The technological maelstrom is dramatically affecting even the most intimate aspects of our lives. Reproductive technologies are forcing changes in the nature of human sexuality, in the way that women view their own bodies, in the difference between women and men. Here Rebecca Albury and Anne Traynor discuss these processes with Mike Donaldson, and assess their strategic implications for the women's movement. In a future issue Rebecca and Anne plan to continue and expand on this initial discussion.

Mike: When I first read Shulamith Firestone's The Dialectic of Sex more than 10 years ago, I thought the discussion of reproductive technology was science fiction. Firestone discussed artificial insemination, artificial inovulation, choice of sex of the foetus, test-tube fertilisation, the development of artificial placenta and the artificial womb. Clearly, what she predicted has happened and is happening.

On rereading, I found Firestone's political position on these issues quite unlike what I am hearing currently. She said, for example,

In the case of feminism the problem is a moral one: the biological family unit has always oppressed women and children, but now, for the first time in history, technology has created real preconditions for overthrowing these oppressive "natural" conditions, along with their cultural reinforcements. In the case of the new ecology, we find that independent of any moral stance, for pragmatic — survival — reasons alone, it has become necessary to free humanity from the tyranny of its biology.

Has this view any currency at all within a women's movement of the nineteen-eighties?

Rebecca: The thing that struck me when I first read the book was Firestone's absolute terror at the functioning of a woman's body. Her description of what pregnancy and childbirth is like is the description of someone who had had an absolutely horrendous experience brought about through a loss of confidence in and power over the woman's own reproductive function. I was much more suspicious of technology than she was; technology is not the answer to fear and loathing of our bodies.

Reproductive technology so far has not been used in the ways that she foresaw, that is, to change relations between men and women, adults and children. Firestone saw technology as a way of breaking a very strong ideological justification for the oppression of women in family units: they produce the kids, so they should do all the child-rearing and caring.

I don't think that reproductive technology will do that unless it is accompanied by a cultural revolution of such magnitude that, beside it, the Chinese cultural revolution would resemble a party barbecue.

Anne: I think that Firestone's conception of childbirth was static and ahistorical. To say, as she does, that "pregnancy is barbaric" and that it is "temporary deformation of the individual for the sake of the species", is to confuse biology and culture. Any biological function gains its meaning from the cultural practices surrounding it and inscribed in it.

Rebecca: Yes, Firestone blurs culture and biology and also doesn't pose sharply enough the question of who controls the technology, which is precisely the question that we should be raising. The people who control reproductive technology currently, the doctors, lawyers, parliamentarians, medical scientists and some philosophers, are not talking about it in a way that raises the possibility of cutting the nexus between ownership of the child and biological parenting. Instead, they see it as a way of ensuring that every woman can play the role of mother.

In the discussion about these technologies so far, it has simply been assumed that they should be reserved for married women or for women in long-term de facto heterosexual relationships. Uncoupled women and women in lesbian relationships are excluded, by and large, on the grounds that they won't make "good mothers". The whole thrust of the discussion of reproductive technology has been toward the "preservation of the family" and thus the restrictive roles of women within it, quite the opposite of what Firestone was on about.

Mike: I wonder if this is quite so true? The "super sperm" bank set up in California houses the semen of Nobel Prize winners, and has inquiries from 20 women a week, on average. One of the successful users of the sperm bank commented, "It's wonderful that a woman can be independent and choose her own family. I don't have any wish for marriage. I love my privacy and my independence." Isn't this what Firestone was talking about?
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Rebecca: Well, yes and no. Using sperm banks like those which currently exist, turn the child into a commodity. One picks the sperm of some "genius", and then proceeds to rear the child in the hope that it will somehow be "better". I don't know what effect that would have on the children, but the expectation that this child is somehow particularly special, and the expectation that the mother must behave in special ways to realise the "potential" of the sperm would lead to immense pressure for them both, from the mother's friends and associates, and perhaps to considerable pressure by the mother on the child. The tensions and ambivalences are great enough with an ordinary child, what would it be like with a "genius"?

