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WHAT'S OUT THERE
BOOK REVIEW

The Online World of Surrogacy **Zsuzsa Berend (2016), 270pp, ISBN 978-1-78533-274-6. Fertility, Reproduction and Sexuality: Social and Cultural Perspectives, Volume 35, Berghahn Books**

Zsuzsa Berend is a sociology professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, and her 2016 book, *The Online World of Surrogacy* is an ethnographic study of surrogacy in the United States. Berend explores the cultural and emotional work American surrogates actively engage in with one another on Surrogate Mothers Online (SMO, http://surromomsonline.com), the largest online (and public) surrogacy support website. Specifically, this book focuses on the meanings that surrogates collectively make in relation to ideas of relatedness, surrogacy contracts, money, and the concept of 'the gift' that is pervasive in discourses about and academic analyses of surrogacy. More broadly, Berend's analysis is situated within the larger sociocultural context, including kinship practices, parenthood, money, reproductive labour, and assisted reproduction in the USA. *The Online World of Surrogacy* builds on and offers an extended analysis of some of the themes already introduced elsewhere (see Berend, 2012). Through the book, the author carefully steers the reader through the myriad complexities of surrogacy and the issues that can arise. These include the more contentious topics related to surrogacy, such as monetary compensation and legal contracts. This book will be of particular interest to the multi-disciplinary field of reproduction studies, medical and sociological anthropology, and kinship studies.

For over a decade, Berend immersed herself in the virtual community and world of SMO, the original surrogacy support forum that had grown from 800 members in 2002 to 30,000 in 2013. She also had email correspondence with 35 surrogates and face to face conversations with one person. As a public forum, SMO is easier to access than closed and private online spaces where surrogates and intended parents interact. Berend is not the only outsider to be interested in reading what surrogates discuss on SMO (p. 1). Yet, her data gathering spans over 10 years, and has resulted in the only ethnography or book based on a virtual surrogacy community. Her meticulous approach to analysing and interpreting the complexities of surrogacy are evident throughout. Although this makes the ethnography valuable in itself, some of the overarching discussion points provide fresh contributions and nuance.

During the dissertation writing phase of my PhD on surrogacy in New Zealand, *The Online World of Surrogacy* sat on my desk in a pile of the 'key' ethnographic texts on surrogacy within reproduction studies. The array of rainbow-coloured tabs peeking out from its pages and sticky notes on my 'things to think about' wall from the book demonstrate the significance of this ethnography. More than once, I silently thanked Berend (and admittedly told her at a conference and via email) for writing it. In this review, I will explore some of the key themes that emerge from each of the chapters.

In Chapter One, 'The Virtual Meeting Ground for Real People', Berend introduces the reader to the SMO forum, describing her field-site and the various threads and subthreads where members can ask questions, share news, and discuss the topic of surrogacy and beyond. Here, we also learn about the forum culture and how more experienced members define and maintain the rules of engagement. Forum moderation is underpinned by certain shared expectations of what a good surrogate 'is' and how she behaves. These expectations ultimately shape the behaviour of new members. For example, 'newcomers were expected to not complain about both the responses they received; they were expected to 'take it' and learn to conform to group norms' (p. 22). At the same time, more seasoned surrogates are not immune to these unwritten rules, particularly if they are seen to be complaining about being treated badly by the intended parents. We see later in the book that they would be more likely to receive sympathy if the intended parents had breached a contract or broke promises they had made, but if the surrogates shared

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distress that was borne out of personal expectations, then they would be chastised.

At the same time, according to Berend, these norms around what is deemed appropriate grief or distress are reflective of surrogates' desire to avoid the practice of surrogacy being seen in an unfavourable light:

> As I came to realize, surrogates did not want me to take their side; rather they wanted me to be pro-surrogacy. In the context of much media attention to bad stories, any criticism could potentially turn into a critique of surrogacy itself. If IPs could be so unfair or ungrateful, can it still be true that they are wonderful people who deserve a baby? (pp. 43–44).

