

## Book Review

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Luc Boltanski, transl. Catherine Porter, *The foetal condition: A sociology of engendering and abortion*. Polity Press: Cambridge, 2013; 328 pp. ISBN 978-0-745-64731-9 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-745-64730-2 (hbk)

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That fluid object we call a foetus (in a non-historical, pseudo-Latinate spelling of the Latin word “fetus”) became available to photographic capture in the 1960s. Highly controversial as a visual adornment adopted for many a Christian-conservative protest placard, the disembodied foetal figure became, in and of itself, a symbol of resistance to feminism’s second wave. The actual foetus is also increasingly disembodied and occupies a remarkable range of locations. Neonatal intensive care units nowadays incubate these living proto-human entities almost from the halfway point of their normal (40-week) *in vivo* gestational term. Meanwhile, millions of abandoned embryos occupy freeze-storage facilities at private labs, and the experimental science of ectogenesis (the attempt to achieve full-term gestation outside of the living body) sporadically yet reliably receives sensational news coverage. On the other hand, the chemical and biomedical means of detaching and expelling the foetus from the body have not proliferated with such ease. For this reason, in this book (first published in French in 2004 as *La condition foetale*) Boltanski’s method of focusing on abortion, in order to produce a sociology of pregnancy, is well conceived.

In six conceptually dense sociological chapters, in a style not dissimilar to Hannah Arendt’s in *The Human Condition*, Boltanski identifies a potentially dizzying, yet laboriously stitched together, series of interrelated paradoxes about this process, only to supersede them all, in a final chapter, in favour of a radical account rooted in experience (Chapter 7, *The Experience of Abortion*). He begins with core anthropological oddities (Chapters 1 and 2) about abortion’s simultaneously taboo and ubiquitous character, and then proceeds to unveil the fundamental hypocrisy of hegemonic, officially unofficial, “understandings” of abortion in recent history (*Understandings*, Chapter 3), none of which have been completely abandoned within the recent, neoliberal, rise of the “parental project” (*The Parental Project*, Chapter 4). Subsequently, Boltanski classifies the classificatory systems that construct various “categories” of foetus (*The Construction of Foetal Categories*, Chapter 5). He wades through the principal streams of bioethical justification for their elimination (*The Justification of Abortion*, Chapter 6).

There are few subjects so reductively emotive, and in relation to which nuanced analysis can be so thankless a task, as the foetal condition. This is because it strikes at a disavowed component of our selfhood, namely the fungible, replaceable origin we share, wedged deep in mother's flesh, being only contingently chosen and adopted which is also the species-character we bear. "*La condition foetale*", Boltanski wants to show, "*c'est la condition humaine*" (Boltanski, 2013, p. 332). It is unfortunate that this final sentence was omitted in the new Polity Press publication, probably because it was assumed to be too easily confused with a "pro-life" sentiment – which it is not, as Jim Conley has already observed (Conley, 2014).

*The foetal condition: A sociology of engendering and abortion* reaches its Anglophone audiences thanks to Catherine Porter, who is perhaps most notable for her translations of Bruno Latour. Unsurprisingly, Porter's finished translation of Boltanski's sometimes rather vexed sociological prose represents an admirable achievement. Infelicities are rare and trifling, such as the tendency to render the frequent colloquial "*finalement*" as "finally" instead of "in the end". If the style is often less than vivacious and pellucid, however, the fault is Boltanski's far more than Porter's. An ambitious sociology of this active verb, "engendering", which evokes a process of "fabrication", seems to promise that it will take a lively view of the metabolic contribution of those who people the earth with the product of their wombs. Admittedly, the original noun "*l'engendrement*" belongs to a different, less active category, more akin to the subject-evacuated concept in English of "genesis". And, accordingly, in *The foetal condition*, we initially find a disappointingly abstract understanding of pregnancy that relegates it without too much fuss to the order of "life". Boltanski has explained in an interview (Marongiu, 2004) how, following an initial impulse to complement his earlier study of capitalism's new "connexonist" spirit (*Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, 1999, p.105) with an analogous account of changes in the organising logic of life ("*le domaine de la vie*"), he was obliged to settle for the more manageable theme: abortion. So a certain still discernible enthusiasm for arcane classifications of the rather apolitical substance, "life", threatens the early chapters. Of this formidable monograph's calm and considered assault on the broadly liberal accounts of "life", on the one hand, and totalitarian conceptions ("fascistic organicism", p. 201), on the other, one wishes to ask the question: where is its political freight? Boltanski waits until the penultimate page to summarise. Recognition of the foetal condition he has anatomised "opens the way to a sustainable conception of a common humanity that would be neither a homogeneous monolith nor an accumulation of singularities" (p. 249).

