The Artificial Womb – Patriarchal Bone or Technological Blessing?

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Every area of technological innovation has an idea that can serve as a kind of ‘Rorschach Test’ for revealing some of our deepest intuitions. Consider, e.g., the idea of a fully automated factory. This idea can be used to bring out a person’s intuitions as to the progressive potential of cybernetics. Some people will share David Noble’s view that we are already heading in the direction of such factories and that workers should militantly resist present uses of automation before it is too late. Others will follow André Gorz who sees automated factories as playing a key role in the liberation of workers via a ‘society of free time’. My own view, developed in another place, is that this focus on how present uses of technology will affect traditional worker constituencies needs to be supplemented with an equal concern with how present uses of automation will affect other non-privileged constituencies. In particular, we need to relate our critique of present uses of automation to the interests articulated by the contemporary movements for racial and sexual equality.

In what follows, I will be suggesting that the idea of ectogenesis – the complete gestation of the human fetus in an artificial womb – can serve as a kind of ‘Rorschach Test’ regarding what have been called ‘the new reproductive technologies’. That is, it can be used to bring out radically different intuitions regarding the progressive potential of this influential scientific-technological project. I will begin by contrasting the generally positive reaction of Peter Singer and Deane Wells with the highly critical reaction of Patricia Spallone. I will then go on to suggest that Shulamith Firestone’s early remarks on ectogenesis add an important dimension to a critical discussion of the new reproductive technologies. I will argue that Firestone should be read as being primarily concerned with the problem of ‘false consciousness’ as it arises in this context. That is, I will argue for a reading of Firestone’s work that takes her to be primarily concerned with getting women to reflect critically on their present attitudes towards such things as infertility, motherhood and biological parenthood rather than naively trying to set out a blueprint for ‘post-revolutionary society’. This is not to suggest, however, that I will be endorsing all aspects of Firestone’s position. Indeed, I will stress that her vision of political struggle needs to be expanded to give an equal role to all of the contemporary movements for equality (racial and economic as well as sexual). Only then, I will argue, will we be able to develop a truly critical and historically effective response to problematic features of the new reproductive technologies. I will conclude by noting how the novelist Marge Piercy deals with the idea of ectogenesis. I will suggest that we would do well to follow her lead and relate our thinking about ectogenesis not only to the concerns addressed by the movement for sexual equality but also to the concerns addressed by the various movements for racial and economic equality. In this sense, what follows should be seen as providing another case where a successful challenge to a new technology will require a difference-respecting coalition between the various movements for equality.

A final introductory note: Ectogenesis can no longer be dismissed as ‘just science fiction’. As the editors of Test-Tube Women point out, 1988 saw ‘the officially published beginning of ectogenesis’. Nor can it be dismissed as still too far in the future to merit serious consideration here and now. Whether we like it or not, the idea of ectogenesis is implicit in the ‘logic’ of the new reproductive technologies as they are presently being developed and deployed. Indeed, ectogenesis is sometimes referred to as the ‘back end’ of a project the ‘front end’ of which is in vitro fertilization. This means that, insofar as people support such things as in vitro fertilization (in a quest, say, for a solution to a ‘fertility’ problem), they can’t simply ignore the more remote techniques implicit in the larger scientific and technological project.

Peter Singer and Deane Wells give a number of arguments for seeing ectogenesis as a progressive development. One of the most interesting, given our aim of bringing out the differences between their view and the view of people like Patricia Spallone, is the following:

Ectogenesis could at some future time make right-to-life organizations drop their objections to abortion; for it is only our inability to keep early fetuses alive that makes abortion synonymous with the violation of any right to life which the fetus may have. If we could keep a fetus alive, outside the body, abortion could be done using techniques that would not harm the fetuses, and the fetuses, or newborn babies as they would then be, could be adopted – if there were enough willing couples...

Would those who now argue for the permissibility of abortion object to this development? If the feminist argument for abortion takes its stand on the right of women to control their own bodies, feminists at least should not object. Freedom to choose what is to happen to one’s body is one thing; freedom to insist on the death of a being capable of living outside one’s body is another. At present these two are inextricably linked, and so the woman’s
freedom to choose conflicts head-on with the alleged right to life of the fetus. When ectogenesis becomes possible these two issues will break apart, and women will choose to terminate their pregnancies without thereby choosing the inevitable death of the fetus they are carrying. Pro-choice feminists and pro-fetus right-to-lifers can then embrace in happy harmony.¹⁰

To those who ask what could possibly motivate a society to develop ectogenesis to the extent where all this could happen, Singer and Wells suggest that a benign ‘invisible hand’ will be at work:

... the present gap of a little over five months during which the natural womb is absolutely essential will certainly be reduced, and may end up being eliminated altogether. This will occur almost by accident, because the ability to keep the immature fetus alive outside the womb will not be developed by researchers deliberately seeking to make ectogenesis possible, but rather by doctors attempting to save the lives of premature babies.¹¹

