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The industrialised breast: Julie Stephens on how neoliberalism milks female labour

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THE INDUSTRIALISED BREAST

Julie Stephens on how neoliberalism milks female labour

There used to be a billboard in Melbourne that advertised milk by depicting young, large-breasted women cavorting on a trampoline. The radical graffiti activist group Buga-Up painted the words ‘Women are not cows’ in large letters across it. The association between women and the mechanised dairy industry was not a comfortable one – Buga-Up chose its words well – and it wasn’t long before the billboard came down.

These days, however, the association may seem less shocking. We have moved into a new phase of commodification where mothers’ breasts have become harnessed to industrial processes.

Farewell to the tender bond between the breastfeeding mother and baby; enter the motorised breast pump. Once considered an unsightly, even dreaded, medical contraption, the breast pump has become a personal accessory item, designed like a Fendi briefcase or a Gucci backpack. In the United States, new mothers with professional careers are offered work-based ‘lactation rooms’ as incentives to return to work as soon as possible after giving birth. They can make online bookings for the purpose-designed pumping chairs in these rooms, where they can ‘comfortably’ plug in and express milk during a work-break. According to journalist Jill Lepore in the *New Yorker*, lactation rooms are coveted

as a sign of a caring workplace, with the newly developed 'Corporate Lactation Policies' of companies like Goldman Sachs becoming an accepted substitute for maternity leave.

In an intriguing article on the history and contemporary uses of the breast pump in the United States, Lepore paints a disturbing picture of professional women increasingly describing themselves as 'lactating mothers', not breast-feeding mothers. Expressing breast milk and feeding it to a baby via a bottle has become more widespread, even for mothers staying at home. The motorised breast pump industry is booming, with the nation beginning to look, in Lepore's words, like 'a giant human dairy farm'. Pumping at work has become de rigueur:

Duck into the ladies' room at a conference, of, say, professors and chances are you'll find a flock of women with matching 'briefcases', waiting none too patiently and, trust me, more than a little sheepishly, for a turn with the electric outlet. Pumps come with plastic sleeves, like the sleeves in a man's wallet, into which the mother is supposed to slip a photograph of her baby, because, Pavlov-like, looking at the picture aids 'let-down', the release of milk normally triggered by the presence of the baby, its touch, its cry.

In this scenario, breast milk becomes a commodity to be pumped, bottled and fed to the baby to improve its immune system or to ensure that later it achieves higher marks at school. Breastfeeding has been detached from its association with warmth, intimacy, comfort, nurture, emotional wellbeing or flesh against flesh.

In some respects, breast milk has always had a market value. Just as privileged white mothers used to rely on wet nurses, so those working at Goldman Sachs probably depend on other women, from different classes and cultures, to feed the precious (and hard won) 'expressed milk' to their infants. While such racialised and class-based patterns of exploitation may be much the same as in the past, the mechanised



processes of production are relatively new. Breast pumps may appear personal but their purpose is profoundly industrial: increasing productivity in the workplace.

In the Australian context, the wider implications are of significant interest. Lepore asks what she describes as 'a privately agonising and publicly unpalatable question': is it the milk or is it the mother that matters more to a baby? In recent debates about parental leave in Australia, the perceived needs of the baby are often eclipsed – as in, for example, former shadow minister for Early Childhood Education and Childcare and for the Status of Women Sharman Stone's description of parental leave as 'an investment in human capital'.

The absent baby in such discussions is matched by an equally absent mother in other public commentary. Feminist writer and ethicist Leslie Cannold is a case in point. She is a key public advocate promoting the removal of references to 'maternity' in discussions of family leave. In an article for the *Age* entitled 'Baby leave is not a women's issue' – and in other interventions on this topic – Cannold argues that, in the interests of gender equity, the maternal should, once and for all, be written out of the leave equation.

Cannold promotes a conservative and conventional model of the contemporary family as dual-income and dual-carer that fits in perfectly with today's workplaces. One parent is encouraged to take leave and look after the baby, so that the other can swiftly return

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to work. At first glance, this seems ideal – an important step towards emancipating women from an unequal care burden. Few would argue against the social, family and personal benefits of men accessing leave to better contribute to the care of their children. Dramatic shifts in conditions around employment and care are well overdue.

