

# The Politics of Hysteria: Man, Media and the Test-Tube Baby

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Some years ago, Dr. James Watson, the American scientist who won a Nobel prize for his deciphering of the genetic code, commented that when the first test-tube baby was born, 'All hell will break loose, politically and morally, all over the world.' For a few weeks in the summer of 1978 it looked as if he might be right. The media, especially in the United Kingdom but also in Canada, were ecstatic about the world's first test-tube baby. Now, in the summer of 1979, his prognosis seems a lot less likely. The media hysteria abated fairly quickly, reminding us of another American, Andy Warhol, who prophesied that one of the effects of communications technology would be that everyone in the world would become famous—for ten minutes.

Little Louise Brown's ten minutes came very early in life—before she was born, mainly. Louise is not strictly a test-tube baby in the sense that she was an extra-uterine production. She was conceived in a dish and replanted in her mother's womb, which had been duly fortified by intensive hormone therapy. In addition to this problematic bombardment with imperfectly understood substances, the mother was subjected to three surgical procedures: the withdrawal of the ovum, the implantation of the fertilized cell and the Caesarian section by which delivery was eventually effected. Much less detail was provided as to the father's role: presumably an induced ejaculation with no surgical nor chemotherapeutic intervention was necessary in his case. Louise was therefore considered as being the fruit of a technological conception and yet still a 'normal' birth. This was not yet Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, just one more step for mankind. An editorial in the *Toronto Star* (July 30, 1978) stressed this point: what Louise's arrival did, according to the journalistic pundits of lower Yonge Street, was 'mark another milestone... in the ingenuity and imagination of man.' Most of the press, both in the United Kingdom and North America took the implicit position that active man had once more exercised himself in doing passive women a great favour.

The birth of Louise was, no doubt about it, a very significant event from a number of perspectives, which the media duly catalogued: scientific, legal, political, moral and psychological aspects were all given a brief airing, between commercials, as it were. Yet the event itself, in retrospect, was primarily a media event, the technological society's mass communication

equivalent to the nine-day wonder. Dr. Ron Davidson, a geneticist from McMaster, noted this with understandable pique on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's television special (*It's a Girl: The Lovely Louise*, July 31st, 1978). The media people, said Dr. Davidson, knew more about the whole affair than Canadian researchers, and he hinted strongly that the famous international co-operation, which is supposed to be one of science's most significant achievements, is not as real as the founders of the Royal Society would have wished. Great secrecy in fact surrounds this research, and, while Dr. Davidson went no further than to suggest that prestige was the carrot which tempts the sticky scramble to be first, one notes that this kind of technology has a potentially very large market value. What it will fetch on the street remains to be seen. Mrs. Brown sold her story to an international news syndicate for \$675,000, but we do not know, as usual, what profits the syndicate made. We do not know, either, who is planning what little profitable do-it-yourself extra-uterine pregnancy package, where this is being done, who is controlling it or who is funding it.

The media event was not entirely uncritical. It even asked a small number of women to comment, but the vast resource pool of opinion and analysis was male. There were the lawyers, conscious of the fact, no doubt, that a New York couple was suing a hospital for 1.5 million dollars for having ruined their incubating embryo deliberately. The lawyers indubitably feel that the main problems around test-tube babies are legal: problems related to genetic 'accidents', inheritance laws, property disposition, child custody and a whole host of others which existing law probably cannot deal with, and which promises windfall legal fees. One almost senses the anticipatory hand-rub of legal greed, and doctors no doubt temper their sense of a medical miracle with nervous glances at the malpractice implications.

The theologians came out in force, but not in unanimity. Fundamentalists predictably argued that Man was usurping one of God's most sacred functions, while progressive clergymen argued that God had given men scientific powers with the intent that he should use them. As far as I know, the High Priestess of the Family, Anita Bryant, was not heard from, perhaps because the whole business confused the argument about the definition of where life begins. We do not yet know whether we

have to think of dropping the glass dish as the sinful equivalent to aborting a fetus, but no doubt Renaissance International is working on that one.

