance journalist Esther Göbel reported on Donath's study in the national broadsheet

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Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ), triggering a heated discussion on social media.¹ The #regrettingmotherhood debate was widely reported by major national and regional newspapers and radio stations and was even featured on a popular daily news show on the national TV channel ZDF. Well into May, the media continued to reflect on the German dimensions of this issue, its historical background, and its societal implications. This public fascination inspired a flurry of follow-up publications (Fischer 2016; Göbel 2016; Mundlos 2016) and artistic interventions (*Regretting Motherhood* 2017; *Raven* 2018; see also Dengler 2017), all ensuring that the topic continued to generate public discussion. Moreover, the #regrettingmotherhood debate has become a point of reference in broader discussions and representations of motherhood in Germany.²

In light of the passionate and polemic interventions across mainstream and social media, this article asks: Why did a study about Israeli women, published in an English-language academic journal, cause such controversy in Germany, of all places? The relatively limited interest in other countries suggests that the #regrettingmotherhood debate exposed localized sensitivities about the cultural construction of motherhood in Germany and its effect on the lived experience of women.³ The fact that so many mothers took to the internet to express their appreciation for Donath's research on maternal regret and to share their own (often negative) experiences of being a

¹ Germany has a long-established culture of debate, with academic controversies frequently reflected in the mainstream media. Famously, the historians' dispute of 1986–87 saw prominent West German scholars such as Ernst Nolte and Jürgen Habermas debate the singularity of the Holocaust and its relationship to German identity on the pages of national broadsheets such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Die Zeit*. Before the advent of social media, feminist scholarship struggled to attract the same attention.

² Donath's decision to publish her monograph (2016) in German first, more than a year before it appeared in English, was clearly a direct response to the enormous public interest in the topic in Germany. For examples of the extent to which #regrettingmotherhood has entered into broader conversations about motherhood in Germany, see Porombka (2015), Giesselmann (2018), Lüthmann (2018), Schwarz (2018), and "Zweites Kind" (*Bunte* 2018).

³ It is beyond the scope of this article to offer more than a cursory summary of the debate outside Germany. In April and May 2015, isolated newspaper articles in Austria, Switzerland, France, and Slovenia reported on the reaction to Donath's study in Germany. At this time, there appears to have been lengthier discussions only in Sweden (see Grönberg and Jåma 2015; Lekander 2015; Schultz 2015). The publication of Donath's book in Hebrew, English, Polish, Italian, Chinese, Spanish, Korean, and French generated some interest in Spain (e.g., Carbajosa 2016; Lijtmaer 2016; and the social media discussion under #madresarrepentidas), Italy (e.g., Coviello 2016; Robetti 2016), Canada (e.g., CBC 2017; Kingston n.d.), Australia (e.g., Gray 2017; Yasa 2017), the United Kingdom (e.g., Otte 2016; Mackenzie 2018), and the United States (e.g., Treleven 2016; Braff 2017). We analyze the emerging discussions in Spain and the Anglosphere in Heffernan and Stone (forthcoming).

mother, coupled with the public condemnation of such mothers, reveals in different ways the contours of a particularly uncompromising vision of motherhood in Germany.

Our article elucidates the historical and political particularities that make this maternal mythography especially loaded in Germany. We also relate the controversy to feminist research on motherhood that underscores the inordinate pressures placed on mothers in the contemporary era by public policy, on the one hand, and myths about the “good mother,” on the other. The emotional responses to the #regrettingmotherhood controversy express the level of frustration, sadness, and disillusionment felt by many German mothers due to these constraints. Moreover, we read the backlash against their confessional tweets and comments—indeed, against the debate itself—as indicative of the ways in which “good mother” discourses serve to regulate women’s behaviors.

Approach

Our analysis focuses on the most intense period of the debate, namely the first six weeks after the publication of Göbel’s article. In order to explain why Donath’s study resonated so strongly in the German media, we relate our media content analysis to prior debates about motherhood. This discourse history has produced a series of frames for discussing motherhood in Germany, that is, a set of “associated idea clusters that form a way of reasoning about a matter that is familiar to audiences” (Entman 1991, 11). Traditional media gatekeepers counted on readers’ ability to make connections between Donath’s research and ongoing concerns in Germany. Moreover, they furthered public interest by referring explicitly or implicitly to these localized issues. Important to our study is the idea that “in a Twitter environment, framing and gatekeeping practices become outsourced—involving ordinary users and elite actors” who expand on and contest preexisting narratives (Ofori-Parku and Moscato 2018, 2842). We consequently look at how the circulation of articles, stories, comments, and tweets influenced the progression of the discussion and how it was relayed to the wider German public.

