



SURROGACY: THREE HEADLINES

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Culture Wars Papers, no. 32, December 2022

In this essay, I explore how hegemonic discourses legitimize and normalize surrogacy by looking at three magazine articles: from a celebrity magazine, a business magazine, and an academic/literary magazine. All three articles present surrogacy as normal, positive, and inevitable, while obscuring the power relations inherent in the practice.

Earlier this year, *Hollywood Reporter* [carried the headline](#): “Khloe Kardashian is expecting her second baby with her ex-boyfriend Tristan Thompson via surrogate.” The little word “surrogate”—so inconspicuous—is added at the very end of the sentence, as if about to be pushed off a cliff without any damage to the main point of the headline: Woman expecting baby with man. Let us pause for a moment here, before the *Hollywood Reporter* does indeed push the word off the cliff, never to return to it, instead stating in the next sentence: “This will be the second child for Kardashian and Thompson, who plays for the NBA’s Chicago Bulls.”

The little phrase “via surrogate” would have been incomprehensible to any reader fifty years ago: some might have guessed it that it meant a type of cesarean, a machine, a hospital? Yet let us look down the abyss: it means that Khloe Kardashian is not “expecting” a baby at all. Another woman who is not named, is pregnant. *Another woman* is carrying a baby whose father is (supposedly) Thompson, *she* is changing her life for nine months, risking her fertility, her health, and even her life. In other words, she is doing what—throughout human history—would have earned her the title “mother.”

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “mother” [means](#): “The female parent of a human being; a woman in relation to a child or children to whom she has given birth.” The real mother would thus be her. Yet in this article, it is clear that she will not be awarded this title. She is not allowed to be called “mother;” she is not even to be named. She is just a tool, a “via surrogacy,” as in “I am going by car”—just the means by which Khloe, like her older sister before her, can have the cake and eat it too: becoming a mother without taking on any of the physical risks.

Isn't it so easy? You just pay, send over your genetic material, and being a mother transforms into something akin to fatherhood: no physical strain; live your life as usual while someone else is pregnant for you. Both men and women can thus be “fathers,” liberated from reproduction, while a woman from another class carries and delivers the baby. It is not the first time in history that the upper classes have used other women to do reproduction for them: just think of wet nurses, forced adoptions, Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. Yet this is the first time it has been done on such an industrial level—with multinational companies producing babies that are *meant* to be separated from their mothers—and the first time it has transformed language itself, banning the word “mother” for mothers of a certain class.

Once the baby was born, *Hollywood Reporter* even [dispensed with](#) the phrase “via surrogate”—their headline stated simply “Khloe Kardashian and Tristan Thompson Welcome Second Child.” Khloe posed in the hospital bed with the newborn, wearing white, while the surrogate was nowhere to be seen: supposedly she was told as soon as her labor was over to move over and give place to Khloe. It is interesting to note that it is still Khloe posing in bed, not Tristan, even though neither of them had a reason to be in that bed.

Pregnancy, hegemonic late capitalism will tell us, is like any job. Philosophers—especially philosophers—will dutifully twist and turn the concepts to explain that [pregnancy is a service](#), that surrogacy is not baby trade but a [donation of a limited bundle of parental rights](#), or that surrogacy [liberates women](#) by freeing the “gestator” from the burden of “motherhood.” The industry itself will tell us that surrogacy is a win-win situation: a childless woman gets a child, a poor woman gets money—or, as the surrogacy company Tammuz [says of its Ukrainian women](#), “this process enables them to secure a future for their children and their families; their motivations are primarily economic.”

Campaigns in favor of surrogacy started in the 1980s and often mimic feminist arguments, just as arguments in favor of prostitution have done since the 1970s. In the case of surrogacy, we are faced with a double message: one, destined for conservative audiences, that claims surrogacy “may shore up, rather than undermine, the traditional family,” since every couple needs a child; and one, designed for liberal audiences, that claims surrogacy is a gay rights issue and a way to subvert the link between parenthood and biology. These arguments never clash with one another, just as scissor blades never destroy each other—they work together to destroy whatever comes between them, namely any opposition to the reproductive industry.

