

Reviews

Against goody two-shoes feminism

Penelope Deutscher, *Foucault's Futures: A Critique of Reproductive Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). 280pp., £74.95 hb., £24.95 pb., £24.95 eb., 978 0 23117 640 8 hb., 978 0 23117 641 5 pb., 978 0 23154 455 9 eb.

A recurring theme within feminist philosophy has been the association of a feminine maternal principle with generativity and life. One of the aims of promoting the generative maternal paradigm has been to counteract what is viewed as the excessive preoccupation with mortality and death within the patriarchal western philosophical tradition. But this move can obscure the complex intertwinement of life and death within reproduction and the maternal – not only through phenomena such as miscarriage, stillbirth and death in childbirth, but also through the framing of women as potential bringers of death precisely by virtue of their endowment with life-giving power (the logic being that she who can bring life can also deny it, withhold it or take it away). What Penelope Deutscher seeks to develop in this book is an articulation of what she terms ‘thanatopoliticised reproductive biopolitics’, which can account for the attribution to women of potential harm to embryos, children and collective futures: the ‘deadly counterpart to the perception of women as life principle’.

Deutscher’s primary interlocutor in this endeavour is Foucault, which may seem surprising given that his work has consistently been criticised for its failure to seriously examine sexual difference and is not generally assessed as a contribution to theories of reproduction. But Deutscher maintains that reproduction can be viewed as a ‘hinge’ between Foucault’s accounts of sexuality and biopolitics – a connection that is present, though latent, in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, and spelled out more clearly in *Society Must be Defended*. Minimally, she argues, ‘reproductive biopolitics belong to the prisms of life through which one can read *HS1*, operating at the nexus between the biopolitical administering of life

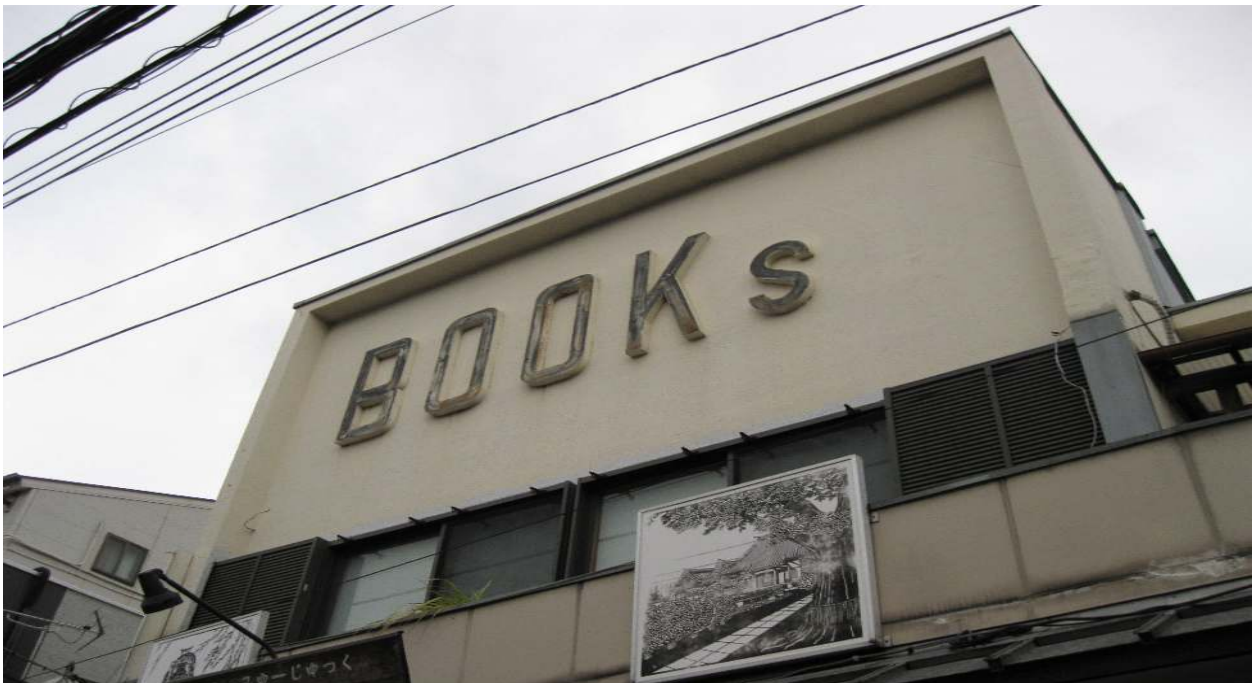
and the biopolitical intensification of sex’. Moreover, though he stopped short of considering reproductive forms of the thanatopolitical, Foucault’s work is a valuable resource for investigating how reproduction and maternity are made as ‘thresholds of death stimulated by biopolitical logics’. Deutscher’s project is thus to draw upon what she describes as Foucault’s ‘suspended reserves’, teasing out theoretical tools and staging ‘transfiguring engagements’ with other theorists Jacques Derrida, Lee Edelman, Judith Butler, Lauren Berlant, Giorgio Agamben, Achille Mbembe, Robert Esposito and Jasbir Puar. Through putting these theorists into conversation with Foucault concerning problems ‘not quite belonging to them’, proximities emerge as well as points of difference, ‘sometimes insofar as they miss each other on points which can be better articulated together and through the miss’.