There are, however, problems with the model. It presents care as a transferable and marketable commodity, further marginalising questions about the impact different forms may have on those who depend on care the most (in this case, babies). It also fails to challenge work-practices that demand impossibly long working hours, and measurements of performance that ultimately devalue children and caring responsibilities.

Moreover, as an example of a dominant strand of feminism in Australia, the gender-equity paradigm is paradoxically de-gendered. Indeed, Cannold argues for ‘the parenthood conundrum’ to be ‘articulated in gender-neutral ways’. This, however, taps into a productivist ethos entirely consistent with the demands of the neoliberal marketplace, with caregivers replaceable or interchangeable in much the same way as employees in workplaces. In addition, a feminism promoting gender neutrality (in the name of equality) denies the bodily experience of women after they have given birth. Though a boon to the productive workplace, the breast pump may not necessarily protect the emotional needs of women and babies. To deny that baby leave is a women’s issue, to decouple

‘maternity’ from ‘leave’, is also to conceal human vulnerability and dependence. It reproduces what Iris Young has called ‘the normalising but impossible ideal’ that we are autonomous, unencumbered self-sufficient individuals, somehow beyond human dependency.

In an interview on ABC Radio National’s *Big Ideas* program, prominent sociologist Richard Sennett argued that all forms of dependency (on the state, employer, spouse, parent or family) have become more and more stigmatised. Sennett powerfully characterised this feature of neoliberalism as culturally opposed to the ‘dignity of dependence’. Not surprisingly, this causes deep conflict for those giving and receiving care. In the case of breastfeeding mothers, they are immersed in (to borrow from social theorist Zygmunt Bauman) liquid dependency. Perhaps this is why new mothers report to feeling like they have ‘returned to some primitive, shameful condition’, as Rachel Cusk confesses in her autobiographical reflection, *A Life’s Work: On Becoming a Mother*. The seductive ideal of self-sufficiency is impossible to maintain when confronted day and night by dependency in all its complexity through the adoring gaze of a feeding infant.

The point here is not the old ‘breast is best’ debate but broader issues about how motherhood is viewed, by corporations with their lactation rooms, by the women doing all the breast pumping, or by the wider culture struggling with issues of care and human vulnerability. On the one hand, there is an absolute explosion of activist and scholarly interest in motherhood and its intersection with feminism; on the other, a pervasive repudiation of the maternal.

In our debates about parental leave, caring for a new baby is presented almost as an industrial or time management problem, not as an issue with moral and ethical dimensions. De-gendered feminist interventions, like that of Cannold, reproduce this view, failing to challenge the neoliberal policies that have imposed such harsh penalties on the most vulnerable in our



Photo by Christy Scherrer

society: children, the frail elderly, sole mothers, women both in the workforce and at home, and poor migrant women working in domestic labour and child care.

After giving birth, breastfeeding and nurturing a baby is one experience, for many mothers, that feels entirely gendered. I am sure that expressing milk in a work-break at dedicated ‘corporate pumping stations’ also makes women acutely aware of gender. As the *New Yorker* article makes clear, however, babies and toddlers are not allowed in these purpose-built lactation rooms, nor indeed in the workplaces that boast lactation policies as a sign of dedication to gender equity. What does that tell us about the real agenda? The industrialised breast is an alienated breast, de-linked from the baby its function is to feed, and separated from wider concerns about society’s commitment to caring for children. Those who frame breastfeeding as a primarily practical problem also divert attention from the politics of the issue.

A much more encompassing debate about family leave is urgently required. Alternative policy discussions should not revolve around market imperatives and values but be based on a recognition that a new human life brings a demand for nurture. It should also include the embodied post-birth experience of women as a significant factor in developing humane leave policies. Only a feminism attuned to gender difference can contribute to genuine policy alternatives – not a feminism that promotes gender neutrality under the guise of equality.

Designer breast pumps, lactation rooms and de-gendered debates about baby leave as nothing to do with maternity reveal a profound cultural anxiety around nurture, care and dependency. Yet, despite the rising demands of a globalised labour market, we will all spend a significant part of our lives giving and receiving care. Thinking differently about care – and putting babies and mothers back into the picture – would be a good way to begin an alternative discussion.