

Dana S. Belu

Heidegger, Reproductive Technology, & the Motherless Age

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Reviewed by Lorraine Markotic, 2020

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This book addresses a subject that is both timely and ongoing. Technology is increasingly a part of the reproductive process, and technical involvement in reproduction is invariably going to continue, most likely to develop exponentially as it has done in past decades. Dana S. Belu discusses “advanced reproductive technologies” (ARTs), but makes clear that these advanced technologies do not actually advance women in terms of their involvement in reproduction. *Heidegger, Reproductive Technology, & the Motherless Age* draws on Heidegger’s philosophy of technology to illustrate how women have increasingly become fungible resources in relation to contemporary reproductive technology.

Belu provides a critical delineation of historical developments in Western medical intervention into birth (forceps, chloroform, twilight sleep, epidurals) and a critically informed elaboration of contemporary practices around ARTs (especially in vitro fertilization [IVF] and transnational gestational surrogacy). But the book is, above all, a philosophical one. Although Heidegger himself pays almost no attention to reproduction, Belu insightfully takes his depiction of modern technology, and our entrenchment within it, and applies these ideas to

reproductive technology. As I have noted elsewhere, for many people, conception, pregnancy, and birth involve Heideggerian enframing [*Gestell*]. Belu incisively shows precisely how—and how deeply—women’s reproductive capacity is ensnared in and by technological enframing, and how women are rendered resources by the optimizing orientation of our technological age with its “norms of efficiency and control” (5).

Heidegger does not consider machines to be key to modern technology; indeed, he considers them only “incidental” (10), as Belu notes. His interest lies in uncovering technology’s essence. What is crucial for Heidegger is how technology is intertwined with enframing, the mode of revealing in modernity, the way in which the world is disclosed to us in terms of its availability to and for us. Technological thinking “frames” our world as standing-reserve (*Bestand*); we cannot but encounter things as standing-by for us. Heidegger eschews the common view that technology is a neutral tool that humans can employ in helpful or harmful ways. He insists that in modernity the world is perceived, experienced, and rendered as standing-reserve, grasped in terms of what we want and demand from it. In his view, this is the essence of modern technology and our inherently technological orientation: we cannot but seek to “challenge-forth” nature, extract something from it—above all any form of potential energy that can be stored and stocked for future use. Objects are no longer even apprehended as objects; they become resources. The world is regulated and secured, ordered in such a way and to such an extent that things are able to come to light only if they are orderable. Belu writes, “What doesn’t show up as a resource or a potential resource, what cannot be challenged-forth, simply does not show up at all” (79). That humans objectify the world and others is certainly a problem, but enframing goes further, casting its net so widely and

entrenching itself so deeply that things are intelligible only within the structure of enframing. As Belu notes, for Heidegger, “enframing is not simply a widespread ‘problem’ we could solve with appropriate remedies, but the underlying structure of being in our time” (9).

Belu takes Heidegger’s insight into the technological enframing of our age and innovatively applies it to the specific situation of ARTs. Women, their bodies, and their reproductive capacity are enframed in a network that positions women as resources and is oriented toward “reproductive optimization” (5). Crucial for Belu’s argument is the distinction she makes between Heideggerian enframing, on the one hand, and objectification and instrumentalization, on the other. Whereas instrumentalization is object-directed and goal-oriented, enframing is systemic and “more invested in the drive to set up new goals and to adopt an attitude of perseverance against all (rational) odds” (38). In my view, the distinction between enframing and instrumentalization is not quite as clear-cut as Belu believes.

Horkheimer and Adorno’s discussion of instrumental reason in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* shows that when reason becomes instrumental it becomes formalized—characterized by the very “calculative thinking” that Belu sees as “typical of enframing” (24). Moreover, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that when Enlightenment thinking becomes instrumental it loses sight of its intent and tends to revert to mythology. This is relevant to the situation Belu describes where women retain an irrational hope regarding in vitro fertilization and keep putting themselves through new cycles of IVF (39), even though this persistently fails to produce results. Belu does not think such situations can be explained by instrumental thinking, but only by technological thinking, which compels one to “optimize more resources, to never give up” (39). In my view, however, Horkheimer and Adorno’s portrayal of the *dialectic* of Enlightenment has something

to contribute to the analysis of the irrational hope involved in such situations. But Belu's point about enframing—that it involves much more than thought becoming an instrument or a tool, a way for a subject to figure out a means to attain a goal or a specific object—is an important one.

