

## LET EVERY PREGNANCY BE FOR EVERYONE

Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (London: Verso, 2019), 216 p. ISBN 9781786637291

At a time of widespread abortion bans, refugee families being torn apart, and other forms of gender-based violence, the recent book by the US-based British writer and scholar Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family*, is a timely contribution to the question of global reproductive justice. It is an iconoclastic, original, and provocative synthesis of Marxist feminist theories of social reproduction, denaturalisation (Haraway, Firestone), classic feminist literature (Pierce, Atwood), and critical social geography. Balancing these sources, Lewis is very clear about her indebtedness to feminist genealogies, yet her engagement with class, race, and the rejection of biological determinism makes the book an often disloyal but nevertheless observant critique of her predecessors. Her writing, perhaps indebted to Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex*,<sup>1</sup> is performative and similarly can be read almost as a manifesto. It never shies from the controversial, starting with the introduction where the foetus and the cells of the human placenta are described as "rampaging" because of their invasive treatment of the gestator's body. The key focus here is on international commercial surrogacy, the process of hiring wombs, mostly in developing countries, by childless and wealthy couples to gestate a child for them. For Lewis a surrogacy is both a point of departure but also the key premise of the book when thinking about worker's rights, biological extractivism, and the ethical questions of baby-making.

Most importantly, this is an avowedly utopian project, geared towards collectively distributing and socialising care, where practical and imaginative limits are put aside. To achieve gestational justice, Lewis argues for recognising all forms of gestation as labour, leading to – as the subtitle suggests – "abolition of the family." (115) Depending on class and race, all gestating subjects experience a different level of value extraction. Even the most privileged gestators under patriarchy are workers; for example, it can be argued that Kate Middleton's marriage into the British Royal Family came with

<sup>1</sup> Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: William Morrow, 1970).

the explicit expectation that she would gestate an heir. As Lewis convincingly argues, commercial surrogates are wage labourers producing value, alienated from the product of their labour. Drawing on feminist theories of social reproduction, both paid and unpaid labour at present involve value extraction, even gestational labour that presently happens in the family for free. The difference here is that unpaid gestational labour is invisible – “the body is working very hard at having an appearance of not working at all” (59) – while with commercial surrogacy monetary arrangements are clearly explicit. When we accept that commercial surrogacy is work because it creates value, then we must also understand unwaged pregnancies as labour, clearing the way for an expansion of the Marxist conception of work. For Lewis, the crucial argument is that unpaid and paid pregnancies are work because they make explicit the optimisation of placentated persons for labour and value production (62) and, most importantly, that there is a property relation between child and family.

There have been some criticisms of this position; Reecia Orzek in *Society and Space*,<sup>2</sup> for example, argued that not all gestation is work and asked whether our body processes can be called labour – what Marx called the transhistorical appropriation of nature, as Orzek reminds us – but such criticisms only confirm the idea of pregnancy as a “free gift of nature.” Lewis’s analysis of the Ashanka surrogacy clinic in India clearly refutes such a premise by highlighting the contradictions in surrogacy as a business model and yet claiming pregnancies and gestated babies as “priceless.”

Lewis’s recognition of all gestation as labour goes hand in hand with a denaturalisation of pregnancy. The denaturalisation is here mostly understood as doing away with the binary between nature and technology and thinking about the gestation as a highly technologised process – in Lewis’s words a “gestational fix” (3) – currently firmly in the service of the heteropatriarchy. *Full Surrogacy Now* is a rejection of genetic, biological determinism upon which claims for the superiority of the “biofam” (biological family) are based, and where “blood” (genes) is the decisive factor in the legal ownership of a child. Some may call this a unique connection of the biological parent and child, but it enables the primacy of biological parenthood and the nuclear family over any other familial arrangements in current legal systems.

As Lewis writes, there is still a great support structure for thinking about a biological gestation as the reproduction of an individual that underpins the nuclear family. Quoting Haraway, she refutes such a position: “there is never any reproduction of the individual [...] neither parent is continued in the child, who is a randomly re-assembled genetic package.” (19) The resulting combination of labour and nature (genome, microbiome) is a matter of us shaping one another, we are all our makers. This clears

<sup>2</sup> Reecia Orzek, 2020, “Will Families Be Different in the Future?” *Society and Space*, Jan 16, 2020 (online at [societyandspace.org/articles/will-families-be-different-in-the-future](https://societyandspace.org/articles/will-families-be-different-in-the-future) [accessed Nov. 5 2020]).

the way for Lewis to argue for a distribution of gestation amongst the collective and the abolishment of the nuclear family, the basis for Lewis's utopian project.

