The Reproductive Fix
Christine Crowe

New reproductive technology has made bottle-bred babies a reality. The unquestioned neutrality of such technology is no longer an acceptable position, and questions such as who does such technology benefit and why have created the climate for lively debate among feminists. Christine Crowe examines these issues, and others.

The "public debate" surrounding the issues of In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) and reproductive technology has so far centred upon two aspects: what could be called orthodox questions of the "morality" of conception outside the uterus, the "dehumanisation of reproduction", the "wastage" of fertilised ova; and the legal entanglements concerning consent and ownership of ova, sperm and fertilised ova. Although the beginnings of a feminist response, or responses, to the new reproductive technology have been evident in the last twelve months, a framework in which to formulate questions which address the complexity of issues raised by these technologies is yet to develop.

In this article, I propose that a feminist critique of science and technology is necessary in order to yield analyses not only of IVF, but of all forms of reproductive technology such as cloning, genetic engineering, organ transplant using embryos, surrogate motherhood and "womb leasing", sex selection and the development of ectogenesis (conception and development of an embryo outside the uterus) using the artificial placenta.

It can be stated that IVF is a major step towards the development of ectogenesis. Carl Wood, a leading figure in the field of reproductive technology, has confirmed the fact that, in Great Britain, an ovum fertilised outside the uterus has survived for fourteen days. (The Warnock report in Great Britain has stipulated this figure as the limit for the growth of the fertilised ovum ex utero.) This occurrence, coupled with the increase in research and development in relation to premature babies born at twenty-four weeks or earlier, means that the actual time period necessary for a foetus to exist in a woman's body is diminishing. In Wood's opinion, the development of an "artificial womb" is not foreseeable in the near future because of the restrictions imposed by governments on the length of time embryos can be "grown" outside the uterus. He states: "I think it's feasible in the future .... I would guess it's more likely to be fifty or one hundred years" (Issues '84, Network 0/28, 27.8.84).
The birth of the first baby developed from an ovum fertilised through the IVF procedure occurred in Great Britain in 1978. I shall examine the views of feminist writers on reproductive technology prior to this event in order to develop an analysis of IVF as one form of this technology. I shall propose that, given capitalist and patriarchal power structures, the IVF procedure is a "technological fix" for certain types of infertility.

Technological fixes have been described as solutions to social problems, solutions which are applied "without first having to remove the causes of the problem" (Elliott & Elliott; 1976, p. 22).

IVF does not "cure" infertility; it provides an avenue to motherhood through technological intervention in the process of reproduction.

In Woman On the Edge of Time (1976) Piercy describes two possibilities for the direction of society. A woman from contemporary society visits two "futures" which represent different results of the use of science and technology.

In one future, society is centrally controlled and hierarchical in structure. Technology is used to control every aspect of individuals' lives. Genetic engineering and forms of biological manipulation had resulted in the segregation of society according to class, race and gender criteria. Children were born of "moms" (p. 290) who were designed to fulfil that function.

In the "other future", representing an alternative direction of science and technology, in inequalities of class, race and gender were eradicated. This society consisted of small communities utilising low-level technology and operating by co-operation with other communities. Reproduction occurred through ectogenesis, the only manifestation of technological sophistication:

It was part of women's long revolution. When we were breaking all the old hierarchies. Finally there was that one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had; in return for no more power for anyone. The original production: the power to give birth. Cause as long as we're biologically enchain'd, we'd never be equal. And males would never be humanised to be loving and tender. So we all become mothers (p. 103).

In relation to technology, Piercy implies that technology itself has the potential for either "use" or "abuse". The outcome of the use of technology is determined by the society in which it evolves.

Piercy states that women must yield the biological power to give birth in order to gain social power. In a society which holds "equality" as a virtue, however, it seems contradictory that the standard by which to judge the "norm" is male-defined; in order to gain "social equality", women must deny capacities unique to them.

In The Dialectic of Sex, Firestone (1972) proposes that women's ability to reproduce is not a power which has to be relinquished, but a "tyranny" (p. 221) which has dictated the nature of women's oppression. She writes "the natural reproductive difference between the sexes led directly to the first division of labour at the origins of class" (p. 17).

For Firestone, the location of social inequalities lies in biology

Women, biologically distinguished from men, are culturally distinguished from "human". Nature produced the fundamental inequality — half the human race must bear and rear the children of all of them — which was later consolidated, institutionalised, in the interests of men (p. 192).

In order to overcome social inequality arising from women's ability to reproduce, Firestone advocates the use of reproductive technology. Much of human history, she states, has involved the transcendence of the "natural":

the "natural" is not necessarily a 'human' value. Humanity has begun to transcend Nature: we can no longer justify the maintenance of a discriminatory sex class system on grounds of its origins in nature (p. 18).