This mission statement is strikingly congruent with the *oeuvre*, almost inexplicably missing from Boltanski's bibliography, of the Marxian-Hegelian midwife and theorist of gestation, Mary O'Brien (*The Politics of Reproduction*, 1983). Boltanski feels that "[l]ike philosophy, the social sciences have failed... to pay sufficient attention to the creation of human beings" (p. 24), and that "gestation... has been relatively little studied by sociology until recently" (p. 29). Yet, in the early 1980s, O'Brien was addressing the same lacuna by theorising procreativity, i.e. the

labour of being-in-labour, with the help of several, generatively untenable, dichotomies that are very similar to those deployed in *The foetal condition* (alienation and integration; the public and private realms, and so on). Had this opportunity for connection not been missed, Boltanski's stance – which is epistemologically humble for the most part – could have attained a deeper degree of self-reflection on the dangers of falling into what O'Brien called "male-stream philosophy" (p. 5), as a white male. Boltanski makes much in his introduction of the "posture [he announces he] will maintain throughout", namely of Durkheim-inspired "axiological neutrality", according to which one can "treat abortion as if it were a sociological object like any other" (p. 2). But the book unselfconsciously forfeits neutrality by consistently reproducing tropes of feminine gestational passivity and masculine impregnatory agency, for example, by referring severally to the foetus being "implanted in her" or even "implanting itself" and "growing", as though autonomously, while she "carries" it (pp. 62, 93, 116, 207, 215, 220, 231, 246). Here, the author's evident innocence of standard critiques such as Emily Martin's much cited 1991 account of the romantic, gendered construction of the egg and the sperm in medical textbooks is, here and there, to the detriment of *The foetal condition*. On the other hand, in the end Boltanski explicitly shows us the need to struggle to find alternative language altogether to think about implantation, gestation, abortion and parturition (all moments O'Brien placed within the reproductive project), recognizing the insufficiency of standard grammar that renders the implanted/or implantee firmly either subjective or objective.

Overwhelmingly, Boltanski is moving away from received categories and towards a fresh and surprising phenomenological materialism. He has departed from the male-stream legacy on human reproduction by virtue of sincerely transmitting the necessarily partial conclusions of a long and faithful engagement with many pregnant or once-pregnant people. Parsing the distinct temporalities of the "will of the flesh", the "will of the self" and the "will to legitimize" (p. 199) within their experience, his work often takes the form of a theoretic rebuttal of idealisms that posit human genesis as an emanation of feminine passivity. Far from natural in the classic sense, "[f]lesh in a state of pregnancy is unusual or "other,"" Boltanski states towards the end of the tome; "animated with its own inherent will . . . *It makes flesh with oneself*" (p. 211) (italics mine). Would that this book were read in conjunction with the interdisciplinary social science pursuits of new materialities, biovalue, co-production, corporeality and the more-than-human! And would that Luc Boltanski, conversely, engaged anew with the unorthodox Marxist conversation currently taking place about the "techno-foetus" (p. 126), of which he seems so leery. Boltanski would also do well to reappraise the "socialist utopia" of Shulamith Firestone he dismisses on p. 245 in light of recent advances in reproductive technology I have already mentioned. In the last decade, Melinda Cooper and several anglophone scholars of gestation – notably looking at the workplaces of contemporary "assisted" reproduction in its commercial forms – have turned to the category of labour, if not labour-power, in order to theorise far more of life than that narrow vista of foetus-engendering activity. Undeniably, Boltanski's reputation for theoretical innovations within a broadly Marxist

tradition – most famously with Ève Chiapello – leads one to expect such a labour-oriented approach to reproduction/regeneration (a direction recently pursued most fruitfully by Cooper and Waldby in *Clinical Labor*, 2014).