Also working on the notion that the problems can be solved by improving definitions are, again predictably, certain sociologists. Amitai Etzioni, president of the Centre for Policy Research in New York, is reported by the *Telegram* as saying: 'We need definitions of life and death and need to know when to pull the plug.' We also need to know, of course, *who* pulls the plug.

Hovering over the whole discussion of test-tube reproduction, as interpreted by the news media, is the 'Draconian shadow of the separate but obviously related technology of cloning and the genetic fix. Again, it is not clear just what stage of development this technique has reached. The media was reassuring and threatening at the same time, milking melodrama and pouring balm in equal parts. Louise Brown's ten minutes of fame did reach the apotheosis of that form of celebrity by becoming a *Time* cover story. *Time* pronounces, in one of its sub-stories, that *A Test-Tube Baby Is Not a Clone*. (July 31, 1978). Human cloning, *Time* reassures us, is so far in the future as to be a topic only for cocktail chatter, and currently significant of mice rather than of men. In fact, it may never be a significant technique for men: current technology cannot persuade the male and female pronuclei to merge so that the male XY chromosome combination cannot be reproduced artificially. Women must note with interest that it is technically easier to produce cloned females than cloned males. This could be a real shot in the arm for male supremacy, which has always had the programming of women as a top priority.

It is easy, of course, to castigate as doom-sayers and pessimists those who are anxious about the macabre possibilities of uniting invitro conception with cloning. The media have duly reported public concern that 'they' might want to produce a race of Hitlers or a robot species. No one in the Brown media coverage seemed to be concerned that we might abolish men or women or both. Generally, the whole presentation of the event leaned towards celebration rather than analysis, yet clearly the issues raised are of very great significance to the lives and culture of women. This does not mean that they are not important to men. Indeed, the whole technology of controlled extra-uterine conception may well solve the problem of the uncertainty of paternity, which has bedevilled men for centuries and spurred them to make tremendous co-operative efforts to transfer fatherhood from its reality as mere idea to something more concrete in social practice. It is conceivable that packaged potency might become an important commodity in male reproductive experience. Nonetheless, the significance for women is what we would like to talk about here, for it is the crucial aspect of these developments which was least examined in the hysterical hype of the media event.

It is possible to argue, and it has been argued, that reproductive technology offers an unprecedented promise of liberation for women. Respected feminists, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone, worked from a simple syllogistic logic which went like this: Women have always been oppressed/ The cause of this oppression is women's reproductive function/ Women's liberation therefore depends on rescuing her from this biological trap.<sup>1</sup> De Beauvoir stated the premises, but did not, like Firestone draw the conclusion. Firestone's vision of a cybernetic society in which the race is perpetuated by technical means is not one which women have embraced with much enthusiasm. There are three main reasons for this. One is a resistance to technological solutions in general. This is not necessarily a New Ludditeism, a mindless resistance to machines, though I don't mind admitting to an element of this in my own thinking.<sup>2</sup> I found Hal, the computer in *2001*, a great deal more persuasive than R2D2 in *Star Wars*. I refuse to think of

computers as cuddly. I think it reasonable to ask how a technology which cannot deliver the mails expects to deliver unfolded, unbent and un mutilated babies. Yet this sort of gut Ludditeism is not perhaps, wholly irrational. It has become increasingly apparent that technology as it is organized and controlled in modern society has no concern at all with human life. The whole nuclear situation is bringing this fact to public consciousness in a steadily more dramatic yet more thoughtful way. The key question is embodied, of course, in the words 'organized and controlled'. Shulamith Firestone recognized this. Her work was an appeal to women to grab control of the relations of reproduction before the robots of capitalism dehumanized us for good. This is the political problem, but the ways and means of taking over this control are not at all clear.

