

Test-tube People

Tomas MacSheoin

1985

a review of

Test-Tube Women, What Future for Motherhood? Rita Arditti et. al., Pandora Press, 482 pages.

“Human beings will end their second millennium since Christ perfecting the means to tamper, for the first time, with their own nature and existence,” *The Economist* of London editorialized recently. And it is hard to imagine an area more important for political debate and action than this one which will determine the fate of our children and their children.

Until now there has been little break in the consensus of approval that surrounds biotechnology and genetic engineering. Opposition to the development of this technology is considered “irrational” and “technophobic.” Discussions have been mainly philosophical or ethical, ignoring the central questions of power and profit that determine the introduction of any new technology. The public image of the technology is a wonderful one: reproductive technology comes rosy with smiling babies for infertile couples. Anyone who opposes this development must be a religious fanatic, or a kook, or paranoid.

Yet it isn't necessary for us to indulge in wild paranoid visions of the horrible possibilities this technology brings. Capital's own forecasters have already done it for us. The RAND Corporation has estimated that routine production of specialized human mutants might come by the year 2025. Such para-humans, they suggested, might be used as sewer workers or stoop labourers, might be kept in enclosed areas (i.e. prisons) as sources of organs for transplants, etc., or might be used for carrying human embryos. Tinkering with genes might also enable capital to create mutants capable of exposure to highly toxic or radioactive work processes and to an extremely toxic environment.

A scientist interviewed in this book who works on cloning (whose work is presented to the public as work on cancer, ignoring its applicability to human cloning), presents as a possible vision of the use of cloning its use in space colonies, or on devastated worlds. It is not we, but capital and its scientific priests, that dream of these holocausts.

A Technological Fix with a Vengeance

More outrageous “justifications” are offered for the development of this technology. William Walters, an Australian pioneer in this research, justifies exogenesis (fertilization, growth and “birth” of the child outside the womb) as a way to protect fetuses from the environmental pollution and drugs: “It is conceivable that prospective parents may be able to protect their offspring better in a perfect artificial environment of exogenesis than in the natural uterine one, exposed as it is to many adverse influences which cannot always be readily avoided in modern urban civilization.” This is a technological fix with a vengeance. Rather than removing the dangers created by previous technological travesties (cleaning up nature, abolishing harmful products, etc.,) one adds yet one more layer of technological intervention.

This technology is also a vehicle for a new authoritarian philosophy of eugenics. One scientist writes: "Cloning would permit the preservation and perpetuation of the finest genotypes that arise in our species." And another, Dr. James Bonner, argues, "One suggestion has been to remove genetic material from each individual after birth and then promptly sterilize that individual. During the individual's lifetime, records would be kept of accomplishments and characteristics. After the individual's death, a committee decides if his (sic) accomplishments are worthy of procreation. If so, some genetic material would be removed from the depository and stimulated to clone a new individual. If the committee decides the genetic material is unworthy of procreation, it is destroyed. The question indeed is not a moral one but a temporal one. When do we start?"

Yet another researcher interviewed by Genoveffa Correa speaks of quality control in the breeding of human beings: "But if we cull down the lazy type that is not interested to contribute to society, I think we have done a great deal. We do that in race horses and farm animals. We select the best dairy cow, we select the fastest horse and we select sheep for their wool. I think we can do a little bit of selection at the human level."

Quality Control of Human Reproduction

Here we are at what is, perhaps, the heart of the matter. The reproduction of people becomes a production process like any other. To speak of quality control of children means that they have been turned into just one more commodity: "recent medical and social practices have made it possible to commodify our reproduction all down the line, making available for purchase eggs, sperm, embryos, surrogate mothers and babies." (Ruth Hubbard)

This has come about through a Taylorization (or scientific management system) of reproduction, a practice that dismembers motherhood into fragmented, rationalized, technological components. Along with Taylorization comes a total alienation from the child—now simply the "product" of the mother's "labor"—on the part of the woman. One of the authors writes:

"I watched a television news show. The man interviewed was Dr. Richard Levine, an artificial inseminator of breeder women and founder of Surrogate Parenting Associates of Louisville, Kentucky. The woman was Elizabeth Kane (pseudonym), the first of Levine's surrogates.

"That's what I do: make babies," said the man.

"I think of myself as a human incubator," said the woman.

"Man is possessing woman's procreative power. She is losing it. She is a thing. She is a vessel for the babies men make."

The major function of quality control is the rejection of inferior or defective products. Already this ideology is being promoted and practiced and has found its ideological representation in the image of the "perfect child." Here again the image is far removed from the reality, and the technological fix is once more in evidence. While there is much talk of eventual genetic therapy, what is offered at the moment is prenatal diagnosis with the offer of an abortion if the fetus is imperfect. The technology of genetic screening, apart from being in itself hazardous, "focuses our attention on our genes at a time when environmental hazards are on the increase and need much more attention than they are getting." (Ruth Hubbard) This, conveniently for chemical and nuclear capital, personalizes the problem of disability and distracts attention from capital's threat to our fertility.

To understand how far this goes, it is worth quoting from an article by Andrew Veitch of the *Manchester Guardian*, whose sensible cynicism towards the drug industry seems to desert him when he's dealing with biotech.