In *The foetal condition's* most substantive section, Chapter 7, Boltanski proposes convincingly that the way to exit the pervasively liberal framework that undergirds (even “conservative”) abortion discourse, with its false juridical and moral abstractions, is to embrace “[t]he possibility of considering the foetus as “both me and not me,” to borrow an expression from Catherine MacKinnon” (p. 194). His team’s research on the experience of abortion indicates that – according to the only people whose knowledge on the topic matters – gestational labour is a thoroughly ambivalent, queer and cyborg enterprise (admittedly, these are not Boltanski’s words): one which is always irreducible to one side of a binary or another. Laudable aspects of the methodology include that it is organised around often extremely long quotations of women’s self-theorisation, and that the sociology is framed as an inquiry into an unspecial social fact. Contrary to what is usually sought in the normative tussle over women’s social power (or right, or *freedom*) to decide what happens to “the unborn” (a tussle Boltanski side-steps, objectionably, given the present conjuncture in his empirical context of France, and elsewhere), the recommended type of consciousness around engendering is here dialectically hybrid. This is necessarily so because pregnancy’s labour is a both lonely and co-imbricated with another being, intimate and neatly separated from touch, active and non-agentive, imaginative and visceral, symbolic and physical, euphoric and sickening, fulfilling and parasitic, conscious and unconscious, subjective and objective, and, all in all, poorly captured by the sociological either/or distinctions that we encountered along the way. For example, the foetus is often both “tumoral” and “authentic” (p. 125); wanted and hated, or vice versa; further, in pregnancy, disquietude and happiness (or repugnant distress and “plenitude” p. 195) tend to alternate. Lastly, and most challenging conceptually, is the politically indigestible fact that the woman and the foetus are not one and not two: “both they themselves and the other being are inseparably in question, without any break in continuity” (p. 194).

My final remarks shall be that the meta-theoretical ambitions of this book do not get to grips with the classed and racialised, geopolitical and neo-colonial, character of women’s (always “situated”) experience of abortion. In 2001, as Boltanski was writing this book, a boat serving as a “floating abortion clinic” travelled to Ireland, hoping to drop anchor and help deprived women benefit from Dutch law (Osborn, 2002). Again in June 2015, *The Telegraph* reported that the same doctor-activist group (Women on Waves) was using drones to transport abortifacient pills across borders to those in need of them (Sanghani, 2015). While Boltanski’s analysis sometimes implies that the world has simply moved on from the 1970s, it is countries such as Ireland, close to Boltanski’s base in Paris (the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences), which consistently generate such headlines. Equally, it is the hyper-developed USA today, which is most prominently associated with “abortion deserts” that necessitate civil disobedience or illegal acts of mutual aid to effect their provisioning. Simply put, abortion access is an archetypal manifestation of class inequality. The poor, in both the developed and

so-called developing worlds, are typically denied meaningful access to safe abortion (including where it is legal). And formidable forces within America have recently escalated the crackdown on abortion clinics, famously via carceral implementations of “foetal rights” in many states (Boltanski discusses the advent of “foetal injury” in American jurisprudence on pp. 137–138). Concomitantly, it is women of colour, inhabiting an Anglophone world, who have become global figureheads of the struggle for reproductive freedom – for instance, those imprisoned following their miscarriages, such as Purvi Patel (2015) and Bei Bei Shuai (2010) in Indiana. This context of live class conflict around the organisation of reproductive resources is not explicitly what motivated Luc Boltanski. Because of his focus on a dubious sense of the whole of society, Boltanski is unable to imagine the position of women who might be enabled through struggle to produce an unqualified legitimization of an abortion as a social “good” even while conceptualizing it as the ridding of a human being. Yet, it is largely because the book falls into this context that it is such good news, roughly 10 years after its publication in French, that this intervention in the divided field of abortion discourse – this contribution by an eminent sociologist to a radical dialectics of gestation – has emerged in English.

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