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# Trouble and Strife

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# BREEDING CONSPIRACIES

## Feminism and the new reproductive technologies



*Is the development of reproductive technology really a male conspiracy? Marge Berer argues that the new technologies should not be rejected out of hand, but that the defence of women's reproductive rights demands that each must be considered on its merits.*

Ten years ago, abortion was the major reproductive rights issue in Britain. The biggest difference between then and now is that the debate on abortion was primarily a political debate, not a debate about technology. Abortion technology was assumed to support women's needs: the question was whether women had access to it on our own terms and when we needed it.

When we look at reproductive technology as a whole — whether we are looking at contraceptives, birth technology or infertility treatment — we can say very little about the politics involved without first examining the advantages and disadvantages, risks and benefits of each technique to specific women. As techniques have proliferated, so the issues have become complicated and not easy to disentangle. Slogans no longer seem to work. There is a revolution going on in biology, of which reproductive technology is only a small part. Any analysis requires a great deal of scientific knowledge. Perhaps that is why so many of us have been slow and reluctant to confront the issues. Not all of us have been so slow.

The Feminist International Network on New Reproductive Technologies (FINNRET) was formed at a women's studies conference in Holland in 1984. Since then some of its members have been prolific in spreading the message (as they see it) on how we should all view the new technology. Several of them have published books and done speaking tours in a number of countries, and there have been articles about the dangers of the new technology in dozens of feminist publications in as many countries.

Women in FINNRET have said that they do not all agree among themselves, and reports from meetings they organised in Germany and Sweden in 1985 and Belgium in 1986 certainly indicate that women attending those meetings had their differences. Yet at the meeting in Sweden the name FINNRET was changed to Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering — FINNRAGE. The group does indeed have an agreed common line, as their manifesto shows.

Thirty six writers contributed to *Test-tube Women*, and eight out of the nine women who contributed to *Man-made Women* are among them. *The Mother Machine* was written by one of the eight.



It is my impression that most of the eight women involved in these three books are the guiding force behind FINNRAGE and primarily responsible for its public face: they are Gena Corea, Renate Duelli Klein, Jalna Hanmer, Helen Holmes, Betty Hoskins, Janice Raymond, Robyn Rowland and Roberta Steinbacher. Can those of us who are daunted by science and its obscure language save ourselves gruelling work by accepting their opinion rather than forming our own?

### *Test-tube Women*

More than half the pieces in *Test-tube Women* are about not-so-new technology like abortion, contraception and sterilisation. The rest is about newer technology and its application — artificial insemination, prenatal screening, in vitro fertilisation, genetics and cloning. The range of topics is enormous and the idea of bringing together analyses of older and newer technology under the same cover was a good one.

I want to concentrate on the newer technology, but it would be wrong not to acknowledge the excellent pieces by Vimal Balasubrahmanyam on population control, Phillida Bunkle on Depo Provera (injectable contraceptive) Anne Finger et al on disability and motherhood, Ruth Hubbard on childbirth, and Coalition to Fight Infant Mortality on that issue. Rebecca Albury's paper compares abortion and IVF services in order to raise questions about technology and motherhood which bridge 'old' and 'new'. Although her views on infertility and how women cope with it need challenging, it is a thought-provoking paper and deserves a whole review on its own.

However, because this book broke so much ground on the newer technology, it should have taken the responsibility to provide solid, factual information, to give women a basis on which to judge the technology ourselves. That it fails to do.

The glossary, a brief four pages, is a good example of this. The term 'embryo division' is defined as dividing a fertilised egg, usually when it is four cells, into individual cells which can then potentially develop into four separate embryos which can then be "subjected to genetic manipulation".

There is no indication that this procedure is strictly theoretical, not already happening. 'Genetic manipulation' is not defined, though 'gene therapy' is (is it the same thing?). 'Gene therapy' is defined, as the replacement of a 'bad' gene with a 'good' gene (their quotes). Good and bad are not defined.

But there are whole papers that do the same. Julie Murphy's piece on 'Egg farming and women's future' is supposed to be about the technique of removing eggs from women's ovaries for in vitro fertilisation and other purposes. It is so thin on information that the only memorable thing about it is the number of times the word 'egg' appears on every page (about 30 times in the first two pages alone).

