Book Review


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This book is an anthropological investigation into the mundane life-world of the assisted reproductive technologies (ARTS) clinic. It is both a deep criticism of and a perceptive insight into the world of ARTS and the (re)production of technologically mediated parenthood. High tech activities, professional protocol and clinical spaces are juxtaposed with embodied, emotional and compliant consumers. The author, Charis Thompson, provides an empirical account that is located in historical context. She also skillfully engages with the philosophical, moral and theoretical issues inherent in the ARTS project.

Thompson’s approach is somewhat unique in that it focuses on the cultural mechanisms that produce parents and shape kinship in the process of producing babies. In other words, the centre of the analysis is the myriad of ‘technical, scientific, kinship, gender, emotional, legal, political and financial’ activities that shape the construction of the parent made through ARTS. The term ‘ontological choreography’ that is central to her analysis encapsulates the ‘dynamic coordination’ of the ART clinic; the skillful management and manipulation involved in negotiating the ambiguities of producing parents through technological means. In the ART clinic, the production of a technologically mediated family goes way beyond the technology itself; meaning, relationships, emotions and deficits are rationalized, reconfigured and shaped with incisive precision. For example, biological and social relationships are both ‘forged and denied’; some things (human actors, gametes) are brought together and others are separated (donors from parenting, kinship, responsibility and rights). The appropriateness to become a parent is calculated; exclusions from treatment are based on both age discrimination and ability to pay rather than the traditional prejudices around appropriate family type. Parents’ reproductive rights are at the core of decision making rather than the traditional ‘best interests of the child’.

Part I of the book provides a somewhat distilled account of academic theoretical investment in the field of reproductive technologies. This comes from science and technology studies and feminist scholarship. It is an historical and descriptive account rather than analytical. It adds nothing further to this huge body of work; nor does it set up a theoretical perspective to inform the research. This Thompson leaves until the ethnography itself. For example, in Chapter 4 she tests feminist deconstructions of sex and gender in her explorations of masculinity, infertility, virility, kinship and fatherhood, and finds them more explanatory than structuralist accounts.

The real strength of the book comes from the fieldwork itself which is reported in Part II. Thompson’s immersion in the everyday world of the ARTS clinic enables her to craft a compelling insight into its technological and emotional complexities as well as its stark realities. She skillfully plies the craft of the ethnographer whilst weaving an artful analysis that employs a kind of linguistic acrobatics that encapsulates the complexities of meaning-making in the clinic. In this section Thompson exposes the normalization practices that technologically create parents; the ways in which pathology, biology and socially deviant practices are recast as normal. In particular she reveals the elisions that make infertile men into fathers as well as the hypergender-appropriate activity that mediates treatment and

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ameliorates lack. She guides the reader through the various strategies by which kinship is constructed, protected and stabilized through the application of the legal notion of 'procreative intent'. Finally, Thompson examines how women exercise agency in dealing with their infertility by actively participating in the medico-scientific objectification of their own bodies. In this way, their ART experience is (re)constructed so that focuses on a long range self identity that elides the immanence of degrading, failed and objectifying clinical procedures.

Part III explores the politics and economics of reproductive technologies. Here Thompson engages with bigger picture concerns. She explores the intersections between private and public; private entrepreneurialism, private desperation and public issues of governance and regulation. The final chapter is a polemic that challenges the reader to understand and debate the radical changes wrought by 'the biomedical mode of reproduction'. Its incursions into biographies, identities and social practices have altered the interrelations between the natural and social order as well as between science and society.

Illuminating, provocative and incisive, this book should be read by everyone involved in any capacity in the ARTS industry.