To fully explore the dynamic interplay of old and new media, we focus on the circulation of content across different media. We analyze print articles and blog posts that used the hashtag #regrettingmotherhood or made explicit reference to the social media discussion; likewise, we focus on tweets and Facebook comments that engaged with the ongoing debate by liking, commenting on, and sharing items that appeared in the mainstream media. We understand this internet content as “multiply embedded,” to use Christine

Hine's terminology: "Content from the internet continuously circulates and is extracted and re-embedded, featuring in word-of-mouth conversations, in printed reports, and mass media, shaping and being shaped by the myriad activities of everyday life and public existence" (2015, 39). We explore how the interaction between these media thrust Donath's research on regretful mothers into the limelight in Germany.

#regrettingmotherhood: Anatomy of a debate

The first media reference to Donath's research came on April 5, 2015—Easter Sunday, an important holiday in Germany for families with young children—when Göbel's feature was published in both the print and online editions of the *SZ*. It summarizes Donath's findings and includes some of the more provocative quotations from her interviewees. Göbel rightly emphasizes the distinction that Donath draws between women who experience feelings of ambivalence or temporary regret when they first have children and those whose regretful feelings last longer, women for whom the burden of motherhood ultimately outweighs the benefits. Göbel explains that Donath does not focus on pressures familiar to German women—balancing a career and family or struggles with perfectionism—but rather on the societal pressure all women face to see motherhood as the culmination of their role as women. She contextualizes Donath's insistence that motherhood is a "cultural and historical construct" for the domestic readership by relating it to a "romantic image of motherhood" that originated around the Industrial Revolution and gained particular currency under National Socialism and that reduces women to child-bearers and nurturers (see also Berghahn 2015).

When Göbel's article was published, the *SZ* posted a link on its Facebook page. A storm of comments, both positive and negative, followed almost immediately. Initially replies tended to be sympathetic toward the mothers in Donath's study, with commentators relating Donath's research to their own experiences. For example, one Facebook user admitted, "I have deep regret too! Being a mother is the most thankless job in the world! If I could live my life again, I would make a different decision, certainly!"⁴ Another

⁴ All of the Facebook comments and tweets we include in this article are our own translations of actual comments posted online, but they also serve as examples of more general trends in the response to the debate. In order to preserve the privacy of individual social media users, we do not include their names or handles here. Interested readers are invited to view the comments on the *Süddeutsche Zeitung's* link to Göbel's article, which was posted on their Facebook page on April 5, 2015 (<https://www.facebook.com/ihre.sz/posts/803907839700597>) as well as the many tweets tagged with the hashtag #regrettingmotherhood (https://twitter.com/search?q=%23regrettingmotherhood&src=typed_query).

remarked that while she enjoys mothering, she recognizes it is not for everyone: “For one woman, it can be fulfilling to devote herself to serving someone other than herself, to nourish them, take care of them every day, to be challenged to the point of vexation and to give everything, without demanding anything in return, just to watch them grow up. For another, it’s pure torture to hold herself back all the time, to keep giving and keep going without getting any payment or applause.” As the Facebook discussion developed, more negative comments lambasted the regretful mothers as self-centered, shameless, and cold-hearted. In this vein, one critical user commented “Regret your role as mother? Pure selfishness!!!” while another repudiated one of the women in Donath’s study: “To describe your child as the ‘nightmare of my life’ is really tough. The poor children of these mothers.” Donath’s research was described by some readers as “brave” and “important,” “a very honest contribution” and “long overdue” but by others as “appalling,” “stupid,” “rubbish,” and “sad.” Many commenters further publicized the Facebook post by tagging friends within it or by sharing it via Facebook and Twitter, so that within a few days several hundred thousand readers had clicked on the link to Göbel’s article (2016, 13).⁵

The next day, the blogosphere was buzzing with commentaries on Göbel’s article and Donath’s research.⁶ One of the first came from independent journalist Christine Finke (2015), whose site *Mama arbeitet* (Mommy’s working) is one of the top German mommy blogs. The mother of three is emphatic that she has no regrets. However, she expresses empathy for mothers who find that motherhood is not for them: “What woman really knows what she’s getting herself into?” Similarly, in her blog *Herzgespinst* (Heart web), journalist and popular novelist Anette Göttlicher (2015) acknowledges the difficulties she had adapting to motherhood and admits imagining how her life might have turned out if she had remained child-free. Rona Duwe (2015), author of *Phoenixfrauen* (Phoenix-women), likewise describes her ambivalent feelings: “Let’s get one thing clear: I love my children. But there are moments when I wish from the bottom of my heart that I could go back to my life without children.” These bloggers’ narratives align with much literature on negative feelings about mothering in which women admit to their ambivalence but ultimately concede that they would do it all again (see Donath 2015, 352–53). These blog posts attracted numerous comments and were shared and retweeted widely on Facebook and Twitter, thus playing an important role in circulating the discussion beyond

⁵ As of May 11, 2020, this post had received 1,300 likes, 450 comments, and 482 shares.