Indeed, there is definitely a gulf between Heidegger's philosophy and Horkheimer and Adorno's work. The latter can be drawn on to show the link between the domination of nature and the domination of women, especially pertinent in the context of biological reproduction. What Belu succeeds in showing is that reproductive enframing does more than exploit, objectify, or even dominate women. Women are not simply instrumentalized by reproductive technology; instead, reproductive enframing makes women into resources, able to appear only—and merely—as standing-reserve. The subject–object dualism characteristic of modernity is superseded by reproductive enframing that “frames women's wombs as reproductive stock (*Bestandstück*)” (24) ready for optimization by medical networks. In the chapter “Enframing the Womb,” Belu argues that enframing creates a resource that it simultaneously pushes forward and seeks to optimize by setting up women “as a collection of discrete and movable reproductive parts: ovaries, follicles, eggs, fallopian tubes, hormones, and so on. These parts are managed as stock, potential reproductive energy that is challenged forth for further medical research and experimentation” (28). In other words, women are not simply oppressed by patriarchy, but are ensnared in a medico-technological web whose ideals are efficiency and control. The fact that women's well-being becomes irrelevant in relation to reproduction is less the result of uncaring, sexist individuals than “a consequence of the overidentification of technology with function, with efficient conception” (33).

Belu discusses at length the IVF engineering of life (70), arguing that although IVF may sometimes benefit individual women, it oppresses women as a group (25–26). In fertility clinics, women become “a medical resource, a fungible entity, and a means for further research” (29). She mentions the astonishing fact that even fertile women sometimes pursue IVF. This is due partly to deliberate misinformation about success rates and health risks, misinformation driven not only by the desire to make money but also by the drive to advance the process, enhance the technology, and to obtain “new clients and research grants” (20) in order to do so. The fragmentation of women’s bodies and their being positioned as standing-reserve—or, again, their being encountered as always already standing-reserve—Belu considers most obviously present in the “resource status of the gestational surrogate” (40). The bodies of gestational surrogates are harnessed by the possibilities opened by IVF. Gestational surrogates are encouraged, contrary to their inclination, to think of their bodies as having “spare space” and are described as having “a rented womb” (46). As gestational surrogates, they are interchangeable and each is therefore considered dispensable. They become a fungible resource “commanded and challenged forth by the clinic” (47). Moreover, IVF and gestational surrogacy open up the possibility of dispensing with women entirely; the next logical step is the creation of artificial wombs (35), especially since with IVF, “most of the time implantation and thus gestation fail” (67). This is the ultimate sense in which enframing promotes a motherless age.

Of course, this is something many people, including many feminists, would welcome: the fact that social parenting becomes more important than bearing a child. But Belu reminds us of the fact that IVF, which most people want to think of as “natural” or at least as assisting

nature, entails manufacturing life. Impelling this challenging act of creation is a belief in the importance of passing on one's genes and/or being genetically related to the child one rears; this is especially evident in gestational surrogacy. Belu points out, moreover, that with IVF there is often an attempt to "match the phenotypes of egg donors with those of the social parents" (72) so that the children seem "genetically linked to the social parents" (72); as well, there is often a refusal to tell children they were conceived through donor eggs. In Belu's view, IVF serves the "patriarchal attachment to parenthood as biological ownership" (61). This important point remains somewhat underdeveloped, however, as does the even more significant fact that such patriarchal attachment works *in tandem* with enframing's creation and controlling of women as fungible resources.

In her penultimate chapter, Belu makes the innovative argument that both technophilic *and* technophobic approaches to childbirth are caught up in enframing. Beginning with the forceps, medical practitioners vaunted and used a tool more than was either necessary or safe, Belu explains. This continued with chloroform and, subsequently, twilight sleep; eventually epidurals were introduced, which paved the way for caesareans. Today women themselves can request epidurals or schedule caesareans, and are no longer simply rendered passive (in earlier days, unconscious) objects by presumptuous, patriarchal medical professionals. Nevertheless, childbirth is more and more enframed: women are "having increasingly standardized, interchangeable birthing experiences" (88–89). Moreover, even if women prefer a drug-free birth, both they and their obstetricians may be encouraged to opt for medical intervention because of hospital policy or administrative protocol, especially in the case of a long labor.