In an article where he considers Robyn Rowland’s objection that ectogenesis is part of a larger project that would lead to a situation where women will be ‘fighting to retain or reclaim the right to bear children’,¹³ Singer adds the following points. First, he suggests that women researchers have figured ‘quite prominently’ in the initial stages of this project. Thus, it would be hard to say that it is simply a product of male researchers’ biases against women. Second, he suggests that women have a greater interest than men in overcoming the infertility problems addressed by this project and that, therefore, ‘it is hard to see why a feminist should condemn it.’ Third, he suggests that, even if this project leads to ectogenesis, the latter could expand the reproductive options available to women. Here he appeals to an ahistorical reading of Firestone that I will reject below:

Ectogenesis will, if it is ever successful, provide a choice for women. Shulamith Firestone argued ... that this choice will remove the fundamental biological barrier to complete equality. Hence, Firestone welcomed the prospect of ectogenesis.¹⁴

Singer concludes by suggesting that Rowland’s fears rest on an overly pessimistic belief—the belief that if women lose control of reproduction they will necessarily be condemned to unequal status in other areas of life:

I am not so pessimistic about the abilities of women to achieve equality with men across the broad range of human endeavor. For that reason I think women will be helped, rather than harmed, by the development of a technology that makes it possible for them to have children without being pregnant.¹⁵

To Patricia Spallone, ectogenesis has no progressive potential at all; for it is part and parcel of an inherently sexist project:

Technical techniques such as IVF exist in the context of a whole technology of reproduction which also includes egg and embryo freezing, superovulation of women, artificial wombs, genetic selection of embryos, genetic engineering, and more. We understand that the scientific approach via high technologies is ‘logical’ in a world where women’s bodies are considered expendable. We understand that this world view can only exist in sexist cultures, a contemporary affront to women’s human dignity.¹⁶

Thus, it is not only false to say that these new technologies presently serve the interests of women: it is also false to say that they could serve women’s interests some time in the future. Thus, feminists should completely reject the new reproductive technologies and develop their own, women-centred approaches to reproductive issues:

Feminist resistance to the new reproductive technologies is not a negative stance, but a positive one, where we can re-assert women’s power and knowledge and experience to ask our own questions about fertility, problems, childbirth, childrearing, motherhood, abortion. The women’s health movement, reproductive rights activists, feminist historians and critics of the new technologies, while demystifying the politics beyond the myth that reproductive technology is neutral, are fighting for this. Feminism seeks a world where women’s lives will be different. While resisting eugenic technologies, we can explore what other
kinds of research and medical approaches will serve women’s needs.\textsuperscript{17}

Spallone has many interesting things to say about what such an alternative approach might involve. Most basically, it would be part of the women’s health movement which has led to ‘feminist health centers and clinics around the world’. That is, it would stress prevention rather than rely on a ‘technological fix’ for patriarchically defined ‘problems’:

\ldots on a most basic level, technological ‘solutions’ are not solutions. A great deal of reproductive health problems, including fertility and congenital conditions, can be eliminated with a woman-centered approach to reproduction: with better primary health care, and changes in social and economic relations.\textsuperscript{18}

Spallone acknowledges, by the way, that such an alternative approach will require active struggle on the part of women:

\ldots resistance must take the shape of community organizing and local protesting, debate over what these issues mean for the women on whom they are used, exposing activities going on in our own backyards, calling for public accountability on these issues, and demanding our right as individuals and communities to say ‘no’ to these technologies.\textsuperscript{19}

One way to get clearer on Spallone’s basic position is to focus on her critique of the ‘reproductive technology is neutral’ position. After documenting sexist and eugenic dimensions in past and present work in reproductive technology, Spallone considers the objection that she has not established that the new technologies are inherently regressive:

\ldots many social activists, including feminists, incorporate the ‘technology is neutral’ belief into a use/abuse analysis of reproductive technology. Those who adhere to the use/abuse argument believe that IVF technology is neutral and can be used for either good or for bad. So, a sensitive IVF advocate might argue that IVF is bad when it exploits women, or is restricted to heterosexual women living with men, but that IVF is good when women choose it ‘freely’ and are not discriminated against.\textsuperscript{20}

To Spallone, this argument makes the mistake of thinking that ‘the pursuit of science (“biological facts”) does not incorporate moral/political decisions’ and the mistake of thinking that ‘IVF and genetic engineering do not occur in a particular ideological context’.\textsuperscript{21} Notice that Spallone indicts ‘pure science’ along with the ‘engineering’ or technology to which it gives rise. With this move she blocks the suggestion that a neutral ‘scientific’ dimension can be pried away from the new reproductive technologies and put to use in a new, woman-centred approach to reproductive issues. Her basic reason for this further move is that ‘basic scientific research’, like its technological applications, ‘imposes an aggressive, confrontational relationship to nature, in this case to woman’s reproduction’.