Deutscher’s method of putting the ‘suspended reserves’ of Foucault to work makes for fascinating, provocative reading; yet the question of ‘why Foucault?’, or rather, why the fidelity to Foucault, still lingers. One answer offered in the book, amongst others, is that taking a Foucauldian route helps to show that a focus on women, children or reproduction does not necessarily entail a ‘more identity-based analysis’ or a ‘default heteronormativity of perspective’. But this might imply, problematically, that feminist philosophy needs Foucault to make it acceptable and there are times in the book when Deutscher does perhaps over-credit him. At points where her own voice or argument begin to emerge, there is often a return to the ‘suspended reserves’ theme, as if her role is simply to activate such Foucauldian reserves rather than developing what is in fact an innovative and

richly insightful line of feminist thought.

The key thesis Deutscher puts forward is that reproductive thanatopolitics cannot be subsumed under a general analysis of biopolitics or thanatopolitics, but rather, must be analysed as a specific phenomenon requiring a designated (feminist) conceptual language. This argument really gets under way in the fourth chapter as she considers the forms of ‘chronic revocability’ produced by thanatopoliticised reproduction, whereby women’s lives are rendered precarious or reducible to ‘bare life’ precisely due to their association with reproductivity. Whilst women’s reproductive capacity was ‘traditionally the pretext of exclusion from political rights’, Deutscher contends, it has now become the object of biopolitical and racialised interest in the ‘good conduct’ and administration of reproduction in societies or populations – a ‘thanatopolitical moment in which [women’s] reproductivity would survive their political rights’. Accordingly, women’s exclusion from full political status has ‘carried over’ into modern, supposedly ‘equal’ societies, as their connection to reproduction is ‘exactly the point where [their] rights are likely to be challenged or deprived’, making women’s rights conditional and insecure, exposing ‘their health if not their lives’, and causing ‘states of structural unease’.

This is clearly demonstrated in a brilliant discussion of the combination of reversibility, precarity and exceptionality that characterises legal regimes governing abortion. Whilst recognising important differences between countries that have decriminalised abortion in the twentieth century, Deutscher emphasises nevertheless that a large number of those countries did so not by repealing earlier laws rendering abortion illegal, but rather, by ‘instituting categories of exception to its illegality’ through specifying general circumstances in which abortion could be permitted (e.g. within a certain time frame, to safeguard a woman’s physical or mental health, or ‘right to privacy’). This phenomenon, she argues, is a marker of the differential political relevance of women’s reproductive lives and cannot be fitted into Agamben’s thesis that the ‘voluntary creation of a state of exception’, or suspension of the law, has become the ‘constitutive paradigm of the juridical order’. In reverse of this formula, Deutscher writes, ‘there is almost never a legal abortion that is not an exception to its own illegality’, meaning that even when women have the right to legally access abortion, that access is marked as conditional, thereby reinscribing the acute ‘possibility of its unavailability’.