Turning pregnancy into a job can be seen as [the ultimate form of reification](#), as Hungarian Marxist György Lukács defined it. As capitalism advances, it needs to find more areas of accumulation. Having conquered the non-capitalist as well as the socialist world, such that practically no territory on earth is exempt from capitalist logic, it now advances into public welfare and our personal sphere—realms previously not under the dominion of capital. Before, we had sex and babies without being paid for it; now, any human activity is to be bought and sold. What this means, again relying on Lukács, is that we must perceive these activities as alien to us; we must dissociate from what we sell. Thus the woman in prostitution must learn to “switch off” and not feel; thus the woman who is carrying a baby whom she will never be allowed to breastfeed, hold, name or raise must “switch off” and not get attached. And so we learn to detach from what is closest to us: our own babies, our own sensuality, ourselves—in short, what makes us human. Surrogacy and prostitution cause an immediate short circuit in theories of reification: here, the “work” does not *feel* like selling oneself—it *literally* is about selling oneself. When Marx and Lukács wrote of workers being estranged and having to seek refuge in leisure time, they referred to being estranged from the products that they produced. What we are dealing with here is being estranged from oneself and one's own child. And for a surrogate, there is no leisure time.

This also means that we must linguistically obliterate those human words that call to mind emotional bonds and human experience, such as “mother.” She is not to be a mother, she is to be a “surrogate,” shortened from surrogate mother and shortened again to “surro”—a machine, a tool. She is not allowed to feel or to claim any human bond; none of these articles ever mention *her* feelings. Yet we do not *all* become machines, otherwise the capitalist system would not function; some have to be customers, and customers' feelings are to be encouraged: Khloe *is* allowed the title mother, she is allowed to speak of her feelings in the media and how much she loves the child. Likewise, any buyer of surrogacy is encouraged to speak out about his or her “need” to have a child—any desire that can be translated into consumption is legitimate. This is the essence of the cruelty of the capitalist system: it allows the humanity of some to flourish and grow to unbearable heights, where any whim is a human right, at the expense of others.

Turning pregnancy into “just a job,” akin to working in a factory—what does this imply for the baby? Does it not turn the baby into a product, akin to a mobile phone? Is surrogacy, then, not baby trade? And is human trafficking not illegal, as well as [clearly unacceptable](#) under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which enshrines in article 7 “the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents,” states in article 9 that “a child shall not be separated from his or her parents... except that such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child,” prohibits in article 11 the “illicit transfer and non-return of children abroad,” and stipulates in article 35 that “States Parties shall take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent the abduction of, the sale of or traffic in children for any purpose or in any form”?

Advocates of surrogacy are lobbying hard to circumvent these obstacles at discussions in the Hague, where a Hague Convention on surrogacy is being drafted by the Hague Conference on Private International Law, modeled on the Hague Convention on adoption. The “parents” are thus defined as the buyers, irrespective of whether they have provided genetic material or not. I have personally been present at these meetings, where representatives of various NGOs have, unbeknownst to their organizations, expressed views in favor of legal surrogacy that go far beyond their respective mandates. The key phrase in attempts to provide a framework for legal surrogacy is “protect the rights of children born through surrogacy,” which means full legalization of reproductive tourism. Western couples who travel abroad without permission from their state to engage in surrogacy nevertheless expect the legal documents to be in place once they return with the child. To “protect the child” means to allow the buyers to adopt the child and dispose of any rights or claims that the birth mother might have.

Let’s look at a second headline, this time from the U.S. business magazine *Quartz*: “Russia’s invasion is [damaging Ukraine’s booming surrogacy industry](#).” The article carries the following jaunty addition in capital letters on top of the headline: MAKE BABIES NOT WAR. It was published on February 25, *the day after* the invasion began. So important is the future of the surrogacy industry that it was one of the very first takes on the war this business magazine covered. Our baby factory is in danger! Our couples cannot get “their” babies out! The article sympathetically portrays Australian Glenn McGill (pseudonym) and “his wife,” who “hired a surrogate in Ukraine.” We thus have one person who apparently needs a name (the man), a nameless person who seems to be an appendage to the man (“his” wife), and yet another appendage to both, namely “the surrogate.” The hierarchy is clear.