The second resistance comes from women who argue that childbearing itself is a valuable and irreplaceable experience. This is a very tricky position. In some of its political manifestations, those associated with the reactionary politics of petty-bourgeois movements epitomized by the anti-abortion movement, the argument for the cultural importance of childbearing becomes an argument for the eternal banishment of women to the private realm. Yet the undoubtedly sincere but shallow emotionalism of the self-proclaimed Right-to-Lifers, who see no contradiction in their devotion to capital punishment and increased 'Defence' spending, should not be permitted to obscure the realities of the motherhood issues. Feminists are increasingly aware that reproduction is the central issue for women, and that the problems of women's inferiority are not biologically but culturally determined. It is not the act of childbearing nor the task of child rearing which stamps women as inferior, but the *value* which male-dominant society has given to these necessary activities of social life. The strains and stresses of this masculine operation are visible in the knots in which men have tied motherhood, the whole Mary and Eve complex, the mind/body dualisms and the historical separation of public and private life which are the lived and visible legacies of centuries of male supremacy. Male culture has found death more existentially exciting than birth, and has chosen the big fight with the natural world as the path to their destructive vision of glory. Male culture has no philosophy of birth, but only a set of social practices which banish women and children from the 'real' world, the male-defined world of aggression and run-away technology, of macho morality and corporate politics.

These are the values which women are beginning to challenge, a challenge which goes far beyond the simple assertion of homely virtues. Female *experience* is a revolutionary ground for a new politics. It is an experience which runs exactly counter to masculine value systems. It deems life as such as of high value, which means that a politics of violence and destruction of life is a crude and savage politics which must be transcended. It regards the reality of childbirth as a fact and a symbol of human integration with nature, and therefore rejects the ideology of 'control' of nature in favour of a politics of conservation of life and its environment. It is a politics which recognizes the human worth of every child born of women, but rejects the phony individualism which measures worth by success in endless and vicious competition. Feminists, of course, are not starry-eyed, and this is not a Utopian politics. It is a vision of a different value system, rooted in feminine experience and very radical. Vision is an essential ingredient of politics, and it is ridiculous to see this kind of vision as less realistic than Men's assorted visions of the Good Society. We shall have to be shown why it is less realistic to envision a politics of co-operation with Nature and love of life than it is to envision torturing Old Mother Nature to Death and calling the executioners heroes.

The third resistance to automated reproduction is a very complex one, and ultimately unites the resisters. However, as it operates on a number of levels, this unity isn't immediately

apparent. It is a resistance which runs a gamut of concern from fear and suspicion to fairly cool-headed analysis. We might call it the historical question, for what it asks, essentially is 'Why Now?' Why is it that at this particular moment in human history our masters appear to be moving from a Pro-Natal position, which for centuries has held to doctrines of the desirability of population increase, to a cautiously anti-natal position, with its contraceptive technology, reluctant relaxation of legal constraints on homosexuality and the politics of male hysteria with its test-tube babies? This movement from a Pro- to an Anti-Natal Posture appears to mark a tremendous swing in ruling class ideology and practice.

At the level of fear and suspicion, this easily leads into some kind of conspiracy theory: there's some group of people out there, motivated by deep-dyed racial or religious or extragalactic cunning, who are trying to do 'us' in. It is this kind of mindless dread which can be and is exploited by Right-wing tub-thumpers in support of the sanctity of the patriarchal family.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are the positivist analyses, which point out that it is only now that the technology is available, and, as technology is the ghost in the machine of human progress, who are we to resist its dictates? This may be true of test-tube babies, but it is certainly not true of the related technology of contraception. As all feminists now know, contraceptive technologies have been developed and quite savagely repressed throughout a long historical period, the whole Pro-Natal era. What the notion of technological progressivism fails to address, however, is the fact that technology does not have some kind of built-in, history-moving mechanical momentum. Technological development is a matter of the allocation of resources, the articulation of objectives, the setting up of projects, the hiring of people, the making of decisions. It is, in other words, a set of social relations and social activities, and it is precisely here that we must begin to be much more specific about who 'they' are who are making these decisions.

