the issues, using original texts. As a core text for students, it is to be recommended. Those readers looking for a richer analysis will have to look elsewhere.

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Confinements: Fertility and Infertility in Contemporary Culture


The first word in the title of this book conveys the main message, that women (in this case American women) are confined to stereotypes in matters relating to fertility, whether “natural” with its natural outcome of delivery, often of course in the US the “unnatural” outcome of delivery by caesarean section; or matters of infertility, with the artificiality of the fertility investigations and treatments which one of the authors experienced.

The plan and purpose is an analytical framework of the female encounters with the power of the carers and gurus who write books and pamphlets supposed to enlighten both the “naturally” pregnant and the infertility sufferer. The decision to turn what was going to be a survey of opinions from infertility sufferers into a “cultural narrative”, part of a “reproductive cultural narrative”, does not offer, unfortunately, the opportunity to fulfil the promised plan: the exercise becomes descriptive rather than analytical.

The book feels (and I use the word “feel” intentionally as analysis is lacking) very like an attack on the lack of autonomy of women in both situations, as women try “to resist the authority that wrenches from them the possibility of choice”. It professes to “look at the class status of advice and the moment when it becomes coercion”.

A very interesting field indeed, straddling the fields of sociology, politics and the law (as in the matter of crack-addicted women who are imprisoned for the welfare of the future child), but especially firmly based on ethics, with the paternalism/autonomy debate between carers and women seen as central. Unfortunately, there is an assumption that such a debate, indeed, such a struggle is taking place: it is vividly described as such: “the patient is also prevented from seeing” whilst the doctor has the power of seeing almost everything through a “Foucauldian panopticon”. The struggle may be even more finely placed, with reference to a different kind of confinement, to a practical imprisonment through lack of knowledge, in what seems to be a very dire situation - total deprivation of liberty and autonomy.

But nowhere is there an analysis of the class status of advice. Examples are given of information targeted at women stereotyped as middle-class, but there are no counter-examples of advice given, for instance, to poorer women attending a state hospital. The counter-example is, instead, centred around the exceptional cases of drug-addicted women, who may be subjected to prosecution in order to protect their fetuses. This matter has been the subject of much academic debate already (by Bonnie Steinbock for instance, to name but one American author well versed in ethical analysis), and to a more fruitful end.

What is missing is an obvious link running through all the chapters, a thread of logic, especially the analysis of the conflict, potential only, one hopes in most cases, between women who may have to surrender part of their autonomy when pregnant or trying to become pregnant. Obviously if this is their choice it hardly classifies as an infringement of autonomy, but the book's argument that that choice is hardly ever made by women because they are submitted to biased and infantilising advice and literature is not substantiated. Even in the chapter entitled Autonomy, control and fertility there is no analysis of the concept of autonomy within this very specific context, which is indeed replete with possible dilemmas. The narrative approach has taken over and been found wanting in terms of actual understanding. Those interested in this narrative, and a particular American vision at that, will be interested by this book: those looking for ethical arguments will be frustrated.

References


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