⁶ See <https://vereinbarkeitsblog.de/regrettingmotherhood-lesesammlung/> for a list of many blog posts on this topic.

the elite broadsheets. The hashtag #regrettingmotherhood was first used on Twitter on April 6 when one user tweeted a link to Göbel's article, approvingly citing the line "It is society that decides that women want children." Fascinating article about #regrettingmotherhood." Other Twitter users picked up on the hashtag, either to express their interest in Donath's research and their empathy for regretful mothers or to air their distaste for the topic.

When the topic of maternal regret reappeared in traditional news media the following week, the focus of interest had shifted: where Göbel reported primarily on Donath's research, now the newspapers were interested in the furor it had provoked on social media. The Israeli context of the original study was barely mentioned. After April 11, articles appeared in most national newspapers, including broadsheets *Die Zeit*, *Die Welt*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*; Germany's most popular newspaper, the tabloid *Bild*; and national news magazines *Der Spiegel* and *Stern*. There were also features in many regional newspapers, including some from the former East German states such as the *Berliner Zeitung*, *Sächsische Zeitung*, and the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*.⁷ Several television and radio stations also picked up on the debate. A high point in public interest came on April 14, when the popular evening news show *Heute-Journal* featured a segment on Donath's research and the social media debate. Reactions to such features were in turn shared on Twitter and Facebook, often tagged #regrettingmotherhood, creating a "ping-pong game between old and new media" (Sauerbrey 2015) that kept the topic of maternal regret at the forefront of the national consciousness in April and early May 2015.

In quantitative terms, the #regrettingmotherhood debate is dwarfed by other examples of hashtag activism, such as the #aufschrei (#outcry) campaign that emerged on Twitter in January 2013 after feminist activist Anne Wizorek suggested that women use the hashtag to share their stories of everyday sexism. Even if the incidence of the hashtag #regrettingmotherhood surged in April 2015, its numbers never came close to the 58,000 tweets that #aufschrei generated in its first fortnight (Stokowski 2014). Yet we can judge the impact of #regrettingmotherhood along the same lines, as a movement to achieve something "that traditional feminist protest has not managed for decades: to place themes relating to women's politics in the mainstream media" (Freudenschuß and Hausbichler 2013, 192). As Hester Baer (2015) emphasizes, German feminists have effectively embraced the

⁷ Based on available metadata, we have not been able to draw any conclusions about whether growing up in eastern or western Germany influences attitudes toward maternal regret and the debate surrounding Donath's article.

potential of digital platforms to illuminate issues that might otherwise be dismissed as particular or individual. In qualitative terms, then, the mainstream and social media responses to the #regrettingmotherhood debate are significant in how they drew attention to the social and cultural construction of motherhood in contemporary Germany and how motherhood is experienced by individual women.

#regrettingmotherhood: Analysis of the debate

As German women linked their own stories to the debate through the hashtag #regrettingmotherhood, Donath's study was quickly reframed within a wider conversation about the social and ideological contours of motherhood in Germany. All strands of the discussion evince the belief that German mothers are overburdened and exhausted (see Dückers 2016). Several reports reference the dramatic 37 percent rise over the previous decade in women turning to the Müttergenesungswerk, a charitable organization that supports the well-being of mothers through nationwide clinics (Becker 2015; ZDF 2015). Reframing regret as exhaustion, stress, and burden—states more commonly allied with the experience of mothering and thus more compatible with cultural norms of motherhood—arguably dilutes the more radical emotion of regret. At the same time, it is significant that the #regrettingmotherhood debate created a space for some mothers to open up about their negative emotions toward motherhood. Many of the mothers who took to Twitter and Facebook to comment on the way maternal regret was framed in the media expressed appreciation and even gratitude to Donath for giving voice to an emotion that is often deemed unspeakable (see also Becker 2015).