In this article, as opposed to the aforementioned *Hollywood Reporter* article, surrogates are not invisible. This distinction is rooted in the nature of the two periodicals. A business magazine seeks to render the production process visible, as readers—presumably investors—need insights into it. For the common people who read celebrity magazines, meanwhile, the production process is generally obscured in favor of the emotional superstructure. In *Quartz*, therefore, the role of the surrogate is central: she needs to produce babies for the West, and thus she needs to be protected, as she is carrying our babies. We are told that “BioTexCom, a fertility facility in Kyiv, even built a bomb shelter to protect its surrogates and infants.” Needless to say, this company would not have built a bomb shelter for pregnant women destined to keep their babies. In this article, it is clear that Ukraine is a top destination for surrogacy (second only to the US) due to its location—close to Western Europe—and its poverty—surrogates are cheaper in Ukraine.

Yet it is, like most business analyses, amoral: surrogacy has to go on, because it goes on. It is a way to make money by creating needs and satisfying them; people’s welfare is not our problem. Surrogacy appears in any market forecast—such as Global Market Insights (GMI)—as a good investment: profits from the surrogacy

industry are [projected to increase 32%](#) by 2027, depending on what they call “the regulatory scenario”—that is, whether or not states allow it.

When I started writing on surrogacy in 2007, I was not expecting that the first countries to ban or restrict it would be destination countries, such as India, Thailand, and Nepal. I pinned greater hope on those countries that had already taken measures against prostitution, such as my own, Sweden. I do not think the surrogacy industry was expecting such tailwind either: it started, after all, as a shady, anarchic smash-and-grab type of business, going from country to country, setting up shop and moving as soon as authorities got hold. At a time when the adoption industry had been heavily scrutinized and regulated, the burgeoning surrogacy industry overlooked human rights regulations as well as the need to approve the suitability of adoptive parents: here, as long as you had money, you could buy any number of children, even if you were a single man and a convicted pedophile at that. Surrogacy is by far the easiest way for a single man to assure sole custody of a child for life, no mother in sight. What the industry is about, in effect, is not reproductive technology, but separation of mother and child.

Yet both Europe and the US have failed to address the systemic exploitation, human trafficking, and cruelties that pervade surrogacy. Part of the reason for this is, I think, that the victims are women and children. And parallel to the surrogacy industry’s project of dismantling the mother, the Western world is engaged with dismantling woman as a political subject, let alone a human being. Women and children have, chivalry aside, long been the lowest priority of politics and health care alike. Now that even the women’s movement is not supposed to mention women, fighting for mothers’ rights can be a difficult task.

The third headline, “Unthinking the Family in *Full Surrogacy Now*,” appears in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, where Madeline Lane-McKinley [reviews Sophie Lewis’ book *Full Surrogacy Now*](#). From celeb mags and business mags, we are moving into the academic realm, where the stakes are higher. One cannot simply omit the word “mother” or speak about profits; one must create a theory that says this is *good*. The article is a perfect example of how previously radical ideas of feminism or socialism have been altered to fit into a pro-capitalist, anti-woman narrative. The author of the magazine article, Lane-McKinley, is very excited about the book, as it “understands the work of baby-making precisely as work, ultimately asking of the possibility for all baby-making to be reimagined, through revolutionary comradeship, as surrogacy.” The surrogacy imagined here is “a plural womb and a world beyond propertarian kinship and work alienation.”

This type of method is common at a stage where an industry has been given a bad rap. We see it especially in texts defending pornography, where the reader is invited to think not of the actual industry—what is bought; what is sold; who makes money and how much; the consequences in terms of mortality rates, PTSD, and violence—but of a utopian future. Pornography is thus presented as a hypothesis, idea or performance far from the actual industry.