"Most genetically faulty embryos are rejected by the mother within a couple of weeks of what has hitherto been known as fertilisation. An immense number of embryos with comparatively minor defects survive. It will soon be possible to identify these defects and offer a termination, not halfway through pregnancy, as now, but within 10 weeks of the mother's last period. And we are not talking about serious cases of spina bifida and anencephaly, but babies bearing the genes that will predispose them to diabetes, muscular dystrophy, heart disease, perhaps even schizophrenia...Ethicists must ponder not only when life should be deemed to begin, but which lives should be qualified to start."

No doubt some scientific minion of capital will soon discover genes linked to work shirking or anti-authoritarian attitudes, just as the "criminal gene" was previously discovered. (Needless to say, the factual basis

for a genetic tendency towards schizophrenia is as suspect as that involved in the “criminal gene.” This is not what is important, however: here science is pure ideology. The message is that our problems originate in the womb or in the genes and not in society.) Here the Nazi task of ridding the world of the deformed, the stupid, the “inferior” races, those who don’t fit in and those who won’t fit in, can be taken on by reproductive technology.

A New Improved Master Race

When the human child is reduced to a product in a world full of products, science moves beyond “quality control” to “improving” the original product. Already the sales agents of the new reproductive technology are advertising their technique as the new improved way to have children.

This is just one shot away from the eugenic philosophy of such U.S. sperm banks as the Repository for Germinal Choice in Escondido, California. (See the August 1983 *Mother Jones*.) This sperm bank is inspired by the American geneticist Herman Muller, himself inspired by Marxism, and aims to provide “the finest germinal material we can get our hands on to ‘improve the human species.’” The master race theory of improvement through selective breeding finds its ultimate twist in Muller’s vision: “He envisioned great banks of human semen containing ‘stocks [which] might become recognized as especially worthy.’ He predicted that widespread procreation by ‘conscious selection of germ cells’ would begin after the sperm of superior men was available. He even dreamed of a genetic eugenic republic, where all would be born genetically improved.” One can already see the slogans: Create Better Men Through Science!

Needless to say, this slogan is also capital’s. Exogenesis and genetic recombination present capital and the state with the possibility of redesigning people for their own purposes. Capital becomes god, deciding who shall be reproduced, why, and in what form. It will make our children’s children over in its own image.

The reproductive technologists are ready and willing to help in this great leap forward. Dr. Richard Seed, a specialist in embryo transfer at Chicago’s Reproduction and Fertility Clinic enthuses: “Mankind is on the verge of modifying life. You’ll be able to sit down and specify a DNA sequence associated with intelligence and put that in the embryo. We’re talking about manipulation. We’re talking about control.”

Writers on ethics and philosophers are already preparing the way for capital. One example, Jonathan Glover, the Oxford philosopher, has written a book entitled *What Sort of People Should There Be?*, dealing with moral and ethical objections to genetic engineering. Ignoring power and profit, Glover effortlessly faces people’s objections to this new technology and finds them baseless. He argues that given this chance to “improve” our species, there is no reasonable argument against taking such a course. Indeed, Glover asserts, if we have a moral obligation to improve the world and our lot, then we also have a moral obligation to improve ourselves through genetic engineering.

Once again, we are assured that our situation will be improved not through our own social action, but through the intervention of technology. The problems of the world are reduced to inferior genetic material; when that material is discarded or improved, a better world will result. It would be charitable to say that these moral philosophers show a woeful ignorance of the real world. But it would be more accurate to say that they don’t know what they’re talking about and that their ignorance is cultivated to omit certain central questions. It is outrageous to hear them parrot the same line on the marvelous benefits biotech can produce to help alleviate the world population and starvation crises, while ignoring the fact that these crises are a direct result of the present world economic and technological system.

Yet isn’t this all pessimistic nonsense? Won’t biotechnology feed the hungry, make the infertile fertile, help control the feckless fertility of those who should not reproduce, and lift the world economy out of crisis? Won’t technology help to perfect human beings and their reproduction, making all the best for the best in the best of all possible worlds?

I’d like to answer these questions and finish this review with a long quotation from Genoveffa Correa which provides a damning critique of the optimistic ignorance of the moral and ethical specialists. It also presents a superb identification with laboratory animals and a warning of what our position within reproductive technology really is:

"I wanted to see the animals. The biologist stepped into the adjacent laboratory, made arrangements for a research technician to show me around, and returned to his office.

"I entered the laboratory. Passing through three or four rooms, I saw rabbits, mice, rats, monkeys in stainless steel cages. I felt like an impostor. The biologist and the technician spoke to me as though I were one of them. But I was one of the animals.

"The technician was explaining to me how dangerous it could be to handle animals. Some animals would bite you if they got a chance. Here, I'll show you, he said, leading me back into the monkey room.

"In one cage, two baby monkeys, looking fearful, clung to each other. The technician opened the cage. The adult monkeys watching from their separate cages screamed. The babies ran to the back of the cage, still clinging together as they fled. the technician pretended to reach for them. Screeches filled the room. The adults rattled the bars of their cages.

"That's a warning to the babies,' the technician explained to me. 'If they had been out of their cages, they'd have attacked me. They all protect the babies.'

"I have often thought of that scene. Sitting at my typewriter night after night, I see my writing on the new reproductive technologies as a scream of warning to other women."

I would advise men to take warning as well.

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