Policing of the website and discussions by members is influenced by the desire to represent a particular image of surrogacy to those who read the conversations. In the introduction, Berend calls it a 'new kind of social control', with discussions revealing joint efforts to 'negotiate and define the balance between selflessness and self-protection, between giving and receiving' (p. 6). Surrogates, particularly newbies, were encouraged to protect themselves and negotiate adequate financial and legal provisions.

Chapter One also spotlights the need for a community to foster connection, create shared meanings and assert agency. Whether that is to do research before choosing a surrogacy agency (in the US context), or successfully matching without any intermediatory at all, both reflect the shift to self-determination. Online matching in particular shows a de-centring of the monopoly that clinics and agencies have traditionally had over the surrogacy process. In contrast to Ragoné's (1996) much earlier ethnography on US surrogacy, Berend found that surrogates were taking more control over their journeys. Over the 10 years of research, Berend identifies the increasingly savvier and better-informed discussions, particularly on contracts and grasp of legal logic (p. 106). Within the strictly altruistic context in New Zealand, where there are no agencies or intermediaries, surrogates must find their own matches, unless they offer to be a surrogate for family or friends. I vividly recall conversations with some of my research participants, when they said that perhaps if there *was* an agency, they would have felt less lost when they started out. Of course, they have their online support forums, which is where many surrogates and intended parents seeking a match ultimately find a community of like-minded people that have been through the journey on which they are embarking on. At the same time, not everyone I spoke with felt comfortable using this forum. For some, places like California were seen as 'the easier option if you have money'.

Chapter Two, 'Journey', explores the relational aspects of surrogacy, between surrogates and their intended parents, and between surrogates and the foetus that they carry. Surrogates use the rhetoric of love to 'reframe commercial surrogacy as an intimate relationship with the intended parents' (p. 12). The giving becomes part of the romance and journey, even when surrogates have disappointing experiences. The 'romance of surrogacy' often reignites their desire to do another surrogacy. This was consistent with some of my participants in New Zealand who felt they could (and should) replace one 'bad journey' with a 'good one'. We learn that the hope of connection and 'shared love' is part of the narrative of altruistic giving within a commercial context. It is not void of altruistic motivations or intentions, blurring the lines between commodification and altruism. Berend's framing of surrogates' feelings, thoughts, and experiences as relational, emotional, and intimate reveals one of several continuums between the commercial (US) and altruistic contexts (New Zealand). In New Zealand, where only altruistic surrogacy is legal, and advertising for surrogacy arrangements is prohibited (as is the case in the UK), many intended parents and surrogates find one another on a closed forum. Similarly, the use of romantic metaphors is also part of the narrative in New Zealand, alongside a pragmatic approach to finding a match (Gibson, 2021a). According to Berend (p. 66), American surrogates prioritise spending time getting to know their potential intended parents, while at the same time more experienced community members encourage 'newbies' to trust their own intuition and to take a 'leap of faith'.

In Chapter Three, 'Contract', Berend explores the way that surrogates negotiate some of the tangible and intangible aspects of surrogacy and the surrogacy arrangement. We learn that within the US, the surrogacy contract is more than a legal document. It is laden with affective meanings linked to concepts such as reciprocity, respect, and recognition of the various sacrifices required by surrogates. As such, the contract is the means through which 'relationships are negotiated' (p. 105) between surrogates and intended parents and provides an opportunity to think through complex moral questions, including the number of embryos to be implanted, under what conditions termination is acceptable, and selective reduction. Actors focus on self-protections because surrogacy is understood and approached as an intimate journey that may not always work out as hoped or expected. Chapter three also highlights that the contract, often pitted by critics of surrogacy, alongside the topic of money, as the proof that surrogacy commodifies babies, is a way to protect everyone involved in the surrogacy arrangement. One of the interesting things to emerge from the altruistic New Zealand surrogacy context is how the *lack* of legal parental rights for the intended parents makes all parties feel vulnerable[1]. Any contract would thus be meaningless, and yet some in the surrogacy community find that writing a 'letter of intent' symbolically helps to mitigate risks by providing a formal (if not legally enforceable) agreement.