The legal regime of abortion as a 'persistent, inverted exceptionality' thus produces a 'special form of precariousness for women', with a further unequal distribution of precariousness amongst women in terms of who can access abortion and who cannot for practical, social or economic reasons. In the US, for example, states like South Dakota or Mississippi have only one abortion clinic, and abortion clinics in various states are routinely closed for minor violations. Poverty or youth can thus make abortion impossible when it requires long distance travel. This is not to say, though, that easier access to abortion is always an indicator of privilege; in some contexts, conversely, it is the freedom from imposed or aggressive promotion of abortion, or the freedom not to be coercively sterilised.

Deutscher develops her analysis of reproductive thanatopolitics further in the final chapter by drawing from Butler's work on precarious life in interesting ways. Within mainstream and 'pro-life' discourses concerning abortion, it is the foetus that has tended to 'pull focus as the possible precariousness in question'; though in Butler's specific sense, the foetus could not be considered 'precarious' given that it is not sufficiently established as a 'subject' in the first place to be vulnerable to a significant *de*-subjectivation. But this is not Deutscher's key point. Her claim is that insofar as the foetus is understood as precarious life, the woman herself becomes a 'redoubled form of precarious life' in that she is attributed with 'both a sovereign-like and biopolitically inflected power of decision or impact' on the potential life of the foetus, and the futures her reproductive conduct is 'considered to unfold'. The making of 'fetal precariousness', she argues, is thus 'a making of maternal precariousness' – a phenomenon we can identify in the very understanding of abortion as a 'moral decision' and the forms of 'responsibilisation' that go with it. In contexts of legalised abortion, Deutscher maintains, state control over life has been 'delegated' such that the woman must not only decide (when access to options is available), but must also be *seen to* decide, as illustrated in the ubiquitous requirement that a woman present and give an account of herself before a health professional as a precondition for accessing abortion or other reproductive technologies and interventions.

Women are thereby produced as 'decision-makers' making especially 'significant' moral choices, their conduct channelled through certain expected performances of subjectivity such as coherent explanation of motives, reflective decision, emotional complexity or confrontation with a 'dilemma'. This can be understood, Deutscher proposes, as a normative form of responsibilisation which is also a 'dividing practice', in that it renders those women who might be less coherently self-narrativising as particularly 'failed subjects' manifesting 'irresponsible' behaviour that impedes individual and social futures:

She is the woman who seems to be having too many abortions, who seems to choose irresponsibility or to be indifferent to the consequential narratives expected of her reproductive decisions. Perhaps she seems feckless, has an insufficient or inappropriate account of her reproductive life (or, more generally, her life decisions). Perhaps she does not seem to care sufficiently how and why she got pregnant or under what circumstances she might again. Perhaps she presents a certain recalcitrance or illegibility in this regard... Perhaps, when it comes to her pregnancy, or her abortion, she is not a good storyteller.

One outcome of such responsibilisation and its production of legible, valued subjects, on the one hand, and illegible or devalued subjects, on the other, is that women in the latter category will be less able to benefit from the 'ontological tact' that is selectively deployed within social and clinical contexts: 'a consensual making and unmaking of the foetus ... between women or parents and health professionals in conformity with the woman's or the parents' choices'. The more a woman presents herself as a 'responsible decision maker', Deutscher contends, the more she will be treated according to clinically-inflected forms of ontological tact that flexibly designate the foetus in terms suitable to her emotions and situation, ranging from 'biological waste' to 'life anticipated' or 'life regretted'. The differential distribution of ontological tact is thus a further marker of the conditional, precarious structuring of women's reproductive lives, and an 'economic, procedural and perceptual' divide which confirms certain women as thinking, feeling, moral subjects, and de-constitutes and denigrates others by contrast.