It is interesting to see that this is now happening with surrogacy. Surrogacy used to be patriarchy’s poster child. When I did TV debates in 2010, couples would bring their babies. As everyone swooned over them, the host would ask me: “Are you against the existence of this creature?” But for a decade now, it has been clear that surrogacy is exploitation. Women [have died from surrogacy](#), women have been kidnapped and [placed in baby farms](#) for surrogacy, children born through surrogacy [have begun speaking out](#) against the practice, and there are around 50 [books](#) and [films](#) critical of it (up from 2-3 in the year 2000).

Enter Surrogacy Utopia. In this article, we are to make a leap to a type of queer communist society where there is supposedly no capitalism and no money, and thus altruistic surrogacy would be practiced without families.

Surrogacy is treated as something almost poetic: “Noting that ‘all humans in history have been manufactured underwater,’ Lewis postulates that “[o]ur wateriness is our surrogacy. It is the bed of our bodies’ overlap and it is, not necessarily—but possibly—a source of radical kinship.”

From this hazy image, we are somehow to deduce that those who oppose surrogacy *today* are bad people. Why? Here the author resorts to the method “white women calling other white women white women,” which, one would have thought, canceled itself out as an argument. To oppose surrogacy today is apparently dangerous, as it could mean “justify[ing] imperial wars and establish[ing] a rescue industry.”¹ Instead, Lewis thinks we should abolish *all* work.

This twist allows the author to take a second radical stance together with “Abolish the nuclear family”—which we know is so utopian it will not happen on this side of the climate crisis—while in reality arguing for what is already happening, namely taking babies from mothers. Otherwise, it would not be surrogacy, as surrogacy is having babies for someone else. Any time surrogacy happens, there is a power imbalance—even in so-called “altruistic surrogacy,” which was recently legalized by Cuba's new family code. It is important to note that statistically, altruistic surrogacy is extremely rare. An overwhelming majority of surrogacy arrangements are compensated, whether secretly or openly. Altruistic surrogacy is mainly a myth that serves to legitimize the idea of surrogacy by speaking of sisterhood, women helping each other, mothers helping sons, and so on. Legalizing altruistic surrogacy might seem like a soft option to many, yet it is a de facto gateway to the legalization of commercial surrogacy without any guarantee for the woman who is cheated of her compensation. We also have to keep in mind that exploitation does not disappear just because the exploited party is not paid. I therefore prefer to speak of unpaid surrogacy, which means that a woman risks her life, alters her lifestyle for nine months, and bonds with a child only to lose it and not get anything in return.

To argue for any type of surrogacy is, in reality, to argue for the expansion of capitalism. Unfortunately, this is very common among anti-woman Anglo-Saxon socialists. For them, capitalism is bad when men are victims and good when women are: the sale of public welfare, the privatization of water or copper mines are bad; the sale of women for prostitution, pornography or surrogacy is good—or at least, fighting it must wait until we have fought everything else. What these socialists fail to understand is that these phenomena are at the *frontier* of the fight against capitalism and exploitation—they must be fought before anything else, because if we cannot fight the commodification of our bodies, our children, ourselves, why should we care about the commodification of things?

An intersectional and socialist stance on surrogacy would be crystal clear: surrogacy is mainly rich, white, Western, heterosexual, and gay couples taking babies from women in poor countries who are working-class or not even that. It is patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism at its worst. Yet by creating a word salad of concepts from socialist and feminist theory, Lewis (and Lane-McKinley) somehow manages to convey that surrogacy must be accepted, otherwise one is a TERF.

It is no coincidence that defenses of surrogacy resemble defenses of prostitution: in many ways, they are two sides of the same coin. Both commodify the origins of life: sex and reproduction. Both exploit women. Both make women sacrifice two of the main joys of life—sexual pleasure and children—for the benefit of others. Where prostitution is sex without reproduction, surrogacy is reproduction without sex. By default. No john accepts a child born out of a paid sex act, just as no buyer of surrogacy would insist on having sex with the surrogate. They have to be kept separate, which is patriarchal male sexuality creating a world after its own

¹ Proponents of prostitution often use this term to refer to those NGOs or women's organizations that try to provide alternatives for women in prostitution.

image, where two capitalist industries have been modeled from the whore/madonna-complex: some women are working to give the male sex, others are working to give him babies, and never the twain shall meet.

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