The distinction between the experience of motherhood and the institution of motherhood is not made by Firestone, who implies that women become mothers through "false motivations" (p. 217). Once these false motivations had been shed, pregnancy, described as "clumsy, inefficient and painful" (p. 221) would not be considered by women.

Firestone neglects to examine the possibility that women may wish to
experience pregnancy and childbirth, however painful and "inconvenient" it may be.

In adhering to the distinction between "women" and "human", Firestone incorporates the existing framework of power relations in her analysis; to be "human", a woman must relinquish her biological capacities. In her advocacy, Firestone conflates biology and culture. As Spender (1982) states:

It is not the capacity to give birth which in itself constitutes a liability or an asset in social arrangements. Whether giving birth is a mark of penance or a sign of superior powers depends largely on which sex controls social organisation and produces meanings for society. (p. 511)

As with Piercy, (1976) Firestone advocates that social equality can only be achieved once women no longer need to fulfil the reproductive function which biology has dictated. Unlike Piercy, who proposes that men become "humanised" in this process, Firestone proposes that women may become "human" by yielding this biological capacity. Both views contain a different focus on the value of women's capacity to reproduce; underlying both, however, is the premise that biology determines social capacities.

As O'Brien (1981) states, this argument advocating the use of reproductive technology can be summed up thus:

Women are naturally trapped in the childbearing function. Therefore the liberation of women depends on their being freed from this trap (p. 20).

Now wish to examine the premise that this biological function is, in itself, a "trap". Biological sciences such as anatomy, physiology and genetics "demonstrate" that the process of reproduction in human beings is no different from the reproduction of other mammals: "anything specifically human in the process apparently must await the appearance of the product of the process, the child, as a separate but dependent creature" (O'Brien, 1981, p. 19).

Childbearing, along with eating, sexuality and dying, is also a "natural function". Eating, sexuality and dying, however, have never been examined solely by the biological sciences. O'Brien points out that these biological events have been the subject of profound theoretical discussion:

Dialectical materialism takes as its fundamental postulate the need to eat: Marx has transformed this very simple fact of biological necessity into the breeding ground of a theoretical system ... The simple act of eating has been transformed by ... Freud into a theoretical a priori of a system ... Death has haunted the male philosophical imagination ... and has become the stark reality which preoccupies existentialism (p. 20).

She writes:

We have no comparable philosophies of birth (p. 20). Reproductive process is not a process which male-stream thought finds either ontologically or epistemologically interesting on the biological level. The human family is philosophically interesting, but its biological base is simply given (p. 21).

In attempting to investigate the experience of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood, Rich (1976) draws a distinction between motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution. She writes of:

two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed upon the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that the potential — and all women — shall remain under male control (p. 13).

Rich criticises Firestone's analysis for its acceptance and reproduction of male-centred interpretations of pregnancy and childbirth. Firestone "fails to explore the relationship between maternity and sensuality, pain and female alienation" (p. 170). It is the institution of motherhood under patriarchy, according to Rich, which must be transformed rather than the biological capacity to experience pregnancy and childbirth.

Rich did not reject artificial reproduction as one possibility pertaining to the future of women:

Ideally ... women would choose not only whether, when and where to bear children, but also between biological and artificial reproduction ... But I do not think we can project any such idea onto the future — and hope to realise it — without examining the shadow image we carry out ... of Eve's curse and the social victimisation of women-as-mothers (p. 170).

Until women are able to explore the experience of biological motherhood,
even under oppressive patriarchal auspices, a real “choice” between biological and artificial reproduction cannot be made.

NOW I shall examine the assumptions pertaining to technology upon which these arguments rest. Implicit in Rich’s discussion of reproductive technology is the contention that the control of technology determines its use. She states:

In light of most women’s lives as they are now having to be lived, it can seem naive and self-indulgent to “demand” that technologies be “turned over” to women (1976, p. 288).

In her advocacy of reproductive technology, Firestone not only considers the biological process of reproduction as uninteresting but “barbaric” (1972, p. 188); this biological “inequality” is to be overcome by the use of the “technological fix” (Elliott & Elliott; 1976, p. 22).

Firestone implicitly adheres to the view that technology in itself is “neutral”. She writes that a “serious error” (p. 186) arises when “results of the misuse of technology are very often attributed to the use of technology per se” (p. 186). Also, “radicals, rather than breastbeating about the immorality of scientific research, could be much more effective by concentrating their full energies on demands for control of scientific discoveries ... For, like atomic energy, fertility control, artificial reproduction, cybernation, in themselves; are liberating — unless they are improperly used” (p. 187).

Reproductive technology seems to provide “additional options for women who want children but cannot, or choose not to, conceive through intercourse”(Rothschild 1982, p. 364). This statement raises the issue of whether technology is indeed ideologically “neutral” — whether technology, by use rather than abuse, actually allows more “options” for those women who cannot, or choose not to, conceive through intercourse. The implication of the social meaning of those options, however, are also to be discussed; who, or what group, defines the “problem” to which technological solutions are the “answer”?

