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Book Review: Surrogacy: A Human Rights Violation by Renate Klein

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Keywords

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**BOOK REVIEW: *SURROGACY: A HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION* BY
RENATE KLEIN (SPINIFEX PRESS, 2017, 224 PAGES)**

Kate Rose

Dare to Tell Project

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RIGOROUS, TIMELY SCHOLARSHIP combined with eloquent, empathetic writing makes Renate Klein's *Surrogacy: A Human Rights Violation* a must-read. At the beginning, I did not understand why Klein placed "surrogate" in quotes; just two days later, after devouring this book, I fully understand that "surrogates" are not substitute mothers, but mothers deprived of their children through contracts and the exchange of money. Only in a firmly patriarchal society can these women be erased in favor of the sperm-giving and money-wielding men who feel entitled to have a child at any cost (the cheaper the better it seems). As this informative book explains, "surrogates" become pregnant and give birth for others, who then pay for the child (or in the case of "altruistic surrogacy" only officially pay for pregnancy-related expenses). The child may be conceived from donated eggs and sperm from those of the commissioning couples, or (rarely) using the surrogate's own eggs. All of this is accomplished through the intermediaries of assisted procreation businesses who put commissioning couples (the people who order and purchase the baby) in touch with women who can carry the pregnancy and birth the baby and other women who "donate" the eggs, through invasive medical procedures. The "surrogates" are always from a lower social class than commissioning couples; the egg donors are often university students; the poverty and vulnerability of both are exploited and they are not well informed of risks.

Klein also writes of women who "benefit" from surrogacy ("intended mothers") and how they are conditioned to think of themselves as failures for not producing children. After painful, invasive in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatments (which rarely succeed), they are led to the option of using another woman (or two women if an egg donor is used), and pressured to embrace this "solution" with gratitude. The harm done to "surrogates" (increased physical risks compared with normal pregnancy, multiple embryos and forced abortion, or "fetal reduction," attachment to the child they are growing and birthing from their own bodies...); and also to egg "donors" (increased rates of cancer, strokes, infertility from drugs involved in harvesting eggs...) might make potential buyers hesitate, if they knew. The IVF industry, however, guides them through glossy photos of happy surrogates and happy families, and alternative points of view are dismissed.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, radical feminists have predicted the harm to women inherent in reproductive technologies. Their analysis has been ignored in recent years. There is a push from pro-surrogacy groups for a universal legalization of surrogacy. This legal change would force countries, where surrogacy is now banned to make surrogacy legal. Klein and many other scientists, ethicists, and advocates of gender, race, class, and disability justice are calling for an international ban on surrogacy, including with the organization “Stop Surrogacy Now!”

By renting a woman’s uterus, the buyer owns that woman for that time period. The child is then forcefully relinquished by her/his birth mother once the fee is paid. This can be considered to be a form of child trafficking. The purchase of human beings violates several international laws. Klein mentions the ways in which people do not want to offend anyone on the delicate issue of having children. They do not want to seem homophobic by not being sensitive to the desire of gay male couples to have a family of their own. Klein asks for solidarity from gay men, in respecting women’s bodies and lives, and mentions other ways in which childless people – gay or straight – may involve children in their lives. Klein also discusses the ironic dichotomy wherein some women are deemed unfit and targeted by invasive, coercive population control measures, while others are led to believe they need to have children in order to be “true women.” Klein does an excellent job of not pitting women against each other, instead exposing the patriarchal underpinnings and agendas harmful to all women. She shows why surrogacy is not a job and cannot be regulated as work. Regulation and “ethical surrogacy” are touted by some as the ideal compromise. Regulation of prostitution was similarly touted as ideal, yet the consequences are the opposite of what proponents predicted: there is actually more illegal prostitution and trafficking in places where it is legal to buy sex. This is because it is harder to distinguish between legal and illegal activities, and traffickers can hide behind the front of legal brothels. Moreover, on a deeper level, the message sent to society that this is acceptable to rent our vaginas is an insult to all women, and an active measure of institutionalized inequality. Saying it is acceptable to rent our wombs would lead to an increase in trafficking and forced practices, as well as their sanitized varieties of legal coercion, oppression, and lies.

Additional problems with surrogacy: 1. Sexual predators can order children created just for them. They no longer need to entice a woman into their control but can simply pay money to a poor woman who will make the baby they can then take away. The easiness of this, and the increased inability to detect what is happening (they can do this in total isolation) make it particularly chilling. Klein cites examples of sex offenders abusing “their” children born of surrogacy. 2. Artificial wombs are being created. How can anyone even pretend that a plastic bag can be the equivalent of a woman’s body with its heartbeat, breath, moods and emotions? All the more so, when progress is being made towards understanding the complexity of life in-utero and how the body of the mother and the fetus interact. Many animals are being tortured in these useless experiments, as are misinformed women (egg “donors”, etc.). In fact, surrogacy in itself is largely an experiment wherein scientists try out new drugs and techniques, with disregard for their subjects’ lives.

Klein allows the voices of surrogacy’s many victims to be heard. She is a biologist, and her scientific explanations are related clearly and thoughtfully—I learned a lot from her explanations. This is a user-friendly book, perfect for those who don’t have time to waste sifting through intellectual density, who want the facts and astute interpretations of them. She responds to the opposing arguments with deep

understanding. Her accounts of policy in Australia and elsewhere are relevant and never dull, even for those who usually space out during such chapters or skip them. I did not skip a single word. The 6-chapter structure is perfect, and there is an excellent index.

As an ethical human being, I find surrogacy inexcusable, and a human rights violation. As a radical feminist, I can understand the horrors of surrogacy in its exploitation of women's bodies and desires. As a mother, I can only say *Oh my Goddess!* There are no words for this horror. Yet Renate Klein has untangled the webs of deceit and opened pathways for all voices from every corner to stand together to ban surrogacy worldwide.

Lastly, I purchased this book very easily on the *Spinifex* website for \$9,99, and they immediately sent me a pdf which I saved and printed out (www.spinifex-press.com.au). I am in China, so ordering a copy would have taken a long time and maybe not made it here at all.

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