Ultimately, birth becomes an “‘obstetrical manufacturing process’ that is primarily served by woman’s body rather than serving it” (89).

What is not so obvious, and what is interestingly posited by Belu, is that technophobic childbirth, such as that exemplified by the Lamaze method, is also “unwittingly stuck in the reproductive enframing” (104), for Lamaze, too, emphasizes “orderability and control” (92). Lamaze recognized that labor is work, Belu explains, and taught techniques for a drug-free birth, training women “to breathe with a great deal of control and precision, avoiding passivity and relaxation as they increase sensitivity to pain” (94). Belu writes: “traditional Lamaze strives for maximum control and optimization” (96) over and in relation to the birthing body. Significantly, Lamaze did *not* consider his method natural childbirth, Belu notes; rather, he considered it *better* than nature, since it involves controlling nature. Woman is no longer pushed around by doctors (95), rather, she self-dominates (109). Interest in the Lamaze method in North America emerged in the 1960s and increased through to the late 1970s (91), but since then has been on the wane (95). Belu believes this is mainly because it frequently leads to slow births and hence is considered inefficient.

What strikes me in relation to the attachment to efficiency evident in the skyrocketing of technological birth, including elective caesareans, is how these streamlined and managed births contrast with the *inefficiency* of IVF. As Belu repeatedly points out, in the vast majority of cases IVF implantation does not work and does not produce a live birth. In other words, IVF is generally unproductive and ineffective. For fertile women, sperm donation would be more effective (as well as less physically painful and involving less health risk). That IVF is preferred by many heterosexual couples where the man has a low sperm count discloses just how

entrenched is the patriarchal belief in the importance of the man being biologically related to his child. What is significant here, in my view, is the fact that enframing renders women—much more than men—fungible resources. Sperm banks do not render men standing-reserve or reproductive stock in quite the way that IVF and gestational surrogacy render women an interchangeable, dispensable resource. It seems to me that this is something we need to think about more. Enframing pushes forward toward optimization, but what is optimized (in this case, women’s bodies) is influenced by existing power structures and ideologies (in this case patriarchy). Just as technology is not a neutral tool, according to Heidegger, but inherently involves the perception, creation, and controlling of resources, so enframing is not gender-neutral, but inextricable from patriarchy.

In her final chapter, Belu discusses birth as potentially a form of *poēsis*, a bringing-forth (rather than a challenging-forth) in Heidegger’s terms. I have argued that it is nothing less than bizarre that Heidegger’s philosophy—which revolves around revealing and unconcealment—ignores birth as *poēsis* (Markotic 2016). Belu specifically advocates and makes a compelling argument for water-birth as exemplary of *poēsis*. Belu seems to be influenced by the emphasis on receptivity running through Heidegger’s philosophy. Heidegger encourages openness to being and opposes traditional notions of philosophy as an attempt to *grasp* the world, an attempt by the subject to understand or ascertain the object. In water-birth, Belu writes, the baby emerges into unconcealment without it being clear whether the “‘bursting forth’ belongs to the mother or to the baby or to both of them” (113). Water birth is not “a skilled triumph over one’s body or a resignation to technological handling” (113); it involves abetting rather than “efficiently producing” (113). Water-birth does not resist medical intervention when it is

needed, but such a birth is frequently slow and inefficient—and hence refuses to comply with enframing. Influenced by Sara Ruddick’s work on empathy in *Maternal Thinking*, Belu argues that water birth involves treating the fetus “empathetically, not in a functional way as a product or a thing” (114). The birthing body is neither predictable nor governable; hence, an enframing medical network seeks to make it so. Belu draws on Ruddick’s discussions of the “work of conscience” to encourage women to resist the pressures and power of the techno-medical network through reflective judgment.

Belu’s important book shows both the extent of enframing and suggests possibilities of resistance. It is an excellent work for anyone who wants to learn more about Heidegger, especially Heidegger’s work on technology; it takes his dense and difficult concepts of enframing and standing-reserve, and elucidates them in relation to one of the most rapidly advancing technologies of our time. It is also an important work for feminist philosophers interested in IVF and/or surrogacy, since it provides a new way to understand their imbrication in the enframed and enframing world of modernity, a world, Belu shows, that both constructs and controls women as resources.

References

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