The media plays an important role in shaping and defining the social meanings of such confessions (see Gammel 1999, 5). Epithets such as “non-sense” and “shocking” reframe the confessions of maternal regret in line with normative culture, exposing the power dynamics at play in discursive politics and providing ample evidence of what Donath (2015) calls the “systems of power governing maternal feelings” (345). In the #regrettingmotherhood debate, two moralistic discourses collided: the public ideology of the good mother and the loaded notion of maternal regret.

The most egregious tweets under the hashtag #regrettingmotherhood describe the discussion as symptomatic of a shameful society that has spun “totally out of control.” For Donath (2015), regret is fundamentally a moral emotion governed by “cultural norms, or feeling rules, prescribing when it is required or unfounded, appropriate, or unreasonable” (346). As Alexandra Zykunov (2015) perceptively notes in *Die Welt*: “It is precisely the parenthetical comment, don’t get me wrong, that reveals once again the extent

of the fear that you will be degraded as a ‘Rabenmutter’ [raven mother] simply by expressing sympathy for mothers who do not realize their role as hoped.” The online version of the dictionary Duden defines the uniquely German word *Rabenmutter* as an “unloving, coldhearted mother who neglects her children.”⁸ Commonly used to refer to working mothers, who are seen as abandoning their young to be looked after by strangers, the term soon appeared in #regrettingmotherhood comments to refer to Donath’s interviewees and the contributors who professed compassion for them. For Violetta Simon (2015), recapitulating a conversation with sociologist Christina Mundlos, regretful mothers “are not raven mothers. . . . On the contrary: many of them would suppress their own needs to such an extent that, in the end, nothing would remain apart from the wish that they had never had children.” This tallies with Donath’s affirmation that the women she interviewed “stressed that they love their children but hate the maternal experience” (2015, 355).

Numerous contributors to the debate find this point difficult to comprehend, insisting “If you love somebody, you cannot wish that they had never been born” (Dowideit 2015). One Twitter user contends, “For me #regrettingmotherhood would mean that I regret a person that I love more than anything else. So: no chance!” Those who conflate maternal regret with a lack of love find their logic confirmed by mothers who publicly admit their regret, apparently without contemplating the damage that this confession might cause their children. To quote another tweet, “how empty the words ‘I love you’ will sound to the children of regretful mothers if they read the #regrettingmotherhood texts” (see also Mayer 2016; Reents 2016). Feminist journalist Heide Oestreich (2015) identifies three reasons for this false logic. First, people are simply uncomfortable hearing other people’s stories of woe. The wider discourse of regret is also incompatible with the forward-looking momentum of neoliberal society. Second, we are all somebody’s child and find it hard to imagine that their lives might have been better if we had never been born. Third, it is still difficult for German society to accept that motherhood does not suit or appeal to some women. Above and beyond this, we argue, the idea of maternal regret challenges the assumption that

⁸ Anglo-American culture has similar concepts such as “latchkey kids” who return from school to a home left empty by working parents. The similar concept of “refrigerator mothers” is attributed to psychiatrist Leo Kanner (1943), who connected childhood autism and schizophrenia to parents who denied their children emotional warmth and connection. This theory was popularized by Bruno Bettelheim (1967). However, these English-language equivalents, while popular in the midcentury period, have lost their social currency in comparison to the notion of the *Rabenmutter*.

maternal bliss is and should be automatic and all-encompassing, rendering any other concerns or desires secondary (see Febvre 2016).

The intensity of the debate also reveals how unpalatable or indeed unimaginable maternal regret is in the German context of sacrosanct motherhood. Newspaper articles and tweets repeatedly use permissive modal verbs to accentuate the moral implications of Donath's findings. For example, the subtitle of a piece in *Die Welt* runs, "Is a woman allowed to question the joy of maternity, or even regret maternity altogether?" thus presenting maternal regret as a public problem (Zykunov 2015). In *Die falsche Wahl* (The wrong decision, 2016), Göbel considers why mothers "are not allowed" to speak about the negative dimensions of their experience (14). She relates this proscription to the sociopolitical framework for mothering in Germany, which she summarizes in terms of "an inconsistent family politics, constant pressure and increasing stress; on top of that, an entrenched maternal myth, a lack of support, and overblown perfectionism" (144; see also Mundlos 2016, chap. 3). As one Twitter user perceptively notes, "#regrettingmotherhood merely reveals the extent to which women and mothers in our society continue to face discrimination across the board." This sentiment is also reflected in companion hashtags such as #regrettinggermany or #regretting-oursociety, as well as the tweet: "#regrettingmotherhood? Regretting social circumstances!"