Anne: Yes, but the process is not unilinear or one-dimensional. The potential is there for the development of less repressive sexual relationships and the dissolution of the nuclear family. The problem is, the liberatory aspects of the technology will be short circuited and manipulated to serve the current needs of the present social system. On the one hand, it weakens the nexus between reproduction and sexuality, which feminists have recognised as a major source of women's oppression. The central question must remain, is self-determination coming with these new technologies?

Mike: Well, if the new reproductive technology means that women can have children without men, doesn't that mean that women are more self-determining? If the problem is, as Rebecca has already suggested, that men control the technologies, isn't it possible to set up centres of reproduction for women similar to, and perhaps in conjunction with, feminist abortion clinics and women's health centres?

Rebecca: Sure you could, but the question then becomes, what is the rest of the situation? What is it like for a woman who has a child on her own? As long as women earn 60 percent of what men earn, as long as the labour market is thoroughly sex segmented, then one of the few conditions under which women can have children and enjoy them, is to be with a man who earns money. It may not be wonderful, but women raising kids need to be in multiple income units. Unless we on the left really work to alter the way people live and experience the need for emotional commitment and caring, then the technology will rush ahead and force women into things that they don't want to be forced into.

Mike: But why are you assuming that "multiple income units" as you call them, need to include men?

Rebecca: There are plenty of women on their own now with kids, kids which they obtained in the usual fashion through sexual intercourse; they thought they were in marriages or de facto relationships which were going to last, and so they had children within those relationships, the relationships broke down, now they're on their own with kids, and they can't make enough money to keep them and feel good about the way they're keeping them. Also, of course, most women want to live with a male partner/lover.

In a sense, access to reproductive technology is available only to single women in professions, which make up the women that use the "super sperm" bank that you mentioned, Mike. So, the unmarried users of this technology are either professionals, or they are women who have already invented suitable forms of group living, or friendship networks, or whatever. Women who live alone and raise children still feel marginalised, and they are.

It is a shame that relationships are not being discussed along with the new technology.

Anne: I agree with many of the points that you are making, Rebecca, although I am not sure that the situation is quite as over-determined as you suggest. Certainly, access to this technology will be limited to those women who have gained some measure of economic security, and sure, the idea of the family as the ideal support system is still strong. But it is not invincible, and has been eroded by the ever-increasing number of women forced to rear their children independent of men. One of the positive aspects of this has been that women are building up alternative emotional support networks which are extensive and which reduce their reliance on men. The problem as you imply, is one of financial independence and inequality in the workforce. But doesn't the development of reproductive technology undermine the very ideology which has worked to exclude women from the public area? Isn't the system setting up technological preconditions which might help women in their struggle for political and economic equality?

Rebecca: But one of the problems still remains that the technologies are under the control of the medical profession, and the level of political struggle against that profession needs to be greatly intensified. Presently, there seems to be even a backing away from making the sorts of challenges that are required. I don't see how you can say that reproductive technologies are even potentially liberating until there is a powerful and ongoing struggle to break the grip of the medical profession.

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Mike: Is the medical profession so impregnable as you make out? I got myself into quite some hot water recently for arguing that very case when a doctor informed me that half the doctors in her hospital were women and that I should take more care to base my opinions on evidence.

Rebecca: Male domination doesn't necessarily require a majority of men. Some women have been socialised by the profession. "Male control" doesn't essentially mean control by individual men, it means control which benefits men more than women most of the time. Far from each man exercising personal authority, things are much more complex. We live in a network of power relations that both defines "masculinity" and ensures the success of individuals and activities that reinforce that definition.

Mike: What sorts of political problems will this new technology pose for radical feminism? Doesn't it open up the possibility for the erosion of difference between men and women, since difference is frequently considered by radical feminists to be based essentially on the biological aspects of what is female? How does difference survive in the face of the artificial womb and placenta?

Rebecca: I don't think we can say what the politics of the women's movement will be like by the time artificial wombs arrive. The general politics of the situation will be quite different by then. We can't talk about current politics in terms of some hypothetical future.

Anne: But can't we talk about directions?

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Anne: I believe that reproductive technology, as it is presently being developed, will lead to the illusion of androgyny and the elision of difference, without actually altering the position of women at all. The political strategy for the women's movement at the moment must rest on difference.

Rebecca: Wait a minute. How would androgyny lead to the subordination of women?