In Chapter Four, 'Money', Berend reveals how surrogates conceptualise the role of money in surrogacy arrangements. Similar to Ragoné's (1996) findings, surrogates are not primarily motivated by money, and remuneration is seen as the necessary compensation for the physical and emotional hardships of pregnancy and labour (p.151). Surrogates are quick to argue that babies themselves are priceless (p. 147), and the rhetoric of money is often combined with 'altruism,

[1] There can be no enforceable contract, and legally, regardless of who is genetically related to the baby born of surrogacy, the law identifies the 'birth mother' as the legal mother and her parent, if she has one, as the legal father. The intended parents become the legal guardians of the baby once they have applied for adoption. While the surrogate can choose to keep the baby, the intended parents can also choose to not adopt the child, leaving both vulnerable.

reciprocity, emotional benefits, and rewards for the surrogate's family' (p. 152). Monetary compensation is thus complementary to altruistic intentions and motivations, having both symbolic and practical significance. Berend highlights the centrality of the forum in helping surrogates to make sense of this topic: 'SMO discussions enable surrogates to collectively respond to criticism without denying the importance of money and allow them to make sense of their complex motivations and to situate money in the relational rather than in the business context of money' (p. 151). Some surrogates emphasise the role of empathy and altruistic intentions by calling attention to how much money they actually receive in comparison to what they give (p. 163). Berend also captures the shifting of priorities, and how, for those surrogates who were initially incentivised by money, it took on less meaning over time. This is similar to Elly Teman's findings in the Israeli context, although carrying a baby for money is less stigmatised in Israel (Teman, 2010).

Chapter Five, 'Gift' deals with the metaphor of 'the gift' as it relates to the surrogates' collective identity and in relation to the topics discussed in the previous chapters. As defined by the surrogates in this book, the 'gift of life' is irreducible to the child or baby they have conceived and gestated. Rather, it is the process of conceiving and giving birth that culminates in parenthood and thus this capacity, in combination with other factors, makes surrogates a special kind of resource (p. 193). This conceptualisation challenges critiques of surrogacy as an exploitative practice that commodifies the baby, who cannot be a 'gift' when money is involved. Berend's analysis underlines the importance of not applying a simplistic lens to the practice. Rather, multiple processes are involved in surrogates helping their intended parents fulfil their dream of having a family. As touched on in other chapters, surrogacy is redefined by surrogates as 'a gift relationship' (p. 193), one that ideally involves bonds of reciprocity and affective ties of (non-sexual or romantic) intimacy and relationships. Here, we read about the rhetoric of the 'gift of trust', and sacrifice involved.

Overall, *The Online World of Surrogacy* is an excellent ethnography of the virtual surrogacy community. The overarching arguments Berend makes highlight the relevance of focusing entirely on how surrogates collectively create meanings. Berend finds Viviana Zelizer's (2009) 'relational work' concept useful to frame her analysis, choosing to focus on the 'interactions that create shared understandings, ideas, and desires among the women who assist reproduction.....[rather than] on reproductive technologies or the politics or reproduction' (p. 5). At the same time, although Berend describes the enormous amounts of data she was left with after logging onto the site several times a week for over a decade, I think that she could have elaborated more on her methods. Given the depth and length of her engagement, it would have been good to see more about *how* she conducted this research. Virtual ethnographies are less understood than more 'traditional' approaches to ethnography and I felt like the entry to the field, and her presence in it, was mostly absent.

One of the most valuable contributions Berend makes with this book is spotlighting the surrogates' narratives rather than the practice of surrogacy itself. Berend's decision to centralise the surrogates' voices in each chapter, whilst weaving in some main themes and her own analysis throughout, paints a vivid image of the topics that are important to surrogatres. Unsurprisingly, their perspectives and experiences differ from the common perceptions of surrogacy within the media and wider society. Surrogacy threatens the very foundations of the institution of 'the family', particularly the cultural myths about motherhood and relatedness (Gibson, 2021b; Teman and Berend, 2021) Berend rightly argues that critics have not taken surrogates' own perspectives into consideration (p. 2), and I ponder whether it is in part because their narratives challenge, or at the least add nuance to, pervasive critiques which purport that surrogacy leads to exploitation of women and the commodification of babies and reproduction.

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