#regrettingmotherhood: The cultural context

The idea that motherhood places impossible demands on women's physical, emotional, and psychological well-being is by no means new, of course, nor is it confined to Germany. On the contrary, our analysis of the #regrettingmotherhood debate dovetails with a significant body of North American research on the impact of maternal myths on women's lived experience of motherhood. Donath's participants' insistence that the regret they feel toward motherhood does not extend to their children recalls Adrienne Rich's (1976) distinction between the experience of mothering, which most women find enriching, and the institution of motherhood, which many experience as deeply oppressive. According to Rich, the idealized image of the "good mother" who is naturally loving and self-sacrificing sets impossible standards for motherhood (225). Moreover, psychologist Nancy Chodorow (1978) shows how family structures privileging paternal power over maternal subjection are replicated: a girl's identification with her mother leads her to desire motherhood and prepares her psychically to mother her own children. For Chodorow and Susan Contratto (1982), this fantasy of ideal motherhood even permeates recent feminist writing on

motherhood; they argue that depictions of maternal power, and powerlessness, hinge on the assumption that women can be perfect mothers—or that they could, if not for the restrictions imposed by patriarchal society.

A wealth of feminist research documents the heightened pressure on mothers in North America since the 1980s, even as they have been joining the workforce in unprecedented numbers in that period. Arlie Hochschild (1989) finds that women's increased participation in paid labor has not led to an equitable sharing of childcare and domestic responsibilities with their partners, resulting in mothers picking up a "second shift" at home. Sharon Hays (1996) documents the growing dominance of the ideology of intensive mothering. She points to the "cultural contradiction" faced by working mothers, who struggle to reconcile the demands of the capitalist marketplace, with its focus on individualism and personal gain, with this ideology, which requires that mothers devote "copious amounts of physical, moral, mental, and emotional energy" to child rearing (4). All mothering practices, even those one might assume to be private choices, such as breastfeeding, come under intense scrutiny as part of a public interest in safeguarding these standards of motherhood (Blum 1999, 3). Even if they work full time, mothers are expected to be the primary carers of their children, ensuring that their nurturance reflects the latest medical advice (Apple 2006) and organizing their children's leisure activities to cultivate their talents (Lareau 2003). Under intense pressure to be both ideal mothers and ideal workers, some mothers are simply "opting out" of the workforce, as the title of Pamela Stone's (2007) study indicates—though Stone emphasizes that such decisions are seldom based on choice. Indeed, her research shows that even women who occupy positions of relative economic and social privilege struggle to reconcile the competing demands of family and the workplace.

In Germany, scholarship in this area has developed against the background of numerous public debates about motherhood that explain in part why Donath's article resonated in this particular cultural context.⁹ One example is the controversial "Mothers' Manifesto," published in 1987 by women associated with the political party *Die Grünen* (the Greens). It built on the wages for housework campaign by demanding better support and socioeconomic recognition for mothers as well as a feminism that values motherhood. Equal-rights feminists took issue with the manifesto's privileging of childbearing and child rearing over women's waged work (Lenz 2010, 621). The manifesto provoked a fierce public debate about the place of

⁹ See Vinken (2001), Kortendiek (2004), Beck-Gernsheim (2006), and Thiessen and Villa (2008).

motherhood within feminism that went on for over a year. Women's roles as mothers were also central to one of the most divisive aspects of the unification of Germany: abortion. While women in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) had access to abortion from 1972, it was illegal in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in 1990 except under exceptional circumstances. Bringing the laws into alignment was so contentious that it took until 1994 to find a compromise and pass a law that removed penalties for first-trimester terminations.

In the early 2000s, German debates about motherhood were reconfigured in the context of the so-called demographic crisis. For almost twenty years after unification, the total fertility rate hovered between 1.3 and 1.4 children per woman (Statistisches Bundesamt 2012, 14).¹⁰ This figure, far below the natural replacement rate, was construed as a demographic "time bomb" by conservatives worried about the sustainability of the economy, the social impact of a graying population, and the future of the German family (Butterwegge 2006, 216). Broadsheet and tabloid newspapers alike were awash with stories about the imminent demise of the German population. The government reacted to the demographic trend by introducing a multitude of measures to support families. Between 2003 and 2009, the program Future Education and Childcare invested several million euros in expanding the provision of full-day schooling. In 2013, access to childcare for infants over 12 months became a legal right. Despite this major investment, the German fertility rate lay below the European average until 2015 (Eurostat 2020).¹¹

The reemergence of feminist sentiment and activism in Germany coincided with this demography debate, which frequently placed the blame for falling birth rates on women and their focus on personal rather than maternal fulfillment (Scharff, Smith-Prei, and Stehle 2016, 4). In a best-selling book, talk-show host Eva Herman (2007) went so far as to declare that, "feminism ate our children" (176). In her view, society has forced women to repress their "natural" femininity, pressuring them into a harsh workplace to which they are not suited. Such concerns are latent in repeated references to the fact that German Chancellor Angela Merkel has no children of her own, in comparison to her current defense minister, Ursula von der Leyen, now president of the European Commission, who has seven children (Ferree 2006; Mushaben 2017). Yet when the latter rose to prominence, she was denounced

¹⁰ In this respect, it is important to note the difference to the Israeli context studied by Donath, where the fertility rate in 2015 was 3.1 births per woman (OECD Data 2018).