Deutscher closes the book by appealing to a 'critical ethics' that can do justice to the multiple modes of power governing reproduction, through deploying genealogical methods to investigate the production of 'reproductive decision-makers' and such complex and multivalent categories as choice, harm, rights, freedom, value and 'life' itself. This constitutes a 'critique of reproductive reason' that does not invalidate the ethical register or the pursuit of reproductive rights claims ('rights we cannot not want'), but is nevertheless oriented towards their framing conditions rather than moral calculation or normative reflection. Yet a more prescriptive message does emerge from the book, which is that feminists must refrain from framing issues of 'reproductive rights' in the language of 'personal responsibility' or claims to 'quality of life, to only the most wanted children and the most deliberative parents'. To put it another way, Deutscher is coming out strongly against what we might call the 'goody two-shoes' variety of feminism that ultimately reinforces the idealisation of motherhood and optimal child-raising in the tradition of Wollstonecraft amongst others. Given that the language of reproductive choice and responsibility occludes or stigmatises those for whom choice is unavailable or irrelevant, or 'whose agency might not be legible as choice', we can only conclude that feminist reproductive politics must incorporate an unflinching defence of 'poor choice and irresponsibility' as an essential part of its programme. This might seem counter-intuitive or counter-productive, Deutscher acknowledges, but in fact the seeming implausibility of this position is yet another indicator of the precariousness of women's political and reproductive lives. As a point of comparison, she notes that ill-informed or reckless decision-making in the polling booth rarely leads to a questioning of voting rights.

Foucault's Futures, through Deutscher's ingenuity, thus takes us far beyond Foucault in developing an astute analysis of thanatopolitical forms of reproductive politics, which can serve as a vital resource for feminist philosophy and activism alike. Inevitably, Deutscher's critical method of asking 'what is missing' and drawing on her interlocutors' 'suspended reserves' invites a doubling back of the method upon her own figures of thought and lines of argu-

mentation. As such, it seems worthwhile to make two suggestions for what she would describe as 'transfiguring engagements' that could push the project further, or in unforeseen directions.

One thing that has perhaps gone missing in Deutscher's analysis is a sense of the embodied specificities of pregnancy and gestation: an absence that makes itself known in those parts of the text where she speaks of women as 'enfolding reproductive space' – an expression we might read as a blank or neutralising rendering of the pregnant body which obscures its complexity as figure (maybe even returning us to the image of the 'foetal spaceman'), and, moreover, its materiality as corporeal. Accordingly, there is a case for staging a 'transfiguring engagement' between the biopolitically-inflected analysis offered by Deutscher and more phenomenologically-oriented accounts of pregnancy within feminist philosophy which explore different sets of concerns such as 'multiple embodiment' or 'intercorporeality'. A richer, more multifaceted account of the materiality of reproduction could thereby emerge, incorporating its symbolic and political elements but also those of a more phenomenological or 'fleshy' character.

Something else that the biopolitical analytic frame can struggle to come to terms with is the patriarchal aspect of reproductive politics: the regulation of maternity and female bodies through sets of power relations marked not only by sovereign or biopolitical forms of power, but moreover, by male power. This is gestured towards by Deutscher in her feminist critiques of Foucault, Agamben and so on, but the focus of such critiques tends to be their occlusion of sexual difference and gender, rather than patriarchal or male power as such. What kind of 'methodological provocations', then, might be stimulated through intersecting Deutscher's bio/thanatopolitical critique of reproductive reason with critiques that revolve around a more sustained analysis of male power, male supremacy and male privilege, such as those advanced within 'second wave' radical feminism? What kind of 'analytic pressure', as Deutscher puts it, could each 'exert on the other's resources, from the terms of resistance of each to the other, and from the lines of critique stimulated by their more awkward proximities?'

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