### *Fantasies that play on fear*

Jane Murphy's piece on cloning is equally short on factual information. She does define cloning, but in a way that assumes it can and will be used to control what genes every embryo, and therefore person, is allowed to have. She is horrified by this, as well she might be, so never questions how feasible this is. She describes an interview with a scientist working on cloning which also conveys her horror of him, and not much else. It turns out that this scientist is interested in cloning because he thinks it may lead to useful information about cancer, and therefore to possible ideas for prevention or cure of cancer. Is this a valid reason to do research on cloning? She doesn't say, and she doesn't ask. Instead she draws him out on how it might be used on another planet, and then goes on to describe a totally discredited book about an experiment in cloning people which never took place, by a man called Rorvik. With so much of her article spent on Rorvik's fantasy, reality gets lost completely.

What is wrong with many of the pieces on the new technology is that they are, in fact, fantasies, just like Rorvik's. They posit futures that frighten because they are awful: and that seems to be their purpose. They are effective because some of them are imaginative and well-written fantasies. The writers do not examine the technology for what it is, but can dismiss it for what it might become. They do not then need to offer reasons for why it has come about,

nor explore the reasons why women are queuing up to take advantage of it. Instead, they make you fear it, as Eve was made to fear the apple, because of the knowledge it would bring.

They remind me of someone describing the minute details of an abortion to someone who has never heard a description of any other form of surgery. They play on and encourage fear of science and technology, suggesting that you reject the technology before you know much about it. Articles by Gena Corea, Betty Hoskins and Helen Holmes all contribute to this, and the science fiction at the beginning and end of the book strongly reinforce it.

### *Man-made Women*

*Man-made Women* concentrates on sex selection, both prior to conception and during pregnancy, but takes pot shots at other new reproductive technology. Much of what I said about the pieces on new technology in *Test-tube Women* can also be said about this book, only more so.

Science fiction scenarios abound, sometimes killing women off completely and sometimes merely enslaving us in 'reproductive brothels'. Women are painted as totally passive and brainwashed victims of a male conspiracy to take over all our reproductive functions, even to the point where we are victimised before conception: 'previctimisation', as Janic Raymond coins it in the preface. The anti-abortionists will love the concept.

It is also badly edited. The writers repeat the same points and, what is worse, quote each other ad nauseam.

The title of Helen Holmes and Betty Hoskins' paper starts off the book by asking if sex selection techniques will lead to femicide, the mass killing off of women. They contribute some solid information when they summarise attempts to control for sex before conception, none of which work, and various attempts at sex selection once a pregnancy has been established. They take no comfort from the fact that techniques before conception have not worked, though that is where the real threat comes from. They assume that sooner or later a technique will work, and go on from there. They talk about the consequences of sex imbalances

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*Test-tube Women*, ed. Rita Arditta et al (Pandora Press, 1984).

*Man-made Women*, Gena Corea et al (Hutchinson, 1985).

*The Mother Machine*, Gena Corea (Harper & Row, 1985).

*The Reproductive Revolution*, Peter Singer and Deane Wells (OUP, 1984).

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if sex selection before conception were widely available.

They do not acknowledge that because sex selection at the moment means abortion, women only use it when there are heavy additional social, economic and political forces (like population control policies) that give them virtually no choice. Madhu Kishwar's paper on amniocentesis and sex selection during pregnancy in India makes precisely that point, and makes this book worth getting hold of. I'll return to it later.

After it, the book begins rapidly to go downhill, with Gena Corea's article on the reproductive brothel, a vision first created by Andrea Dworkin, which Corea describes in detail.

### *Breeding sows*

Corea says a model already exists because farm animals already live in reproductive brothels, with the new technology being tested and used on them in preparation for being applied to women. To show us what is in store she quotes a manager of a meat company:

The breeding sow should be thought of, and treated as a valuable piece of machinery whose function is to pump out baby pigs like a sausage machine. (p41)

Applied to women, she sees the following sorts of scenarios waiting for us in the near future:

The missing link to the assembly-line, brothel approach to human reproduction is being forged in in vitro fertilisation clinics around the world where teams are working intensively to control the cycles of women. In the brothel, on the appropriate days of their cycles, women would line up for Pergonal shots which will stimulate their ovaries. Engineers would superovulate only the top 10 to 20 per cent of the female population in the brothel.