The question of whether technology is autonomous, whether it has an independent existence, a separate “history” detached from social forces in which it developed or whether technology both reflects and is a reflection of social, economic and political relationships, is an issue around which much debate revolves. The question is especially pertinent to women because the contraceptive and reproductive technology developed and being developed this century will have dramatic effects on the lives of women.

A distinction must be made between “technique” and “technology”. Technique refers to “the act of applying knowledge, whether directly or with the aid of a tool or machine, to a productive task” (Dickson; 1974, p. 16). Technology refers to “an abstract concept embracing both the tools and machines used by a society, and the relations between them implied by their use” (p. 17). This distinction is crucial; often the disparity between the two is not acknowledged and social relations involved in technological innovations are not considered.

Statements such as “Technology has a career of its own, so far not much subject to political guidance than restraints imposed on other enormously powerful institutions” (Lipscombe & Williams: 1977, p. 19) exemplify this view.

If technology is viewed as neutral, then social relations which occur through the use of the technology are determined by either the “use” or “abuse” of the technology. I propose that reproductive technology is shaped by the social relations of production and reproduction incorporated in its very construction. Without a radical alternation of the social relations in which the technology is designed, the control of technology would in itself do little to alter the social relations necessary for its implementation.

The present social circumstances in which in vitro fertilisation is practised relies upon women’s perceiving motherhood to be desirable. Motherhood is perceived by many women as the achievement of positive personal and social identity. The lack of options for women to achieve such identity other than through mothering reflects the power of the ideology of motherhood as well as illustrating inequalities relating to production and the sexual division of labour. Women’s lowered self-esteem due to the inability to reproduce, and therefore mother, reflects the strength of ideology in which women are perceived primarily as reproducers. In contemporary society, motherhood is defined as the relationship between a woman and her biological child; adoption of children is perceived as a “substitute” for this biological relationship. Women who are unable to have this biological or state-sanctioned relationship to a child are perceived as “childless”. As Rich (1976) asks:

What makes us mothers? The care of small children? The physical changes of pregnancy and birth? What of the woman who, never having been pregnant, begins lactating when she adopts an infant? What of the woman who ... has practically raised her younger sisters and brothers ... and who later enters a convent? (p. 225)

I propose that in a society where motherhood was not confined to a biological relationship, the IVF program as a “technological fix” for infertility may not develop. It is necessary to raise issues not only relating to the “control” of the
technology, but to investigate the social relations surrounding the development of such technology. Without such examination, the issue of women's co-operation in the IVF program would not be addressed. A feminist critique based solely on control of the procedure would implicitly adhere to a "use/abuse" argument concerning science and technology.

The IVF procedure, as a technological fix for infertility, does not address the question of the social meaning of motherhood. Instead, it focuses exclusively on motherhood as the relationship between a woman and her biological child. As a discipline, medical science has the power to define its own priorities and areas of research. Its area of interest lies with further medical intervention in the process of reproduction rather than the investigation of the causes of infertility itself. The IVF procedure is amenable to women with gynaecological (rather than endocrine, i.e. hormonal) infertility. If, as doctors claim, IVF has been developed to "help" infertile women to become pregnant, why has this area of research been concerned exclusively with particular types of infertility rather than examining ways of preventing infertility in general?

As a technological fix, IVF negates the examination of infertility due to iatrogenic "treatment" (where the infertility is caused or produced by diagnosis or treatment by a physician), misdiagnosis or outright neglect of women who report symptoms which have later led to their infertility. It has been proposed that infertility appears to be increasing rapidly in the United States possibly because little is known about the prolonged use of birth control — the pill and the IUD — on fertility, and because the higher VD rate is causing more long-term infections women may not be aware of (Boston Women's Health Book Collective: 1980, p. 14).

The incidence of blocked fallopian tubes as a result of pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) in women using an IUD is 12 percent. Ten percent of women who contract gonorrhea will contract salpingitis (inflammation of a uterine tube); oral contraceptives are known to cause amenorrhea (absence of menstruation) and infertility; there is a correlation between septic abortion and infertility (King, 1981, p. 14). Hubbard, discussing the use of the technological fix in the form of IVF, states: "The problem caused by one risky though medically approved and administered technology can be relieved by another, more invasive technology" (King 1981, p. 14).

Singer and Wells, addressing the issue of the "use" or "abuse" of technology, argue, however, that this piece of technology is ideologically neutral: "A technology is only a tool. How society chooses to use a tool will be influenced by the characteristics of the society in question" (1984, p. 44).

Their argument reflects the views of many doctors involved in the IVF program. As with the debate around nuclear power, there are advocates for the use of certain technology as long as there are certain controls. Contained in the proposition is an implicit and explicit reference regarding the relationship of technology to the society in which it occurs.

