

archaic since at least the 1960s and that is still part of current debates. A dominant discourse positions women in certain ways of which they are often not conscious; only when they band together to take up arms against some particular hardship, suffering or frustration may women begin to be aware of the codes that confine and limit them. At such a moment one might say that the unconscious is becoming conscious, and that a "female," as against a (patriarchal) "feminine" discourse is beginning to develop. That is, a "female" discourse manifests itself, not in any return to some "essential" femaleness, but in the very processes of struggle against dominant discourses that position women in oppressive ways; it emerges, that is, in the "gaps" of patriarchal hegemony discovered in moments of struggle, disruption, rebellion.

It is the unconscious level that I unravel in looking at motherhood from the perspective of *representation*. I am not a positivist historian making claims about lived realities in the sense of daily self-concepts, personal interactions, or women's historical struggles in the social formation for rights, and so on. It is on the level of what underlies the daily, conscious actions that representations exist and that we can uncover the mythic signifieds of a culture.

These mythic signifiers are most evident in the popular texts that I will explore here and offer as "evidence" of myths being at work in the culture at any given time. My premiss is that women, like everybody else, can function only within the linguistic, semiotic constraints of their historical moment – within that is the discourses available to them. We cannot, thus, expect in the mid-nineteenth century the kind of feminist consciousness that erupted in the 1970s: nineteenth-century women had their own form of feminism that (following women historians) I am here calling "domestic" feminism, while we are today confronting a mother-paradigm shift analogous to that with which this book starts: this shift has been brought about by a second-stage industrial revolution marked by the move from the machine to the electronic age that postmodernism signals. The entire semiotic field in which we live in postmodern America contains the dramatic alterations in technologies and the decentering effects of the multi-corporate capitalisms that have developed since the 1960s. The new postmodern mother-constructs, both positive and negative, that are emerging in this context will be explored in the book's conclusion by examining both popular and feminist materials. The book aims here to contribute to the crucial work of analyzing the ideological frameworks, representations and discourses that construct the new reproductive technologies and the new social and political institutions that position the postmodern mother.

THE HISTORICAL SPHERE

Motherhood as institution and social discourse

Theorizing satisfactorily the complex interrelationship between a cultural discourse and economic/social/technological change is beyond the scope of this book. The historical shifts in major institutions affecting the mother, like the family, are long, slow and arduous, moving more rapidly in some nations and regions of nations than in others, and happening usually first in the cities, and later in the country. There is no overnight, uniform change either in relations of production or in cultural/ideological discourse. What we are talking about is a change in institution and, correspondingly, in discourse that can be seen only from some historical distance; the precise links between discursive and technological changes again may become visible from an historical perspective, but most often remain unclear. Does the change in discourse precede or follow the technological changes? Do the two kinds of change happen more or less in tandem? Do pressures from traditional paradigms and positionings impede implementation of technological discoveries?

For my purposes here, I will posit three major economic/political/technological eruptions that affected the historical mother and produced corresponding changes in mother-discourses. I do not attempt to show *how* such mutual changes happened; nor will I try to substantiate claims for institutional eruptions, which are in any case readily recognizable, generally accepted, and have been usefully summarized by the historians and sociologists I rely on (Cott 1977; Welter 1966; Degler 1980; Ehrenreich *et al.* 1978).¹ Positing a tentative link between changes in mother-institutions and mother-discourses seems reasonable enough, if one takes a broad perspective, although I will not try to *prove* such links: I am satisfied to show parallels.

The three historical eruptions are first, that of the Industrial Revolution, second, that of the First World War, and third, that of the recent, electronic revolution following the Second World War. The first eruption marked the economically necessary transition of the pre-modern mercantile-class wives and mothers out of their roles as producers in the old pre-industrial economy into that of consumers in the new middle-class home (Cott 1977; Degler 1980; Filene 1986; Chafe 1972; Bernard 1974).² This shift may be said to inaugurate the early modern mother in the modern nuclear family.

