

CARLETON UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY



FALL 2021 *Colloquium*

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"Raising the Autonomous Individual: Reading Advice to Parents about Children's Sleep"

The genre of advice to parents about children's sleep proliferated between the mid-1980s and the first decade of the twenty-first century. This essay reads that advice against itself, as symptomatic of larger political trends—in particular the end of the privilege of the normative midcentury nuclear family, and the advent of neoliberal ideology and political economy. Specifically, it argues that sleep advice between Richard Ferber in the mid-1980s, William Sears in the 1990s, and the moderating feminist voices of the early 2000s, reflects an ambivalence about the autonomous individual within neoliberalism, versus the need for attachment and the dependence of kinship. Returning to Jessica Benjamin's object relations feminism (which itself embeds concerns about its 1980s context), it shows how the oscillation between methods of sleep training that stress "independent sleeping," against those that align with "attachment parenting," reveal the same subject-object relations of power (with concomitant gender roles) that Benjamin outlined as central to domination. By embedding this analysis in its contemporary material conditions of class, race, and gender, the essay argues that sleep practices try—and must necessarily fail—to create workers and family members who are both entirely autonomous and mutually supportive. It combines a relatively new literature on the psychodynamics of family relationships as mutually informed by neoliberal rationality, with an established critique of the politics of "intensive mothering," to show how children's sleep has become a part of women's work—a technology of the self—that carries the burden of forming the future citizen-worker.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 1, 2021

1:00 P.M. EST

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