COMMENT

The age of mechanical reproduction

How technology has reified conception

By James Mumford

Only the most eccentric of our ancestors – Mary Shelley or Aldous Huxley – had the audacity to imagine what we now have the power to do. In 1977 scientists fertilised an embryo outside the human body and successfully transferred it for the first time. Seven years later, the first birth following human embryo cryopreservation – where the embryo is frozen and stored – was reported. In 1985 the UK entered an age of gestational surrogacy and "wombs for rent". Preimplantation genetic diagnosis was successfully tested in 1989, and today allows us to screen embryos for more than 600 genetic conditions. Now we have gene editing, the first hacked human beings, with the rogue Chinese scientist, He Jiankui, reportedly modifying a gene in twin girls in an attempt to make them resistant to HIV.

Technology has not only enabled new ways of having babies; it has transformed how we think about the old-fashioned method of procreation. This is because a technological society is not just one with ever-more sophisticated tools. It is also one that views everything as a form of making, including unassisted procreation (IVF accounts for around 2 per cent of all births in the UK).

Breakthroughs in artificial reproduction have obscured the ways we treat natural procreation as if it were also a form of manufacturing. This means that while novelists have been obsessed with human cloning; while parliament has wrangled over mitochondrial replacement therapy; while academic journals publish articles about the desirability of designer babies; and while bioethics students are preoccupied with saviour siblings (a child that is born to provide an organ to a sibling who needs a transplant), we have missed the more urgent ethical question: how has technology redefined our perspective of having children?

This reality was brought home to me while teaching and writing about ethical controversies at the beginning of life. Embarrassed by my rudimentary grasp of biology, I consulted a medical textbook. What struck me as I read the chapter on reproduction was the nomenclature. Where I expected to find the word "foetus", I instead encountered "products of conception" to describe the tissue derived from fertilisation.

The consequence of this encounter was a disconcerting defamiliarisation, and I started to see the phraseology everywhere. For example, at the beginning of *Far from the Tree* (2012), a riveting book about the experience of parenting a child who is radically different from oneself, Andrew Solomon writes, "When two people decide to have a baby, they engage in ▶

an act of production." Or as Debora Spar puts it in *The Baby Business* (2006), "Baby-making is the oldest production known to humankind."

The use of words such as "product" and "production" suggests we are dealing with commodification. The global fertility treatment market was worth almost $15bn in 2019, and the product in this market, the tradeable good, is ultimately the "newone" (my preferred and, I hope, ideologically unloaded term for the pre-natal human organism).

Products, however, do not exist strictly for the purposes of sale; it is possible to make things with no intention of selling them. What we are really talking about is broader than commodification – it is reification.

Derived from the Latin for "thing" (*res*), "reification" was the term coined in 1923 by the Hungarian Marxist philosopher György Lukács to describe occasions when "a relation between people has taken on the character of a thing". Members and associates of what came to be called the Frankfurt School, including Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse, expanded the category to include our objectifying relationship with nature.

In their view human beings, by means of their technological interventions, had misconstrued the animate as the inanimate, the living earth as dead matter, reducing the world to a source of raw material for industrial projects – with deleterious social and environmental effects.

Enthralled by the reifying language of reproduction, we imagine a product moving down an assembly line toward us, arriving in the light of day, governed by a strict logic of cause and effect.

The arrival of this manufactured thing is expected and predictable. If the conveyor belt is disturbed and one of the items it is carrying falls off and breaks, a replacement is easily produced. Products are repeatable, uniform and, therefore, disposable.

You don't have to look far to see the ethical implications of reification on human parenting. Consider the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins's advice that a woman knowingly pregnant with a child with Down's syndrome should "abort it and try again". By the logic of mechanical reproduction, the newone is considered merely as a defective object that is replaceable.

Parents give what they have been given: human life

"Reification," Adorno writes, "is a forgetting." What is it about procreation that reification forgets? A couple decide they want children and try for a baby. Their act determines the coming forth of a newone. They play a causal role, obviously. That which comes to exist would not exist were it not for their action.

But what about what comes to exist? After all, there are limits on what parents can create. The newone will be what it is by virtue of its parents being what they are: that is, human. Reification thus forgets that procreation is the sharing of one's being.

Reification forgets the gifted character of human existence, the fact that while parents certainly give life to their offspring, they are giving what they have been given: human life.

You don't have to believe in a deity to feel the force of Molly Bloom's humbling of human pretensions in James Joyce's *Ulysses*: "As for them saying there's no God I wouldn't give a snap of my two fingers for all their learning why don't they go and create something." ●

James Mumford is the author of "Vexed: Ethics Beyond Political Tribes" (Bloomsbury)

COMMONS CONFIDENTIAL

Failing upwards

Ailbhe Rea

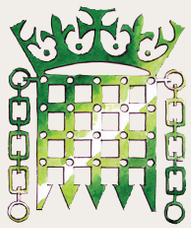
British politics has been captivated this week by the steady trickle of revelations from *Left Out: The Inside Story of Labour Under Corbyn*, the forthcoming book by Gabriel Pogrund and Patrick Maguire (formerly of this parish). One group in particular has been breaking out the popcorn to enjoy the show: Liberal Democrat MPs, who have been delighted to learn that Jeremy Corbyn was jealous of their electric battle bus during the election campaign (Labour's ran on diesel). "I wish I'd known this at the time," remarks an amused senior figure from the Lib Dem campaign. "I'd have sent it to follow him around the country."

It was also revealed this week that Tom Watson, the former Labour deputy leader, held secret talks with Jo Swinson to consider standing for the Liberal Democrats in December's general election. It has prompted some to wonder about the fate of those who did make the leap to the Lib Dems last year, only to lose their seats. Chuka Umunna and Luciana Berger have both joined communications firm Edelman, while Sam Gyimah has joined the board of Oxford University Innovation. "I can't see a way back for Chuka," a former colleague observes, while several privately wonder whether Berger might stand again for her old party under Keir Starmer.

"It would be a big win for him from an internal perspective," one Lib Dem MP muses.

Some of the defectors from the last election have, however, "got the Lib Dem bug", according to a fellow MP. Phillip Lee, who sparked a Lib Dem revolt over his record on LGBTQ issues when he defected from the Tories, is expected to stand again for the party, as is Antoinette Sandbach, the former Tory MP for Eddisbury. She's already in the club: when the female Lib Dem MPs met for Zoom chats during lockdown, Sandbach joined, as did former leader Jo Swinson.

Boris Johnson has shared his summer reading list, complete with Lucretius, *Britain's Europe* by Brendan Simms, and *Any Human Heart* by William Boyd, the fictional diary of Logan Mountstuart, a posh, affable fellow who drifts from woman to woman and historic event to historic event, always at the centre of things and failing upwards.



The Labour leader is reading *The Nickel Boys* by Colson Whitehead, and the shadow chancellor Anneliese Dodds is reading *The Secret Barrister*, and *Betrayal in Berlin* by Steve Vogel, while the Green MP Caroline Lucas's beach reads include *The Covid-19 Catastrophe* by Richard Horton, editor of the *Lancet*, and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Angela Rayner, however, has eschewed all book chat. The Labour deputy leader is leaving it, an aide jokes, "to her more intellectual colleagues". ●

Ailbhe Rea is the New Statesman's political correspondent.
Kevin Maguire is away