The first implicit assumption is that technology develops of its own momentum; technology is the application of scientific discoveries which are developed in circumstances devoid of political factors. In capitalist/patriarchal ideology, "ideas" themselves are promoted as autonomous entities. The autonomy of technology, stemming from the seemingly "objective" natural sciences, must be questioned. By promoting a schism between the technology and the social relations in which it is formed, the legitimation of more extensive power relations occurs. Technology would be seen to have "social impacts" due to its implementation rather than carrying with it dominant values of the society in which it was formed. As Arditti et al (1984) have stated in relation to IVF:

Who are the developers, the promoters, the "experts"? Who benefits— which sex, which class, which race? How much does it cost, and who is going to pay? Why is it so hard to get accurate information? (p. 2)

Fox Keller (1982) proposes that the ideology of Western science contains a projection of male consciousness which include qualities such as objectivity, rationality and control: "The ideological ingredients of particular concern to feminists are found where objectivity is linked with autonomy and masculinity, and in turn, the goals of science with power and domination" (p. 594).

The second premise to which the argument for the neutrality of this technology rests upon the belief that "society" can "choose" how this piece of technology is used. The current debate of the social, legal and 'moral' aspects of in vitro fertilisation have developed after the implementation of the technology. As a consequence of capitalist development in which specialisation of skills and interests is evident, the scientists and gynaecologists involved with the in vitro fertilisation program regard their research and programs as procedures for the treatment of the physical body. Issues such as the social or political ramifications are not areas with which they must deal. As one of the doctors states:

I am not involved in the ethics of having to make those decisions. My ethics and how I manage? I am terribly interested in the possible, and not very interested in what is not possible. I think that's about it .... I have no experience on the way they are decided (1982: Proceedings on the Conference: IVF: Problems and Potentialities, p. 39).

The decision as to who should decide for "society" the "uses" of this technology is problematic. The Waller Commission (1984) has established guidelines for the IVF program. This committee has made its conclusions in the absence of public discussion. Indeed, the lack of information concerning this report indicates that the community in general is not aware of the formation of a committee to resolve contentious issues.

The NSW Health Commission has recently established a working party to report on proposed regulations for IVF. This group comprises doctors and social workers involved in the program, and one woman undergoing IVF. The issue of "public debate" of the procedure is addressed only within the framework acknowledged by the state. Power is operating in this instance at the level of only allowing certain issues to be discussed by
A feminist response or responses to reproductive technology requires a critique of science and technology which does not inadvertently incorporate current ideology of the neutrality of science and technology. A demand for more control of reproductive technology is, in itself, inadequate as a basis for critique. I propose that an analysis of reproductive technology necessitates an examination of the social construction of needs and the ideological components of such technology. I have attempted to give a brief outline of feminist thought on reproductive technology prior to the escalation of research and development in this area to enable further discussion in light of events since the development of the IVF procedure. In order for a feminist critique to become part of the debate surrounding reproductive technology, many complex issues must be raised and discussed. Questions and issues negated by the use of IVF as a technological fix must be brought to light. These issues are not confined solely to IVF, but future forms and manifestations of reproductive technology. Although there may not develop one "feminist line" on reproductive technology, there needs to be an agreement between women on how to approach issues and formulate questions. An ongoing discussion which deals with more than questions of technique is needed.

Immediate questions which arise centre upon issues which may require investigations and research, as well as debate between women:

- What are the alternatives for women who cannot be biological mothers? Infertility brings with it both personal and social dilemmas. Not only do many infertile women experience negative repercussions, including lowered self esteem, but feel implicit social rejection and isolation. Because of the focus on motherhood as a "natural" situation for women, these women are subject to constant social scrutiny. What help in the form of counselling, support and information can feminists undertake? What encouragement and support is there for women who do not reproduce?
- Women on the IVF program are given drugs which produce "superovulation", the production of multiple ova per cycle. What long term studies have been made on possible effects of these drugs?
- Why has not more research and development funding been allocated to the investigation of the causes of infertility? Are doctors being educated to detect early symptoms? Are women and men being educated to recognise symptoms?
- More information and education is needed in relation to the transference of sexually transmitted diseases, symptoms of which may be undetected by women.
- What avenues are available for women to gain more access to information concerning reproductive technology?
- More information is needed on infertility and its causes, thus enabling feminists to have a rejoinder to doctors who claim that IVF is the only way to "help" infertile women.

The questions raised represent only a small number of those which can be formulated. The complex nature of the issues necessitates an analysis, or analyses, which are able to examine not only those issues currently debated, but those which may arise in the future.

References

Bibliography


Christine Crowe is researching a Ph.D. on the new reproductive technology at the Department of Sociology, University of NSW.