Scientific control of ‘human reproduction’ requires that some women be posed as ‘Other’, as clinical and laboratory object of study for the scientist-observer. Such an approach could only proceed in social conditions which allow them. If scientists asked different kinds of questions about biology, if medical scientists recognized women as the active social subjects of reproduction, not as passive breeders, if they respected women’s reproductive freedom and autonomy, then they would not be pursuing IVF and human embryo research.\textsuperscript{22}

Spallone grants that this is a ‘radical’ position in that it impugns the neutrality not only of technology but of ‘pure science’ as it is currently practised. Thus, she goes beyond Gordon Taylor’s suggestion that we should put some of our biological science in an ‘ice box’ until society is ready for it.\textsuperscript{23} Instead, we should recognize that current biological science and the technologies they spawn (such as ectogenesis) are based on a world view that ‘can only exist in sexist cultures, a contemporary affront to women’s human dignity’.\textsuperscript{24} And so women must categorically reject this project’s approach to knowledge:

To change our relationship to science and technology in the most woman-respecting, life-respecting way, we must start from the recognitn that we are our bodies, we are ourselves. We do not have to accept man-made paradoxes and the splitting up of women into parts (eggs, embryos, wombs, placenta) which has been so ingrained as to seem natural. We can overturn the dualities of mind/body, rational/emotional, science (what men do)/not science (what women do), and the ancient conceptual split embryo/woman. Knowledge of women’s fertility and procreative powers must have to do with our bodies, and be grounded in experiences in the world, in feeling and doing (which also includes thinking and observing), not what scientists find for us in laboratories after they have taken our insides out. Mainstream scientists’ ‘out there’ is our ‘here and now’.\textsuperscript{25}

\textbf{III}

Here it might be well to pause to consider a crucial difference between the two approaches we’ve considered so far. As we noted above, Singer and Wells see ectogenesis coming about as a result of the non-problematic desire to save premature babies.\textsuperscript{26} To Spallone, however, ectogenesis will be developed as a result of the patriarchal desire for ‘scientific’ control of human reproduction. In short, the two approaches see ectogenesis as arriving...
under radically different auspices and thus having very different potentials. For Singer and Wells, effective ectogenetic techniques will be developed as a result of a non-problematic motive and so there is no reason why they can’t be turned to the progressive end of increasing reproductive options for women. For Spallone, such a progressive potential is ruled out because ectogenesis will arrive under patriarchal auspices which will cast a regressive shadow over any future use. Notice that their account of what is presently motivating the push to develop ectogenesis allows Singer and Wells to avoid resting their case for ectogenesis on a naive ‘technology is neutral’ position. They can claim a progressive potential for this technology by pointing to its non-problematic roots rather than by claiming that a technology’s roots don’t matter. In this sense, they can challenge Spallone’s negative assessment of ectogenesis on empirical grounds (by challenging her account of what is in fact motivating present research) rather than by appealing to an abstract thesis about technology (by challenging the claim that a technology that is developed for problematic reasons must necessarily be used for problematic ends). The problem, of course, is that it is not at all clear that Singer and Wells’ account is correct. Perhaps the desire to save premature babies will play some role, but that does nothing to show that the less acceptable motives stressed by Spallone won’t also be present and, in fact, much more influential.

It is important to note that this issue cannot be resolved simply by pointing to ways in which women themselves support the new reproductive technologies. (As, e.g., Singer does when he points to the role of female researchers and to women’s interest in overcoming fertility problems.) Women themselves could be caught up in attitudes that support patriarchal values. Were this the case, their support would not go any way at all towards overcoming fertility problems. Women themselves could be caught up in attitudes that support patriarchal values. Were this the case, their support would not go any way at all towards showing that these new technologies can be put to progressive ends. It would only be further evidence of the hegemonic status of patriarchal ideas and attitudes.

To be sure, Spallone is aware of this problem. Thus, she concludes her book by quoting a group of Japanese women to the effect that women have to ‘struggle not only against the State and men but also against the eugenic ideal within women themselves’.27 Her concluding remarks also include a call for women to begin to deal in their own way with such things as the ‘social stigma of infertility’.

There will always be cases of women who are not able to bear a child. ‘Technical’ solutions to fertility problems do not solve the social pressures women experience with respect to fertility, motherhood, and biological parenthood.28

It is here that the work of Shulamith Firestone takes on a special relevance; for, I now want to argue, she saw more clearly than most how difficult it would be for women to overcome these ‘social pressures’.

IV

There are, I think, two readings of Firestone’s The Dialectic of Sex that should be resisted. The first, reflected in the remarks of Singer quoted above, takes Firestone to be suggesting that ectogenesis is an inherently progressive notion.29 The second takes Firestone to be putting forward the naive, ahistorical version of the ‘technology is neutral’ position criticized by Spallone. My contention will be that neither of these readings does justice to Firestone’s position; that, instead, we need to pay special attention to those passages where she stresses that a feminist position on such things as ectogenesis must ‘arise organically out of the revolutionary action itself’.30 On this reading, Firestone is suggesting that one simply cannot resolve this issue in the abstract. Everything depends on whether or not a ‘feminist revolution’ takes hold in history and on how it affects women’s attitudes. That is, apart from an historically-unfolding feminist struggle, one simply cannot say whether ectogenesis is a progressive or regressive notion because the attitudes of women themselves may be changed in presently unimaginable ways through such a struggle.