Then, after following the development of the eggs through ultrasound and blood tests, they would operate on the women to extract the eggs. Perhaps they would allow the women to heal from the operation every other month so that the women would only be subjected to surgery six times per year . . .

They could then freeze the eggs for future in vitro fertilisation and transfer into a 'non-valuable' female. A woman could be used for reproduction long after she is dead . . . So could women who were never born. A female embryo could be developed just to the point where an ovary emerges and then the ovary could be cultured so that engineers could get eggs from it. The full woman would never be allowed to develop. (p46-47).



And so ends the need for women. Or does it?  
*Femicide — why wait?*

Roberta Steinbacher and Helen Holmes follow, quoting statistics from a number of surveys of sex preference of both men and women in the USA and internationally. The statistics do indicate an overall preference for boys, at least as first children.

Unfortunately, they do not say enough about the questions asked to make it clear whether the answers would be a good prediction of actual human behaviour — in other words, whether the preferences would survive in the face of pregnancy. The one survey of pregnant women.

they quote showed a majority without a preference for a boy. They attribute this to the actual presence of the baby, powerful enough to wipe out previous memories about preference. Unlike me, they take little comfort from this, and they do not question the validity of the other statistics because of it.

Instead they jump from the surveys into predictions of femicide, using the historical precedents of genocide of Native Americans in the USA and of Jews in Germany. On what basis do they make this comparison? It is a key comparison, it seems, since not only they but Robyn Rowland and Renate Duelli Klein make it. The genocide of Native Americans was accomplished with guns, starvation, forced migrations in inhuman conditions, and more. The gas chambers of Hitler's extermination camps used a technology no more complicated than the running of a car in a closed garage. If femicide were the goal, why bother with the complicated technology and why wait until some uncertain date in the future when the technology is perfected enough to use it for that purpose? They have not asked themselves. With such comparisons, the real possibility of genocide loses meaning.

In the eyes of these writers, social, economic and political control of women does not hold a candle to the power of medical technology. The future they predict assumes a form of fascism that makes Hitler's look like child's play, a fascism made possible by technology rather than by political ideology and power. Added to this, they write as if scientists are capable of perfecting any technological feat they can

dream up – not only technically, which in itself is a big assumption, but by implication financially and politically. They do not seem to notice the cost in hard cash of everyone selecting the sex of their children, or of making and maintaining enough glass wombs to make women's wombs redundant, or of 'fixing' the genes of every embryo. That, for me, is the difference between science fiction and analysis of science.

### *Allying with anti-abortionists*

FINNRAGE urge resistance to the technology. How do these writers propose going about that resistance? In *Man-made Women* Robyn Rowland takes up the problem of how to control or stop the development of the technology, which she believes it is necessary to do. She is aware that control would have to be exercised by the state, and is also aware of the dangers to women in increased state control of reproductive services. However, the technology frightens her more than the state. She goes so far as to suggest that, "feminists may have to consider alignments with strange pillow-friends: right-wing women perhaps" (p85) in order to get the technology controlled, and she has already practised what she preaches.

In early 1985, Rowland, accompanied by Duelli Klein, spoke at a press conference in London organised by anti-abortion MPs, in support of a bill that would have banned research on human embryos and placed strangling restrictions on the practice of in vitro fertilisation in British clinics. The bill was called 'The Unborn Children Protection Bill', and it was obvious that it threatened more than just IVF. Rowland was touted to the press as a feminist who was on their side, and though she said when she spoke that she supports abortion rights, she was the one contradicting herself, not them.

The principle behind the Powell Bill was that the state has both a duty and a right to control reproduction. Anti-abortionists supported Powell because they do not think sex, marriage and reproduction should be separated, and they do not believe anything artificial should interfere in "natural" reproduction. That includes intervention with birth control or abortion, as well as any assistance in becoming or remaining pregnant. They believe women

should accept the birth of children, just as we should accept the inability to have children, in both cases, whether we want children or not. There is nothing feminist in such an ideology, but it is consistent.