¹¹ There are indications that these measures have started to bear fruit, with a total fertility rate of 1.60 in 2016 and 1.57 in 2017 and 2018 (Eurostat 2020).

as a *Rabenmutter* for apparently prioritizing her career over her family. Noting a wider array of headlines deriding women as “career fetishists”—not to mention repeated features on “childless academics” and “freeloading welfare mothers”—Barbara Thiessen and Paula Irene Villa (2008) claim that “mothers and children obviously embody ideological positions, historical lines of tradition, sociopolitical regimes, and religiously founded ethics in Germany, changes to which mobilize massive affects” (277).

The ideology of public motherhood has a long and contested history in Germany, particularly given the rhetorical exaltation of motherhood during the National Socialist era. In popular lore, this ideal of motherhood exemplifies the regressive, antifeminist sentiments of National Socialism. After all, the government intended to restrict women’s employment and offered newlyweds marriage loans if the wife retired to the domestic sphere. As Gisela Bock (1986) trenchantly argues, however, Nazi family politics revolved not around mothers but fathers, who received the marriage loans (171). According to Barbara Vinken (2001), Nazi propaganda merely radicalized a long-standing “dogma of German motherhood” (9). This expressive label anchors the German myth of motherhood in the nation’s Protestant tradition, which in the sixteenth century reimagined the family as a model of divine community (Allen 1991, 18). In the late eighteenth century, the Swiss pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi propagated the idea that motherhood was woman’s God-given and natural purpose. Reformulating women’s role in the family in terms of a contribution to the good of society aligned with a wider search for new models of sociality based on freedom and emotional commitment to the community (Allen 1991, 18–19). For Vinken (2001), the resulting opposition of motherhood and bourgeois individualism has continued to define a “special German pathway” in family policy (19).

Historians attribute the slow political gains of German feminism before the Second World War in part to the illiberalism of the state (Evans 1976, 3). Into the twentieth century, the elite Junker class retained political and social influence through its involvement in the military, bureaucracy, judiciary, and the Protestant Evangelical Church, the institutions through which the maternal dogma has exerted its influence. The linkage between military service and citizenship left little room for envisioning women’s social contribution beyond their procreative function. Yet in the popular imagination, this conception of female citizenship remains associated with National Socialism.

Indeed, several contributors to the social media debate under *#regrettingmotherhood* raise the idealized image of motherhood promulgated under National Socialism, pointing out that the concept of maternal bliss was “Nazi-Jargon” and “Nazi-Propaganda.” To quote blogger Mira Sigel (2016),

“even now we have not overcome the artificial elevation of motherhood, which the Nazis defined as *raison d'état*.” Such comments underscore how central this chapter of history remains to self-understanding among wide segments of German society. They lend credence to Ann Taylor Allen’s (2007) conjecture that family-friendly social policies are likely to have limited impact on the reproductive choices of women in countries that “are wary of natalism, which they associate with the authoritarian regimes of the past and resist pressures to produce more children for the state” (239). The sense that motherhood was subject to ideological distortion during the Third Reich has undoubtedly contributed to an atmosphere of critique regarding discourses about women’s role as mothers.

Other tweets highlight a further dimension of the historical context: the radically different notions of motherhood that prevailed in the GDR and FRG during the period of division. For instance, one tweet claims, “In our socialist society every Mom had a place. It’s obvious that it does not work that way under capitalism.” In part due to an ideological commitment to equality, and further motivated by the labor shortage, the East German state sought to increase and incentivize female employment through extensive maternity leave, subsidized childcare, and generous leave to care for sick children. Consequently, by 1989, 91 percent of East German women of working age were employed (Ferree 1993, 91).¹² Yet West Germans viewed the version of equality promoted in the East as an ideological restriction of women’s freedom of choice. Against the historical background of National Socialism, and in response to the family politics of the GDR, “protecting motherhood” from manipulation became a priority (Moeller 1993, 6). Although women were granted equality in principle in the 1949 Basic Law, the family law of 1958, along with welfare and tax policies premised on a male-breadwinner model, made it difficult for married women to work outside of the home until changes to the law in the 1970s.