To be sure, there are passages that seem to support the ‘ectogenesis is inherently progressive’ and the ‘ectogenesis is neutral’ readings. In fact, the following passage seems susceptible to both interpretations:

... the misuse of scientific developments is very often confused with technology itself. ... As was demonstrated in the case of the development of atomic energy, radicals, rather than breast beating about the immorality of scientific research, could be much more effective by concentrating their full energies on demands for control of scientific discoveries by and for the people. For, like atomic energy, fertility control, artificial reproduction, cybernation, in themselves, are liberating – unless they are improperly used.31

On the one hand, the phrase, ‘in themselves, are liberating’ might seem to support the claim that artificial reproduction techniques are on the side of progress and that we can readily identify the forces that are blocking this progressive dynamic. On the other hand, the analogy with atomic energy – where abuses were due to the fact that the use of ‘scientific discoveries’ was not controlled ‘by and for the people’ – suggests that Firestone takes the new reproductive technologies to be neutral. The first reading is easiest to discredit. Firestone always makes it clear that under present auspices, ectogenesis will be a nightmare:

Cybernation, like birth control, can be a double-edged sword. Like artificial reproduction, to envision it in the hands of the present powers is to envision a nightmare. We need not elaborate. Everyone is familiar with Technocracy, 1984: the increased alienation of the masses, the
The second reading is harder to dispose of. Indeed, in the very next paragraph Firestone seems to give an even more explicit endorsement of the 'technology is neutral' position:

But again, as with the population explosion, and birth control, the distinction between misuse of science and the value of science itself is not often kept clear. In this case, though the response may not be quite so hysterical and evasive, we still often have the same unimaginative concentration on the evils of the machine itself rather than a recognition of its revolutionary significance.  

Let me try, then, to show how other passages from The Dialectic of Sex can be used to give the above passage a different import. Very roughly, I will be suggesting that for Firestone the 'value of science' (which she wants to distinguish from the 'misuse of science') lies in its ability to expand the imagination here and now rather than in its ability to provide us with a blueprint for a liberating future. On such a reading, to say of ectogenesis that there needs to be a 'recognition of its revolutionary significance' is not to say that women here and now should embrace ectogenesis and try to take it away from patriarchal forces. Rather, it is to say that in the struggle against patriarchal practices, women should see their own present attitudes toward reproduction as contingent — as not marking-off once and for all what is involved in genuine sexual equality. This reading of Firestone's approach to ectogenesis is supported by her claim that she is trying to stimulate thinking in fresh areas rather than to dictate the action. Notice also that she grants that fully artificial reproduction will be an 'unrealistic' idea for the foreseeable future:

Childbearing could be taken over by technology, and if this proved too much against our past tradition and psychic structure (which it certainly would at first) then adequate incentives and compensations would have to be developed — other than the ego rewards of possessing the child — to reward women for their special social contribution of pregnancy and childbirth.

It seems, then, that we should not assign too much weight to those notorious passages where Firestone seems to suggest that women here and now would gladly embrace ectogenesis if they were honest with themselves; if they admitted that 'Pregnancy is barbaric ... the temporary deformation of the body of the individual for the sake of the species', that 'childbirth hurts. And it isn't good for you'. In fact, on the reading I'm proposing, it's crucial to note that Firestone follows the above comments on ectogenesis with something far short of a naive endorsement of ectogenesis:

Artificial reproduction is not inherently dehumanizing. At the very least, development of an option should make possible an honest examination of the ancient value of motherhood.

I have focused on passages from Firestone's work that seem to support a more dialectical approach to determining the progressive potential of ectogenesis. I believe, by the way, that such a reading does not detract from what is surely a key feature of Firestone's position, viz., the need for a 'feminist revolution'. All I have tried to do is to suggest that her remarks on ectogenesis are designed to stimulate a revolutionary consciousness here and now rather than to dictate how babies should be made 'after the revolution'. This is not to deny that many feminists in the early 1970s took her to be giving such a blueprint for a post-revolutionary society. It is only to suggest that there is another way of reading those passages like the following where Firestone is 'speculating about post-revolutionary systems':

We're talking about radical change. And although it cannot come all at once, radical goals must be kept in sight at all times. Day-care centers buy women off. They ease the immediate pressure without asking why that pressure is on women.

At the other extreme there are the most distant solutions based on the potentials of modern embryology, that is, artificial reproduction, possibilities still so frightening that they are seldom discussed seriously. We have seen that the fear is to some extent justified: in the hands of our current society and under the direction of current scientists (few of whom are female or even feminist), any attempted use of technology to 'free' anybody is suspect. But we are speculating about post-revolutionary systems, and for the purpose of our discussion we shall assume flexibility and good intentions in those working out the change.

