Once and Future Feminist

Merve Emre

with Silvia Federici, Cathy O’Neil, Sarah Sharma, and Andrea Long Chu
Once and Future Feminist
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Deborah Chasman & Joshua Cohen

How can women possibly be free if they must carry the burden of reproductive labor? In her The Dialectic of Sex (1970), radical feminist Shulamith Firestone raised this question and argued that technology could provide a promising answer: artificial wombs would provide a way out of a world of gender hierarchies. With the proliferation of assisted reproductive technologies such as egg freezing and surrogacy, it might look like we are making progress.

Merve Emre, our guest editor and lead author, is not so sure. “People’s bodies,” she observes, “are unruly sites for politics.” Techno-utopias may have their attractions, but they flatten human life. Drawing on personal narratives, Emre explores how technologies shape real experiences of reproduction and care, and how they obscure and sometimes worsen inequalities—in time, money, kinship, and access to healthcare. Such stories are heterogenous, individual, particular to place and person. Can an egalitarian and maximally inclusive feminism emerge from these stories? What would it look like?
Many of Emre’s respondents share deep concerns about the promise of techno-fixes: they turn pregnancy into a commercial transaction, transform babies into commodities, fetishize genetic perfection, echo histories of racial exclusion and state violence—or simply don’t work. These critiques also suggest—as does Emre—rich sources for alternate visions, including the contributions of black women and queer communities in modeling and theorizing the kind of elective kinship and social structures that might sustain baby-making and distribute its burdens fairly.

With more than 2,000 kids forcibly separated from their parents, our current realities are painfully distant from these hopeful prospects. But utopian imagination is perhaps most important precisely when the gulf between real and ideal is greatest.

Other contributors to this issue also work at the rich intersection of technology, work, and feminism. James Chappel asks why feminist concerns are so rarely attentive to older women—whose reproductive labor is finished and who are especially vulnerable in an economy with so much precarious work. Sarah Sharma looks to Silicon Valley and “Mommy apps” whose designs debase women by treating them as outmoded technologies. She asks how we might reimagine technology without gender hierarchies. In a speculative story on sex robots, Cathy O’Neil gives us a glimpse of that future.

Finally, two contributors look back toward the future. Jill Richards interviews legendary activist Silvia Federici, a member of New York’s Wages for Housework in the 1970s, about her vision of women’s liberation. Michael Bronski recalls Gay Liberation’s vision of a society in which gay men and women raised children together. Building from the past and from the margins, they imagine a world more generous, decent, and humane than our own—a society organized around elective kinship and the belief that our children are our common responsibility.
From the breast pump to egg freezing, new technologies have long promised to “liberate” mothers, but the results are often uneven, freeing some women while worsening the oppression of others. *Once and Future Feminist* considers how technology offers women both advances and setbacks in the realms of sex, career, and politics. In the age of Silicon Valley, these issues are more pressing than ever, and this collection pushes readers to consider not only whether emancipatory feminism is possible today, but what it might look like.

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