Unification thus meant the coming together of two very different models of motherhood, and there is no doubt that the former East German states have gradually moved toward the West German model (Ferree 1993, 105). Admittedly, the dominant model of the stay-at-home mother has been eroded in the past decades. However, only 24 percent of all German mothers were employed full time in 2016, while a further 46 percent worked part time. It is noteworthy that the overall employment figures in former East and West German states only differ by 4 percent (Statistisches Bundesamt 2017). The male breadwinner model remains institutionally anchored through policies

¹² The fact that these policies were only open to mothers ultimately led to the gendered division of labor becoming more pronounced at home and in the workforce.

such as the *Ehegattensplittung* (joint assessment), which offers tax incentives when one spouse earns more than the other. Particularly controversial was the *Betreuungsgeld* (childcare allowance) introduced in 2013 but declared invalid by the Federal Constitutional Court in August 2015 for treating a matter beyond legislative reach. It granted parents between 100 and 150 euros per month if they decided to stay home to care for a child between the ages of 15 and 36 months. Nicknamed a *Herdprämie* (which can be translated both as “stove premium” and “herd premium”), this allowance was criticized for diverting funds away from the creation of better childcare infrastructure and discouraging mothers’ participation in the labor market. This policy recalls Élisabeth Badinter’s argument that there is an important difference between welfare policies designed to promote parity by allowing equal access to the workforce and those designed to make it easier for women to stay at home (2011, 136). In fact, social scientist Mechthild Veil (2010) argues that this tension defines German family politics, which neither supports the employment of mothers nor adequately recognizes their care work. She attributes this impasse to the differing models of motherhood in East and West Germany, on the one hand, and the conflicting constitutional claims that “marriage and family come under the special protection of the state order” and “men and women are equal” (216).

This context goes some way toward explaining why Donath’s article resonated so strongly in Germany. In a 2016 representative survey, YouGov found that 20 percent of 1,228 German parents surveyed admitted that “they would not want to have children again if they could choose again today” (3), with a fifth highlighting a lack of childcare support (11). Sixty-three percent of parents who can see why others might regret having children highlight inadequate childcare provisions (11).

#regrettingmotherhood and fertility decisions

Donath (2015) explains that the reason why women are reluctant to speak about their experience of mothering in terms of regret—and why we are so shocked when they do—is because “motherhood is framed in many societies . . . as a mythical nexus that lies outside and beyond the human realms of regret” (347). Maternal historian Vinken (2016) senses that Donath’s article touched a nerve in Germany because it debunks the myth of maternal bliss for which many women sacrifice so much. Ultimately, however, she reads the relatively high levels of childlessness—currently the highest among European countries (Sobotka 2017, 37)—as evidence of German women’s potential for autonomy. As Diana Tietjens Meyers (2001) argues, however,

women's choices about motherhood are seldom truly autonomous, since they are heavily influenced by what she terms the "matrigyno-idolatry" that dominates the discursive setting in which women make their reproductive choices (737). Against this backdrop, it is difficult for women to separate their own feelings and thoughts about motherhood from the idealized picture force-fed to them since childhood.

The German #regrettingmotherhood debate adds a new dimension to this research by providing evidence that some women are turning away from motherhood *precisely because of* the hegemonic ideals of motherhood that dominate in culture and the media. An early Facebook comment on Göbel's SZ article declared, "I'm very happy that I never wanted children and that's not going to change. Not because of the children themselves but because of the role that you get pushed into here as a woman. I'm at an age where most of my friends have children, and the prejudice they have to contend with and how they are treated sometimes is simply intolerable." One responder recommends Sarah Diehl's book *Die Uhr, die nicht tickt: Kinderlos glücklich* (The clock that isn't ticking: Happy without children, 2014), remarking that it shows "why many young women have no desire to allow the cursed (and very German) ideal of mother to be negotiated on their bodies." Diehl's interviews with German women who are voluntarily childless provide further evidence that many choose not to become mothers due to an inability to relate to prevailing models of motherhood. One interviewee describes in stark terms the consequences of these ideological constructs: "The patriarchy also limits women's autonomy when it makes the conditions for motherhood so unattractive that women no longer want to become mothers. Even if by doing so, it cuts into its own flesh" (56).