Does Firestone's approach to the new reproductive technologies provide an adequate basis for a successful challenge to present uses? I think not; for several reasons. First, it relies too heavily on the notion of a 'feminist revolution'. Although a woman-led resistance against patriarchal features of our society will surely be a key element in any successful challenge to the forces that presently control the new reproductive technologies, it won't be sufficient. A more multifaceted resistance will be needed. The black feminist Pat Parker puts the general point as follows:

Another illusion that we suffer under in this country is that a single facet of the population can make revolution. Black people alone cannot make revolution in this country. Native American people alone cannot make revolution in this country. Chicanos alone cannot make revolution in this country. Asians alone cannot make revolution in this country. Women alone cannot make revolution in this country.
country. Gay people alone cannot make revolution in this country. And anyone who tries will not be successful.\textsuperscript{41}

What needs to be added to Firestone’s analysis, then, is a recognition that a critique of the new reproductive technologies must also tap the historical forces and critical perspectives represented by the various movements for racial equality and the more traditional movements for economic equality.

The second shortcoming of Firestone’s approach is related to the first. It has to do with Firestone’s goal of stimulating the imagination of women here and now so that their vision of the future won’t simply be a projection of attitudes they have as a result of their daily life in a patriarchal social order. As we have seen, she tries to do this by ‘speculating about post-revolutionary systems’. For some people such speculation can be a powerful mechanism for looking critically at their present situation. For example, Nancy Breeze reports that she ‘felt encouraged’ by Marge Piercy’s vision of ‘a loving, child-centered environment for the babies of non-womb procreation’.\textsuperscript{42} But for many women it has the opposite effect. Radically new visions of the future can be so threatening that people cling even more tenaciously to the status quo. Also, they can seem to be a diversion from more immediate problems.\textsuperscript{43}

Here again Firestone’s project could be helped by incorporating, as equal partners, the movements for racial equality and the more traditional movements for economic equality. Indeed, I suggest that an honest, difference-respecting coalition between the various movements for equality would generate mechanisms that would maximize the likelihood that all non-privileged constituencies will reflect critically on their present attitudes. That is, it would provide a non-idealist basis for self-criticism.

Combining these two criticisms of Firestone’s approach we could say that what is needed is a coalition between the various movements for equality that places equal weight on the present interests and attitudes of each constituency. Such a coalition would not only greatly increase the historical force of any resistance to the new reproductive technologies but it would do so in ways that force each constituency to reflect critically on how its vision of the future has been influenced by the very social order it would challenge.

Here it might be helpful to pause to ask why Firestone herself didn’t make such a move. In fact, I think that this is where one can begin to see the importance for radical politics of ‘post-modernist’ themes. Firestone herself seems to be caught up in what Donna Haraway has called an ‘unreflective participation in the logic, language and practices of white humanism’ which has led orthodox Marxist and radical feminists to ‘Annex other forms of domination by expanding its basic categories through analogy, simple listing, or addition’.\textsuperscript{44} That is, in seeking a ‘single ground of domination to secure our revolutionary voice’, radical feminists have overlooked features of our present social order that make ‘cross gender and racial alliances on issues of basic life support (with or without jobs) necessary not just nice.’\textsuperscript{45} Thus, Haraway argues that those of us who are deeply unhappy with the status quo need to abandon the enterprise of trying to sort ‘consciousness into categories of “clear-sighted critique grounding a solid political epistemology” versus “manipulated false consciousness”’. Instead, we should capitalize on new opportunities for ‘new kinds of unity across race, gender, and class as these elementary units of socialist-feminist analysis themselves suffer protein transformations’.\textsuperscript{46} It seems to me that this last suggestion – that the categories of race, gender and class may themselves undergo transformations – is the key to a successful challenge of present uses of the new reproductive technologies. For suppose that we grant that, while history has generated and will continue to generate a fragile unity around the oppression of women, it has also done something similar for the oppression of traditional workers and for the oppression of racial minorities. Suppose, further, that we grant that there will be situations which call forth an alliance or coalition between these fragile unities. Haraway’s point is these unities may change as a result of such a coalition. Still, these fragile unities must be the starting point. Catherine MacKinnon’s eloquent case for the methodology of ‘consciousness raising’ must be extended to all of the contemporary movements for equality;\textsuperscript{47} but at the same time these unities must engage each other in a difference-respecting coalition. Bernice Johnson Reagon captures this two-way process when she says:

> Some people will come to a coalition and they rate the success of the coalition on whether or not they feel good when they get there. They’re not looking for a coalition; they’re looking for a home! They’re looking for a bottle with some milk in it and a nipple, which does not happen in a coalition. You don’t get fed a lot in a coalition. In a coalition you have to give, and it is different from your home. You can’t stay there all the time. You go to the coalition for a few hours and then you go back and take your bottle wherever it is, and then you go back and coalesce some more.\textsuperscript{48}

To be sure, such a coalition won’t be easy; but it will become necessary as each oppressed constituency insists that “this is our world” and “we are here to stay”. As a black woman, Reagon says to other oppressed constituencies:

> You must make sure you understand that you ain’t gonna be able to have an ‘our’ that don’t include Bernice Johnson Reagon, cause I don’t plan to go nowhere! That’s why we have to have coalitions. Cause I ain’t gonna let you live unless you let me live. Now there’s danger in that, but there’s also the possibility that we can both live—if you can stand it.\textsuperscript{49}

Notice how all this differs from the literal position where one tries to criticize the status quo on the basis of a vision of the future that abstracts from historically-conditioned differences due to race, class, and sex. On the view we’re proposing, one begins by affirming one’s historically-constituted identity as a black woman, or a white male worker, or as a white middle-class woman, etc.
But one goes on – due to the need for a coalition if any critical project is to succeed – to reflect critically on how this fragile intragroup unity might change as a result of such a coalition.