Few reproductive rights supporters were active in opposing the Powell Bill, and it was my strong feeling at the time that they were suffering the same contradictions as Rowland. Not only is it contradictory to support state restriction of infertility research and treatment but not of abortion. To kid oneself that the state is more benevolent than science to women is politically naive and dangerous.

### *The Mother Machine*

*The Mother Machine* makes the same assumptions as *Man-made Women*, and sets out to document the validity of those assumptions exhaustively. Corea interviewed and quotes dozens of people involved in the field, many of them scientists, and read hundreds of documents on the subject. She talks about eugenics, artificial insemination, embryo transfer, in vitro fertilisation, sex selection, surrogacy, artificial wombs and cloning. She gives graphic and often brutal descriptions of how this technology is applied in animals, particularly cows, before it is tried on people.

The chapter on embryo transfer is a good example of how Corea uses guilt by association to discredit the technology. Much of it centres around two doctors in the USA, brothers aptly named Seed, who want to earn both fame and fortune from embryo transfer clinics they plan to open across the country. It is a story of abysmal failure, not only to get official support from the hospitals where they worked or most colleagues, but also to get finance, women willing to submit to being their 'patients', or success in achieving any pregnancies. Their plans sound technically ridiculous to me. If Corea has proved anything in this chapter, it is that confidence men exist in the world of medicine as elsewhere and that private medicine practised in a free-enterprise manner is extremely likely to produce stories like this one. That is, however, not the point Corea is making.

In the chapter on in vitro fertilisation which is overall more informative, she explores the ways in which it might be used

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In *T&S3*, there was an article by Diana Leonard explaining many of the new reproductive technologies (some of them actual, some still only theoretical) – IVF, super-ovulation, surrogacy, cloning, sex selection and sex determination, and artificial wombs. That issue also included a report by Jalna Hanmer and Elizabeth Powell-Jones of the first national feminist conference on the technologies. In issue 5, Naomi Pfeffer wrote on why feminist attitudes towards the new technologies and infertility make her angry.

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other than to overcome infertility. She describes how Professor Wood of Australia talked about people coming to him to ask if they could make use of donor sperm or eggs to get pregnant because they were not happy with some aspect of their partner's appearance or personality. Corea writes that Wood's team did not comply with these requests and that they were the subject of discussions with an ethics committee. She then goes on to say:

Given the low opinion we women often have of ourselves, that internalized oppression that makes us feel a deep sense of inadequacy, one would expect that the use of donor eggs could, in time, become quite common. This possibility will be heightened should authority figures act as if it were perfectly reasonable for us not to want to use our imperfect genes to produce our imperfect children. It appears likely that they will. (p126)

Given that Wood refused, who are "they"? Suddenly, Corea wheels Dr Seed back in.

#### *Whose truth?*

Worse than her opinion of the medical profession is her opinion of women. In the chapter on surrogate motherhood, she criticises a Dr Parker, who has done a study on surrogate mothers. He believes there is a connection between some of the women's previous loss of a pregnancy through abortion and their wanting to become surrogate mothers, even if the women were not aware of it or denied it. "So Parker dismisses the women's own felt experience when it contradicts his theory", Corea says. (p239).

Unfortunately the exact same criticism can be levelled at Corea. She quotes a number of surrogate mothers as saying they have freely chosen to become surrogates and have wanted to give the children to help someone. Her response is that "Women may themselves suggest, even enthusiastically, that they help out the family by breeding for payment, but this does not mean that in a society that defines women by their reproductive function and consistently underpays them for their labor, that the women are acting of their own 'free will'." (p230). She too dismisses the women's own felt experience.

It would appear that no matter what the technology, Corea is against it. She went looking for abuses and of course she found them. What worries me is that she

found nothing else. It would seem that no woman has ever given informed consent to being experimented on, and that all experimentation is ruthless in its aims. The trial and error that characterises all medical research is for her inexcusable. Failure proves that the doctor never wanted to help women after all, while success increases the threat of control by doctors over women. Either way, we are being manipulated for reasons that have no connection with our own needs.

If so much evil is being and has been perpetrated by doctors and medical researchers, what is wrong with the rest of humankind that we have allowed it to continue? Her answer is that we have been silenced and confused, made to believe, accept and even welcome our own degradation. She exhorts us to speak the truth, in order to change the world. But whose truth?