Anne: I said the "illusion" of androgyny. Because I think that the ideology of women as "different", and the negative aspects attached to it, are no longer as necessary to the maintenance of a system moving toward totalisation. Capitalist patriarchy could well accommodate, and benefit from, a concept of androgyny which implies homogeneity. We can draw parallels between reproductive technology and productive technology. Technological changes at the point of production have rendered difference an irrelevance at work. With technology you don't have to be muscle bound and 6'2" to do "manual" work. New technology promises to take care of biological differences. We are all the same, we are all equal, no more need to struggle to overcome the disadvantages of difference. In short, as the contradictions in this society set up the conditions for liberation, so will capitalist-patriarchy use "androgyny" to render these conditions inoperative at the ideological level.

Rebecca: But how does that continue the subordination of women?

Anne: Because there would be no real change.

Rebecca: I think that, with artificial reproduction, androgyny is going to mean that we would all become like men. And that, therefore, any kind of difference of female functioning from male bodily functioning, would be chemically treated. Because the difference in biology is no longer necessary for reproduction, we can do away with menstrual cycles and a whole range of things. What would happen is not a move to a genuine androgyny, but a move toward the neutering of women and the masculinising of society as a whole. Right now, women have become...
repositories for certain gentle virtues, because that is how our culture has divided up psychological attributes. But if, in moving toward androgyny, you simply have men, and not-men who are not-women too, then you drop off a section of human values that are currently seen as positive, and necessary, though less regarded, and female.

Mike: But doesn't the use of difference as a political strategy at this time involve a revalorisation of femininity, maternity and, by extension, the family? Isn't this what Women Who Want To Be Women and the Right to Life are pursuing?

Anne: First, I must emphasise that to advocate difference as a political strategy at this point in time, is not to say that difference is an irreducible biological given. These differences are socially and historically constructed and are therefore open to change. Second, the strategy of difference can be used to achieve different goals. Women on the right use difference in order to make a nostalgic return to a time when "femininity, maternity and the family" seemed to give them some measure of security. In so doing, they accept the negative side of the bargain which the system deals out. Those feminists who advocate difference also revalorise the feminine and the maternal, but their aims are entirely progressive. Taking the positive values of difference — sharing, caring, etc. — they apply them in a practical effort to transform the dominant value system.

The power that women have in the socialising and domestic realms is a power which, to date, women have been unable to realise, or recognise, since they have been taught that their work is valueless compared to that of men. From the point of view of difference, women can begin to realise this power. It begins with the rejection of those negative aspects which have been attached to our work, and a reassessment of our worth to the social system. Of course, to arrest the process here simply results in a reinforcement of our present status. But this needn't be the case if the personal power realised at one level is carried over and asserted at other levels. Albeit constructed, our "difference" has inscribed us as having particular needs and particular values; turning our "difference" to a positive advantage we can place these needs and values at the centre of a political program which radically confronts the system. Ultimately, the assertion of difference is a demand for self-determination in all areas.

Rebecca: I think difference is important for it reminds women not to embrace masculinism in the name of androgyny, but going too far with "difference" is dangerous because, in this political conjuncture, it does move into sentimentalism — as in, "it's the only power we have, so we should keep men away"; this makes no change to what men do, or to the social value placed on domestic work and child care. If we focus too heavily on difference, then we will find ourselves in that trap. The control of the refrigerator is not the control of our lives. It is true that presently women are responsible for most of the emotional and personal life maintenance of the human race. But we have to look at this carefully and see that the whole structure is not what gives us pleasure, only some parts of it do. So let's even out some of the stuff which is oppressive.

Mike: You seem to be suggesting that men should re-enter the areas of fertility and heterosexual gender relations. How do you suggest that we should go about doing this?

Rebecca: Men should bring their not inconsiderable skills in company research to the corporate financing of medical research and share those with the women who are concerned; they should raise questions about reinforcing models of the nuclear family; question the view that every woman should be attached to one and only one male; experiment in new forms of emotional support networks; they should take responsibility for their own self-maintenance and the life support work that needs to be done for kids; they should raise the questions of child care among groups of men.

Anne: Decisions on women's issues must be the prerogative of women, and men must take a back seat. This means men must constantly monitor their personal politics as they relate to women and resist the temptation to exercise the power which they enjoy by dint of their sex.

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