VI

How does all this bear on ectogenesis, the topic of this paper? Recall that I suggested in my opening remarks that ectogenesis could serve as a kind of ‘Rorschach Test’ of our thinking about the new reproductive technologies. We now are in a better position to characterize the different responses to the idea of an artificial womb. Some, like Singer and Wells, see it as a potential blessing to women; as increasing their reproductive options even, if – and this is crucial for understanding their position – things go on pretty much as they are. That is, no feminist revolution will be needed to actualize this progressive potential. Others see ectogenesis as the end result of evils inherent in the new reproductive technologies as they exist here and now; as the perfect symbol for a project that sees women merely as a collection of body parts, or as an inevitable result of a project driven by capitalist greed. Still others see it as playing an essential role in maintaining the privilege of white people of European descent. What I want to suggest in these final remarks is that each of these reactions to ectogenesis can make an important contribution to an effective and critical resistance to present directions in the new reproductive technologies.

Suppose it was granted that there is no single critique that captures the ‘basic’ problem with ectogenesis; that, instead, each emphasis is ‘rational’ given the historically-conditioned interests of the various non-privileged constituencies. How might this diversity be turned to progressive ends? The answer, it seems to me, is to grant that each non-privileged constituency has become a kind of ‘specialist’ in certain forms of distrust. That is, due to their different collective histories, the various non-privileged constituencies bring quite different critiques to bear on the new reproductive technologies. For example, the white working-class male could contribute – due to his daily struggle with capital at the point of production – a special distrust of economically exploitative dimensions of the new reproductive technologies. Blacks of both sexes and various classes could be ‘specialists’ in detecting racist dimensions of the project. Gays of both sexes and all races could be specialists in detecting heterosexual biases. And white, middle-class women might – due to their daily interaction with white middle-class males – serve as ‘specialists’ in detecting how white middle-class males use patriarchal notions of ‘scientific progress’, ‘individual rights’, etc., to preserve their multi-dimensional privilege.

The problem with admitting this diversity of distrust is, of course, that it threatens any easy unity between the various contemporary movements for equality. For example, when we take such historically-conditioned diversity seriously, it begins to look as though not all women share a generalized distrust of men. Thus, Gloria Joseph urges white feminists to recognize that ‘Black women in America have at least as much in common with black men as with white women’. But, as Bernice Johnson Reagon has suggested, perhaps these differences are something the various non-privileged constituencies will have to learn to deal with if they want to mount an effective challenge to key institutions and projects of the status quo. Furthermore, this may be something they will have to learn to deal with if they want to develop a truly critical vision of the future.

Just here is where Marge Piercy’s novel, Woman on the Edge of Time, is helpful. At the beginning of the story, Piercy’s heroine, Connie, is deeply suspicious of the utopian society she is allowed to ‘visit’ through her ‘contacts’ with Luciente. Furthermore, Connie’s doubts about the way they do things in Mattapoisett – the name of the future community to which Connie ‘time-travels’ – take place on all of the dimensions we have canvassed above. For example, at first Connie distrusts the artificial reproduction and communal parenting arrangements on the basis of traditional attitudes toward motherhood:

How can men be mothers! How can some kid who isn’t related to you be your child? ... How could anyone know what being a mother means who has never carried a child nine months heavy under her heart, who has never borne a child in blood and pain, who has never suckled a child. Who got that child out of a machine the way that couple, white and rich, got my flesh and blood. All made up already, a canned child, just add money. What do they know of motherhood?

Connie also distrusts the Mattapoisett society from the point of view of people of colour. Thus, she says the following about Bee, a black man who works in the ‘brooder’ room:

What could a man of this ridiculous Podunk future, where babies were born from machines and people negotiated diplomatically with cows, know about how it had been to grow up in America black or brown? Pain had honed Claud Keen. This man was a child by comparison.

Connie also had serious doubts about the de-urbanized, ecologically responsible, self-sufficient nature of Mattapoisett. Thus, in response to Luciente’s boast that every region tries to be ‘ownfed’, Connie says:

Just here is where Marge Piercy’s novel, Woman on the Edge of Time, is helpful. At the beginning of the story, Piercy’s heroine,
But - and this is what makes Piercy's approach to the future relevant to our discussion, she does not simply juxtapose Connie's present attitudes (and the doubts they generate) with the radically different attitudes of the inhabitants of Mattapoiset. Rather, Piercy tries to show how contradictions in Connie's present attitudes lead her to develop radically different attitudes towards such things as motherhood, racial identity, sexuality, work, etc. This process is especially evident when Connie admits for the first time that her own child, Angelina - who had been taken from her by the welfare establishment and given to a rich Scarsdale couple would be better off in Mattapoisett:

Suddenly she assented with all her soul to Angelina in Mattapoiset, to Angelina hidden forever one hundred fifty years into the future, even if she should never see her again. For the first time her heart assented to Luciente, to Bee, to Magdalena. Yes, you can have my child, you can keep my child. Even with your obscenities and your talking cats. She will be strong there, well fed, well housed, well taught, she will grow up much better and stronger and smarter than I. I assent, I give you my battered body as recompense and my rotten heart. Take her, keep her! She will never be broken as I was. She will be strange, but she will be glad and strong and she will not be afraid. She will have enough. She will have pride. She will love her own brown skin and be loved for her strength and good work. She will walk in strength like a man and never sell her body and she will nurse her babies like a woman and love her children's house of many colors. People of the rainbow with its end fixed in the earth, I give her to you!58

Piercy also explicitly affirms the need for a vision of the future that is based on a multi-dimensional struggle against a multi-dimensional system of privilege. Thus, though she has Luciente say at one point that the system of artificial reproduction and communal parenting was 'part of women's long revolution',9 she also stresses that Mattapoiset will come into history only if all powerless constituencies of Connie's time unite to work for it:

The powerful don't make revolutions... No, Connie! It's the people who worked out the labor-and-land intensive farming we do, it's all the people who changed how people bought food, raised children, went to school!... Who made new unions, withheld rent, refused to go to wars, wrote and educated and made speeches.50

Toward the end of the book, when it has become clear that the people of Mattapoiset have 'contacted' Connie so that their possible future can in fact be realized in history, Bee gives Connie the following bit of advice:

There's always a thing you can deny an oppressor, if only your allegiance. Your belief. Your co-oping. Often even with vastly unequal power, you can find or force an opening to right back. In your time many without power found ways to fight. Till that became a power.61

This all-too-brief review of one of the main themes in Piercy's novel is not meant to suggest that Piercy's vision of a better world is the 'correct' one for those of us who reject racist, sexist, classist features of present society. It is simply to suggest that we need a vision of the future that arises out of a multi-dimensional resistance here and now.

In this sense, how Piercy argues for her position on future uses of the new reproductive technologies is more important than the details of that position. To be sure, it is important to entertain the possibility that we may have to transcend our present attitudes toward genetic parenting. But even more important is the recognition that how these attitudes get transcended must be the result of a coalition that brings together all of the forms of distrust canvassed above. In this sense, Firestone was on the right track when she said that our position on such things as ectogenesis should 'arise organically out of the revolutionary action itself'. All that needs to be added is that this 'revolutionary action' cannot be seen as an attack on some 'basic' or 'primary' form of privilege. Rather, it must be seen as a multi-dimensional attack that builds on the insights and historical force of all non-privileged constituencies.

Notes

1 Here I am indebted to Brian Barry who once suggested that John Rawls' A Theory of Justice can serve as a kind of philosophic 'Rorschach Test'. (‘Critical Notice of Wolff, Understanding Rawls’, The Canadian Journal of Philosophy, Vol. VII, No. 4, 1978). In what follows, I will be focusing on different reactions to a particular idea rather than to a particular thinker's written work. But I will move closer to Barry's use of this simile when I discuss various reactions to Shulamith Firestone's The Dialectic of Sex.


6 Spallone develops her general critique of the new reproductive technologies in Beyond Conception: The New Politics of Reproduction (Granby, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1989). To supplement her remarks on the specific issue of ectogenesis, I will also draw on things that she has written with feminists who share her general critique of the new reproductive technologies.


9 Rita Arditti et al., Test-Tube Women: What Future for Motherhood? (London: Pandora Press, 1989), p. xvi. They describe this breakthrough as follows: 'In May, 1988, the US journal Fertility and Sterility reported a 'first' from Italy: in Bologna, researchers had connected a living womb (extracted from a woman in a hysterectomy) to a so-called perfusion machine which provided it with oxygen and nutrients similar to the conditions of an early pregnancy. They injected a spare embryo from a woman on IVF. The embryo developed normally for 52 hours (Bulletti et al, 1988).'


11 Ibid., p. 133.
It should be noted that this argument presupposes that ectogenesis won’t involve serious risks to women’s health. But as David N. James points out in ‘Ectogenesis: A Reply to Singer and Wells’, *Bioethics*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1987), ‘fetal transplantation would ... require general anesthesia as well as a surgical incision through the abdominal wall and uterus, with all the risks of medical complications which accompany these more invasive procedures’ (p. 87).


Ibid., p. 49.


Ibid., p. 190.

Ibid., p. 32. An example of a ‘problem’ that could be better addressed by a preventative approach is Pelvic Inflammatory Disease: ‘A World Health Organization study showed that among women diagnosed as infertile, 50.9 per cent of those with a previous history of PID [[salpingitis]] had an infection-related diagnosis.... Why are all those governments and doctors who are so concerned about infertility not calling for a concerted screening effort for women most at risk? The World Health Organization 1978 Task Force on the Diagnosis and Treatment of Infertility identified infections as preventable causes of fertility problems globally’ (p. 71).