Much of the documentation is fascinating in its own right, and there is a lot of useful information to be had from the book, including the extensive bibliography, but too often Corea uses her skill as a writer to manipulate the reader's feelings, by turning the information she has collected against its source to support her own point of view. Using images of breeding brothels, egg farms, war on the womb, hormonal bombardment of the ovaries, and subversive sperm, she takes the reader on a fascinating tour through her vision of woman as victim. It is sensationalist journalism at its best.

#### *The Reproductive Revolution*

*The Reproductive Revolution* deserves to be mentioned because it covers the same ground as the other three books but from a totally different perspective. It is a deceptively simple book, dealing with sophisticated arguments in a straightforward manner. It unashamedly supports the development of in vitro fertilisation and then looks at surrogacy, cloning, sex selection, genetic engineering and glass wombs. Each technique is explained in a non-mystifying way before the writers go into the ethics of whether to develop further those techniques still on the drawing board.

The book includes the texts of ethical and scientific evaluations of the technology by US, British and Australian medical bodies, which are amazingly sensible in many respects. Even more interesting, it contains the



results of a questionnaire answered by Australian IVF patients.

There are points in it that I think are naive (such as that if it becomes possible to flush an unwanted pregnancy from one woman and implant the embryo in an infertile woman who wants a baby, those on both sides of the abortion debate will have nothing left to disagree about). But overall, it is sane and more informative than Corea's et al, and an excellent counterpoint to them. It at least forces the reader to think about the issues from a different point of view.

### *Feminist analysis*

Attempts by feminists at a more balanced view may seem less exciting than *The Mother Machine*, but I'll mention two that I think are worth emulating. One is Ruth Hubbard's piece in *Test-tube Women* about the hazards of childbearing and the implications of pre-birth technology for the childbearing experience. One of the most important points she makes is that we are never going to have a choice between technology and 'natural' practice (which Steinbacher and Holmes think we have) because *all* practice is socially constructed: the 'natural' does not exist.

The real issue for feminists is, she says, whether the forms of technology we now have to choose from help to empower us or not and in which circumstances, and whether they cater for our needs and interests as we ourselves define them. She looks historically at the very real pain and hazards that exist in childbearing, because they explain why women have been willing to accept much of the current technology. She accepts the ways in which the technology has succeeded in making childbearing less painful and safer, and points out the ways in which it has failed or been applied when it was not needed.

Then she looks at other consequences it has had, intended or not, some of them capable of altering the entire experience of childbearing. For example, women can forget that it is possible not to have prenatal screening tests and still have a healthy and good pregnancy. She is able to be critical of the technology without falling back on con-

spricary theories to explain the dilemmas we currently face.

Madhu Kishwar's piece in *Man-made Women* deserves to be in a different book. She describes how in India in the past the low status of women and girls led to female infanticide and later to other forms of deprivation of girls which killed more of them than boys, and how this has kept the boy:girl ratio in favour of boys to this day. Amniocentesis is now being offered to women in those same areas as a sex determination test along with abortion if the foetus is female.

She makes it clear that the technology is not responsible for this anti-woman practice but was adapted to be used as yet another means of practising it. Kishwar is the only writer in *Man-made Women* who does not say or imply that a ban on technology is the way to solve what is essentially a social and economic problem. For her, the answer lies in changing women's status, for example so that women become economic assets instead of liabilities. She would campaign against women using amniocentesis for sex determination on health grounds because of its associated risks, especially in substandard clinics, and because it is not 100% accurate in determining foetal sex. But she does not locate the source or the solution of the problem in technology.

Neither Hubbard or Kishwar are apologists for technology in any sense, but *neither do they see women as passive victims*. It is from their perspective that I think we need to be assessing the technology, whether it is for infertility treatment, childbirth or birth control. We need to acknowledge that medical science responds to our demands and needs as well as creating them for us. Women are prepared to take a lot of risks with their bodies and their feelings both to have babies and to prevent and terminate pregnancies they don't want. It is not just doctors twisting our arms. If we accept as feminists that women have to define our own needs and interests, then even — or should I say particularly — other feminists should not presume to do it for us. □

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