

Book Review

Barbara Katz Rothman: *Recreating Motherhood: Ideology and Technology in a Patriarchal Society*

WW Norton & Co., London, 1989

Sociologist Barbara Katz Rothman has written extensively and brilliantly on motherhood. She has looked, in turn at what it is like for a woman to become or to be a mother and at how technology and the quest for the perfect baby affects a woman's feelings about the process and her relationship to the child.

Recreating Motherhood explores the most fundamental question of all. What exactly is a mother? The answers – and there are many – are not as straightforward as they once might have been.

Until relatively recently, a mother was generally considered to be a woman who conceived, carried and gave birth to a child. Usually this same woman also raised the child to adulthood. In some cases, this part of mothering might be taken over by another woman. This woman was also referred to as the child's mother – perhaps with the qualifying prefix “adoptive-” or “step-”.

This definition of a mother as a woman who bears and/or raises children, has been virtually universal, but in some societies it has not counted for much. Rothman in her discussion on types of societies, distinguishes between “male-dominated” – those social systems in which men set the rules – and “patriarchal” – social systems in which “children are reckoned as being born *to men* out of women”. Virtually all societies are male-dominated, but in those that are also patriarchal, women are at their most vulnerable and are most thoroughly controlled. “To maintain the purity of the male kinship line, men had to control the sexuality of women and ensure that no other man's seed entered her body.”

It is this (male) seed that has always been at the heart of patriarchy and is at the heart of most of today's controversies over motherhood. Even feminists – and this is what so disturbs Rothman – have incorporated this view of baby production into their positions on several issues without recognizing the incompatibility of patriarchal views with genuine feminism. Using the male model of the seed as determinant of paternal rights, the woman's ovum in this view is the basis for *maternal* rights as well. The relationship between women and their children is not based on “the unique nurturance, the long months of pregnancy, the intimate connections with the baby as it grows and moves inside her body.” It is a view that perpetuates patriarchy and fits neatly into societies enamored with technology and capitalist notions of ownerships. The benign sounding “liberal” philosophy into which both technology and capitalism are firmly embedded is a hostile environment for a view of motherhood that involves the messy, amor-

phous business of feelings and relationships and makes no clear distinction between the (“valuable”) work of the intellect and the (“not-so-valuable”) physical labor involved in motherhood.

The problems with the liberal patrio-technico-capitalist view of motherhood are highlighted most clearly in the practice of surrogate mothering and in the discussions which rage around this practice. The highly-publicized Baby M case embodied every negative aspect of this time-worn “solution” to infertility. “Time-worn” because it is not, as Rothman reminds her readers, “a new procreative technology. Artificial insemination with donor sperm has been used in human beings for over a hundred years.” The practice of one woman producing a child for another extends at least as far back as Old Testament times. Sarah in the Book of Genesis was not just thinking about providing a son for Abraham when she urged him to produce a child with her maid. “Perhaps”, she said, “I can build a family through her.”

Essentially, it is no different today except that most surrogate mothers conceive via artificial rather than natural insemination and the procedure has been commercialized. The biological father has his (valuable) seed planted in a hired womb; the womb’s owner (don’t call her “mother”) contributes her services (nine months of gestation, labor and birth) and in exchange for relinquishing all rights to the baby gets some financial compensation – usually about US \$ 10,000. The sperm donor agrees to take delivery of “his” child if it meets quality control standards. If not, the surrogate becomes the “real” mother with all the attendant responsibility and no compensation.

What if the mother decides not to sell? That was what the Baby M case was all about. The mother was hounded, accused of being unfit, of stealing the father’s child and (worst of all) renegeing on a contract. It was this last point that so enraged her feminist adversaries. That messy relationship business interferred with contractual obligations and made women look unreliable! Ultimately, Baby M was taken almost literally from her mother’s breast, by the police on the strength of an illegal court order. An expensive legal process ensued during the course of which the mother lost all parental rights. They were restored on appeal, but by then the child’s integration into the father’s family was a *fait accompli*. The mother, apparently the only adult who considered Baby M’s emotional well-being decided not to disrupt her life again by seeking custody and settled for liberal visiting.

Since the Baby M case, surrogacy has been outlawed in many countries and a surrogate mother in the United States is protected against forcible relinquishment if the baby has been produced from her own ovum. Women impregnated through in-vitro using another woman’s ovum are simply borrowed wombs with no claim to the child. It is this dismissal of the pregnancy as relationship between mother and child and the denial that the fetus is a part of the mother’s body that so dismay Rothman. Is is very clear to her that “women never bear anyone else’s baby – every woman bears her own baby – regardless of the source of the sperm and regardless also of the source of the egg”. To protect both the integrity of the relationship and the mother’s body, she proposes legislation to codify the reality that “the gestational mother is the mother”.

That would not mean that no one else could become the mother. It would mean that the decision would rest with the gestational mother whether to raise or relinquish her child, whatever the intention had been in starting the pregnancy. The principle that the child a woman carries is her own, also governs Rothman's discussion of adoption and infertility, childbirth, abortion and fetal power, disabilities and the decision-making of all kinds that mothers make on a daily basis. Some of her conclusions will dismay the reader with strong opposing views, but her closely reasoned arguments are hard to dismiss.

In her final chapter, Rothman calls for "a feminist agenda [that] goes beyond calls for inclusion into the world that is . . . economic justice, an end to patriarchy, valuing nurturance." Moving from the principle that a child a woman carries is her own, Rothman rejects absolutely the idea of surrogate parenting on the basis that "children are not fit objects of contracts". Adoption, on the other hand, would be allowed – in various forms – but agreements could be made only after the birth of a child. The mother would have "full rights of personal privacy, bodily autonomy and individual decision-making in pregnancy" and equally "full medical decision-making rights for the care of their . . . children". Child care would be recognized for the valuable work that it is with state support for the mother or for a caretaker she hired – to avoid the current situation in many countries that "one woman's salary must cover another's [so that] day care workers . . . cannot themselves afford for their own children the care they give to others". Where do fathers fit into this agenda? "Men can have children of their 'own' just as women do – in their caring and in their acts of generation, nurturance and tenderness" – but these children would no longer be the father's property.

It's an agenda that's hard to fault, but it will require flexibility and a willingness to change age-old patterns of thinking and behaving. Patriarchy and male dominance have outlived any usefulness they ever had. In a world where misogyny, violence and endless war are the order of the day, it is time for a change – and where better to begin than with mothers – the source of life for us all?

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Some Recent Books Sent to the Editor

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- Jirina Prekop and Christel Schweizer: *Unruhige Kinder. Ein Ratgeber für beunruhigte Eltern*. Kösel Verlag, München 1993. ISBN 3-466-30351-6
- Hanne B. Wielandt: *Det første samleje. En epidemiologisk analyse af første trin i den reproduktive karriere*. Odense Universitetsforlag, 1990. ISBN 87-7492-781-7