As the #regrettingmotherhood debate unfolded, many women pointed to the testimonies of regretful mothers, as well as the backlash against their admissions, to justify their decision to remain childless. In this vein, one user tweeted "#regrettingmotherhood and so I don't regret it later, I chose a life without children," while another tweeted in English, "#regrettingmotherhood is my reason nr. 1 not to be a mom." In her sociological study, Mundlos (2016) expresses her surprise about the extent to which the #regrettingmotherhood debate resonated with women who are voluntarily childless. When advertising for participants for a study of the phenomenon of maternal regret in Germany, many women without children also contacted her because they "saw their decision underpinned to some extent by arguments" circulating in the debate (20).

Prior to the #regrettingmotherhood controversy, there had been some speculation in the media about a potential link between the growing rate

of childlessness in Germany and cultural ideals of motherhood.¹³ Politicians and media pundits alike questioned why around 160 new political measures to support families, costing 200 billion euros a year, had not had a marked impact on the birthrate (Pawlow 2015). Maria von Welser (2007), journalist and president of UNICEF Germany, argues that it is not the social or economic framework that discourages women from having children: “It is the atmosphere in this country that does not add up” (12). For Günter Burkart (2006), the emerging “culture of childlessness” in Germany is underpinned precisely by a “culture of doubt” relating to high standards of “good parenting”—especially “good motherhood” (120–22). Such arguments were popularized by Badinter (2011), who writes rather polemically about the exalted status of the German *Mutter*, which she compares to the Italian *mamma* and the Japanese *kenbo*. Crucially, Badinter links the falling birth rates in these three countries to women’s reluctance to take on a role that brings with it such high expectations and leaves so little room for individuality. Given the long history of the German model of sacrosanct motherhood, Badinter does not find it surprising that governmental policies had failed to bear fruit: “Changing an ideal takes far longer to have effect than providing childcare” (2011, 135).

Conclusion

As Donath (2015) notes, “even though the mythography of motherhood is increasingly being vexed, and although there is now some legitimacy to rocking the cradle, opprobrium is still poured upon mothers who dare to complain about mothering” (362). Her words of caution appear particularly pertinent against the backdrop of the German #regrettingmotherhood debate. Its virulence demonstrates that normative maternal models remain fiercely protected. While the media engagement with Donath’s article suggests the difficult cultural conditions for mothering in contemporary Germany, the debate itself may well provide an impetus for renewal. In the first instance, the hashtag #regrettingmotherhood names and makes visible a maternal experience normally repressed from social discourse. In turn, maternal regret is reframed as worthy of public recognition. As a form of “virtual consciousness raising” (Kennedy 2007), the debate triggered by Donath’s article reassures women who regret their motherhood (and those who feel compelled to repress their ambivalence) that they are neither abnormal nor

¹³ Though Michaela Kreyenfeld and Dirk Konietzka (2017) document rising numbers of women who will remain childless in all European countries, they observe that the trend is most evident in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.

alone. With each retweet, blog entry, or newspaper article, new stories are attached to confessions of regret, amplifying previously unheard voices. These voices “reverberate” across and beyond cyberspace, creating online communities that allow emotions and their objects to be delineated (Kuntsman 2012, 2). The sharing and naming of an emotion is thus creative, as Sara Ahmed (2004) explains, for it “works to create a language with which to respond to that which one is against, whereby ‘the what’ is renamed and brought into a feminist world” (176). Some of the most nuanced interventions came from those bloggers, commentators, and tweeters who pointed to the fierce pressures that mothers experience in contemporary Germany and used the #regrettingmotherhood debate to frame their concerns. Seen thus, the importance of Donath’s study and the way it has been discussed in Germany lies in the new vocabulary it has provided for examining the relationship between public discourse about motherhood and women’s own experiences of mothering. Through the #regrettingmotherhood debate, commentators were able to reflect on social and policy issues that increase the burden on German mothers and make it more likely that they might come to regret their motherhood. On a concrete level, then, the contributions highlight obstacles to happy parenting and identify areas for political improvement (see Mundlos 2016, chap. 7).

Finally, the most thoughtful engagements with the stance of regret illuminate the ways in which women’s own lives are implicated in the systems of power that “institutionalize which roads are forbidden from being taken” (Donath 2015, 360), to wit, nonmotherhood. Similar to the expressions of regret evaluated in Donath’s article, formulations of ambivalence and solidarity during the #regrettingmotherhood debate challenge the notion that motherhood is an integral part of a woman’s identity. As Donath (2016) argues in the introduction to the German edition of her study, “regret can be understood as a kind of alarm bell that calls on society to . . . rethink its reproductive politics and attitude to women’s duty to become mothers” (14).

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