It is quite difficult to find out. Obviously political and legal decisions related to laws governing abortion and homosexuality are relatively easy to trace, though we should perhaps pay more attention to the facts that the Gay Liberation Movement appears to be the product rather than the cause of what legal relaxation there has been, and that the abortion reforms, unsatisfactory though they are, have been on the whole more easily brought about than decent day care or really safe contraception. Technological resources are allocated in a much less public way, in the boardrooms of multinational pharmaceutical companies, probably, or in the complex government/industry/academic nexus in which research money is fought over.

The easy way to express this is to say that these are ruling class decisions. Marxists do not seem to be as comfortable with this notion as they usually are with sloganized accounts of bourgeois perfidy. This is because Marxism has decreed that capitalism is Pro-Natal, and that its built-in tendency to irrational accumulation and expansion of everything is irreversible. Yet this orthodoxy is astigmatic. There appear to be quite good reasons why capitalism might be reversing itself on the population question, and the activities of such organizations as the Club of Rome suggest some of the reasons why this may be so. Astute capitalists—and let us never underestimate their numbers nor their know-how—do see that the destruction of the environment for profit is ultimately a short-term investment indeed. They recognize that an increasingly automated mode of production and the degradation of labour wrought by efficiency experts can create serious social upheavals. Massive unemployment and worker alienation presumably have limits beyond which lie trouble. No doubt economic power brokers believe that they know where these limits are, and they also know that there are only two ways to avoid reaching them. One is

to—perish the thought—slow down production and the division of labour: the other is to reduce population. A third condition which makes population control attractive is, of course, the problem which we talk about as that of the 'Third World'—another instance of the carving up of wholes into parts which appears to be so essential to male rationality. The truth is that the capitalist mode of production cannot meet either the so-called revolution of rising expectations nor even the everyday needs of a world population which is outstripping global resources and, despite huge investments of our money in space exploration, it does seem that the moon isn't made of edible cheese after all.

There are, then, excellent reasons why the allocation of technological resources to the development of population control should make good sense to the political and economic decision makers of the world. The questions are: do they make sense to the people of the world, and if not, what are we going to do about it?

Difficult questions, these, but not hopeless ones. In the first place, resistance to these dehumanizing tendencies presents a particular challenge to feminism, which is increasingly recognized as the most profoundly radical and promising political movement of our times. As feminists, male and female, begin to recognize the profundity of the transformation of values which the Movement represents, questions of theory and practice, of projects and strategies, begin to clarify. Perhaps we should work towards a reversal of world population trends, but the way to do this is not by a contraceptive technology which limits the number of births at the same time as it kills off women of child-bearing years. A safe contraceptive technique is an immediate and pressing concern, so that the reduction of world population will grow from the free and intelligent choices which women and men make with regard to their reproductive capacity.

Environmental conservation is an objective which unites women and men who would prefer to respond to a politics of conciliation with nature rather than a chauvinistic politics of hysteria. The reorganization of child care and the transformation of the value of shared tasks of child rearing are quite specific political objectives, beginning with day care and proceeding to radical reform in the socialization and education of the generation which will carry forward the political struggle for an integrative rather than a competitive society. Women can take the lead in the resistance to the degradation of work which means activity in the Union Hall as well as in the work place. The anti-life poisoning of the foods we eat and the bombardment of our bodies by strayed radio-active particles have to be resisted politically. These are the politics of the feminine principle of integration of the natural and social reality.

In the face of these kinds of objectives, the technology of test-tube babies has a low priority. It is far too problematic to rush ahead with and we need a concerted effort to find out who is doing what, where and how. The curious mixture of male power fantasy, Brave New World robotism and ~~un~~perverted totalitarian vision of an absolutely automated biological assembly line is one to which women must respond rationally, coolly and with well-organized resistance. . . and without any help at all from the media.

The media content research referred to in this article was done by Helen Gilks, of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

1 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. (New York, H.M. Parshley, 1961), esp. pp. 57-58.  
Shulamith Firestone. *The Dialectics of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. (New York, 1976).

2 The Luddites were the 19th century English weavers who responded to mechanized looms by destroying the machines.