Ibid., p. 191.

Ibid., p. 186.

Ibid., p. 186.

Ibid., p. 187.

Taylor makes this suggestion in *The Biological Time Bomb* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1968). It is interesting to note that even in 1968 it was beginning to look like ‘The development of the “perfect” artificial placenta can only be a matter of time’ (p. 39).

Ibid., pp. 189–90.

Ibid., pp. 192–93.

The claim that artificial wombs will be developed as a result of the desire to save premature babies is not new. Gordon Taylor made this claim in 1968 in *The Biological Time-Bomb*, p. 39.

Spallone, *Beyond Conception*, p. 192. Here she challenges women to look closely at how present attitudes discriminate against disabled people.

It should also be noted that in the prologue to *Made to Order: The Myth of Reproductive and Genetic Progress*, ed. Patricia Spallone and Deborah Lynn Steinberg (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987), Spallone and Steinberg note that ‘pronomatality is part of the context in which women decide to “choose” reproductive technology’, and they go on to ask: ‘How are we to understand this growing emphasis on motherhood?’ (p. 9).

Hillary Rose seems to accept this reading of Firestone when she blames Firestone for deflecting women’s attention from present abuses of the new reproductive technologies: ‘I realized that Firestone’s unrealistic Utopian hopes and the theoretical naivety of her analysis has made it more difficult for women to see the political threat flowing from some of the fast-developing techniques of reproduction — not the least the test-tube baby’ (my emphasis) (‘Victorian Values in Technology’, in *Reproductive Technologies: Gender, Motherhood and Medicine*, ed. Michelle Stanworth [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987], p. 151).


Ibid., p. 196.

Ibid., p. 200.

Ibid., p. 200.

Ibid., p. 227.

Ibid., p. 228.

Ibid., p. 199. And of course there is the famous parenthetical remark: ‘(Like shitting a pumpkin, a friend of mine told me when I inquired about the Great-Experience-You’re-Missing. What’s wrong-with-shitting — shitting-can-be-fun says the School of Great Experiences. It hurts, she says, What’s wrong-with-a-little-pain-as-long-as-it-doesn’t-kill-you? answers the school. It is boring, she says. Pain-can-be-interesting-as-an-experience says the School. Isn’t that a rather high price to pay for interesting experience? she says. But-look-you-get-a-reward, says the School: a-baby-all-your-own-to-fuck-up-as-you-please. Well, that’s something, she says. But how do I know it will be male like you?)’ (p. 199).

Ibid., p. 199.

The central passage goes as follows: ‘Just as to assure elimination of economic classes requires the revolt of the under-class (the proletariat) and, in a temporary dictatorship, their seizure of the means of production, so to assure the elimination of sexual classes requires the revolt of the underclass (women) and the seizure of control of reproduction: not only the full restoration to women of ownership of their own bodies, but also their (temporary) seizure of control of human fertility — the new population biology as well as all the social institutions of childbearing and childrearing’ (pp. 10–11). Some interpretations of Firestone’s position completely ignore her call for a ‘revolution’. (Singer is an example.) Others seem to dismiss it as unrealistic. Thus, Catherine MacKinnon wonders ‘How women, who have not been permitted to control their own bodies or existing technology, could control reproductive technology remains a mystery’ (Toward a Feminist Theory of the State, Boston: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 56).

Hillary Rose puts this as follows: ‘For some feminists the Utopian promise of Firestone’s work was sufficient — she seemed to solve the problem central to radical feminist theory of how to guarantee the continuation of the species without needing men’ (‘Victorian Values in the Test-Tube: The Politics of Reproductive Science and Technology’, in *Reproductive Technologies: Gender, Motherhood and Medicine*, ed. Michell Stanworth, pp. 151–52).


As I noted above, Hillary Rose worries that ‘Firestone’s unrealistic Utopian hopes have made it more difficult for women to see the political threat flowing from some of the fast-developing techniques of reproduction — not the least the test-tube baby.’


Ibid., p. 76.

Ibid., p. 79, pp. 87–88 (my emphasis).

Ibid., p. 91.


It should be noted that Adrienne Rich also grants that artificial reproduction could add to a woman's reproductive choice— but only if controlled by women. Rich puts her point as follows: 'Ideally, of course, women would choose not only whether, when, and where to bear children, and the circumstances of labor, but also between biological and artificial reproduction...' ('The Theft of Childbirth', in Seizing Our Bodies: The Politics of Women's Health, ed. Pam McAllister, Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1982, p. 268).

It should be noted that Spallone stresses the need to take seriously the needs of women who are economically non-privileged and women who are not of white European ancestry. (See especially Chapter 9 of Beyond Conception). My point here is that an effective challenge to the new reproductive technologies must also take seriously non-privileged men of all races.

I develop this notion of 'specialists' in detecting various forms of privilege in Uses of Distrust.


Marge Piercy, Woman on the Edge of Time, p. 106.

Ibid., p. 104.

Ibid., p. 70.

Ibid., p. 141.

Ibid., p. 105.

Ibid., p. 198.

Ibid., p. 328.