Of course, in global capitalism the options to intervene in the labour and nature of gestation are unequally distributed. The privileged have been able to techno-fix their gestation through systems of specialised private medical care quite extensively for some time now. For them, commercial surrogacy is just an extension of the available technologies of birth, which expands their consumer's choice. For Lewis, the current situation necessitates doing away with the angelic sanctity of bourgeois white motherhood, with its supporting structures of low-paid domestic workers, nannies and lately the surrogate services – which she argues are a “‘technology’ that absorbs 100 percent damage from the consumer's point of view: the human labour of a gestational surrogate.” (3)

### Gestation is Work

If the left-wing utopian project is the abolition of work, the only way forward is to remove what Lewis called in her interview with *Verso* the “workness” of gestation, understood as the alienation of worker, wage labour, and product. Lewis firmly insists that gestation as it currently operates must be understood as productive care labour and legally recognised as such, as this “opens up the realization that pregnancy workers can bargain, commit sabotage, and go on strike.” (75) As a result of this position, Lewis has been criticised as an advocate of a further commodification of social life.<sup>3</sup> The book takes a close look at the wide movement of surrogacy abolitionists aiming for surrogacy bans. From the perspective of anti-surrogacy feminists and, as with any other gendered labour bans (sex work, pornography, abortion, IVF), their campaigns are based in the idea of protecting surrogates against labour and gender-based exploitation. Yet anti-surrogacy campaigns are often based in problematic ideas of natural motherhood/womanhood, feeding the Western “rescue industry,” and are very often supported by right-wing patriarchal nationalists who claim to protect their own women (their chastity, honour, and so forth), often without the participation or consent of those directly affected. (41)

Regardless of its title, *Full Surrogacy Now* is ultimately a call for a surrogacy abolition, even if chapter 2 – “But Aren't You Against It?” – might suggest otherwise, eloquently arguing for surrogacy decriminalisation and the creation of workers' run cooperatives. But the book's ultimate aim lays in the future: a flight from the market and a revolutionary change in society. For if, as Lewis writes, babies belonged to everybody and were everybody's responsibility, surrogacy would generate no profits, erasing itself as a concept, and baby-making, re-distributed into a commune, would exist in relation to collective needs and desires. (168) This, as Lewis herself admits, is left at the level of an open proposal. The final chapter, “Amniotechnics,” draws on Astrida Neimanis's

<sup>3</sup> Nivedita Majumdar, “Labor and Love Under Capital,” *Jacobin*, Jan. 2020 (online at [jacobinmag.com/2020/01/full-surrogacy-now-sophie-lewis-review](https://jacobinmag.com/2020/01/full-surrogacy-now-sophie-lewis-review) [accessed Nov. 5 2020]).

powerful text, *The Bodies of Water*.<sup>4</sup> Bodily liquids such as amniotic fluid and the collective ownership of water at the blockade of the Dakota Access Pipeline are powerfully weaponised as a speculative, future collective “birthing” body.

While Lewis is highly convincing about the levels of oppression and violence that are connected to the current hetero-cis patriarchal family systems, it is unclear, as with many collective projects, how to address the affective desire for individuation (and the private desire for possession) that the emotional bond of parenthood, biological or not, represents. For any speculative imaginaries to be thinkable, even as a theoretic proposition, doing away with the private ownership of babies to establish gestational communism must be a viable part of an imaginable affective register.

*Full Surrogacy Now* could explore in more depth how doing away with family altogether would truly eradicate capitalism. The argument for doing away with the nuclear family as a cornerstone of heteropatriarchy (for its connections to property accumulation, private possession, and gender-based violence) is clearly made, but such a proposition has been made before. The book embraces other forms of family (communal living, existing non-biological families, queer families, and polyparental families), but they are seen as a stopover before full gestational communism. In this respect, it could be suggested that a more developed case for the complete abolition of family in relation to the end of capitalism is needed if we are to meet its radical implications. Yet, expecting a realistic social utopia would be missing the point of this exciting book, where its utopian aims of the collective distribution of care is firmly and convincingly sketched out from the failures of the present.

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<sup>4</sup> Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).