

Zsuzsa Berend, 2016
The Online World of Surrogacy
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Contemporary surrogacy was first introduced to many with the Baby M. case of the late 1980s, becoming a political issue and a topic of international discussion¹. Surrogacy is mantled by multiple and articulated social disconfirmation that stress how it is surrounded by ethical issues at different levels and with different degrees. Many critics of surrogacy problematized commodification of life, the patriarchal exploitation on women's reproductive capabilities, and the idea that babies are snatch from the womb of the surrogates². Rather than exploring these much-rehearsed and not particularly fruitful questions about ethics and moral risks of the exploitation and commodification, Zsuzsa Berend, author of the book *The Online World of Surrogacy*, pays attention to what Fourcade and Healy called "moralized markets"³. In this book, Berend builds and expands on her previous works, providing an updated and extended analysis of her continuing research on US Surrogacy. Berend's study offers a punctual analysis of commercial surrogacy in the US and unique perspective for a better understanding of the experiences and points of view of the women directly involved in this assisted reproductive practice. Also, while the author situates her analysis within the rich literature of artificial reproductive technologies, her attention is not focused on the politics of reproduction but on documenting how surrogates, through online discussions, have fashioned a collective and social meaning of US surrogacy.

The *Online World of Surrogacy* is an ethnographic exploration of the largest online information and support forum for US surrogates: <http://www.surromomsonline.com/> (SMO). SMO, founded in 1997, it is a self-regulating group operated by surrogates, is a public forum that also wants to educate people about surrogacy. Berend has followed and analyzed the discussion threads in which surrogates have negotiated medical, legal, and relational

1 Markens S. (2007), *Surrogate Motherhood and the Politics of Reproduction.*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

2 Gross M. (2012), *Choisir la paternité gay*, Érès, Toulouse.

3 Fourcade M. and Healy K., (2007), Moral opinions of the market society. *Annual Review of Sociology* 33: 285-311.

issues, supporting or criticizing each other. Berend described surrogacy as an example of an emotional, socio-cultural, and dense network in which all the people involved make creative efforts to establish, maintain, negotiate, and transform interpersonal bonds of intimacy.

Although surrogacy has become a politicized issue in recent years, there are not many studies that have focused on the lives of US surrogates. Since there are very few qualitative studies on this topic, her empirical exploration of US surrogacy follows two previous work; *Surrogate Motherhood. Conception in the Heart*, published in 1994 by Helena Ragoné and *Examining Surrogacy Discourses Between Feminine Power and Exploitation* published in 1998 by Elizabeth Roberts⁴. Berend found it enlightening to compare her data with the findings of Elly Teman on Israeli surrogacy⁵. Also, if Israeli and US approaches are in many ways opposed, the surrogates often use the same metaphors. Narrative power⁶, relational work⁷, and language of love are the theoretical concepts used to analyze the chorographical interaction between intimacy and economic transactions of the surrogacy pathway. Furthermore, the work of Berend draws on Rayna Rapp's investigation of the naturalness of pregnancy and on her emphasis on the complexity of the experience of women who have access to such technologies⁸.

The book is divided in five chapters. Each chapter discusses crucial aspects of the path surrogates travel (such as the journey, the meeting and match between parties etc.) while, at the same time, it analyses some fundamental nodes of surrogacy (money, gift and contract). The first chapters describe the “journey of shared love” between the surrogates and the intended parents, and the relationship that is built also with the fetus. The rhetoric of love runs in most of the stories collected and it is the logical antithesis of commodification. This interpretation of surrogacy as “a labor of love” inspire surrogates to redefine the relationship between parties and to negotiate and transform interpersonal bonds of intimacy in creative ways. Chapter 3 explores the contractual phase. The contract is significant, not just legally, but also in terms of relationship. Through contract negotiations the parties involved in the surrogacy arrangement also gage if they “are on the same

4 Ragoné H. (1994), *Surrogate Motherhood: Conception in the Heart*, Westview, Boulder.
 Roberts E. (1998), *Examining Surrogacy Discourses Between Feminine Power and Exploitation*, in *Small Wars: The Cultural Politics of Childhood*, eds. Scheper-Hughes N. and Sargent C., University of California Press, Berkeley, pp. 93-110.

5 Teman E. (2010), *Birthing a Mother. The Surrogate Body and the Pregnant Self*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

6 *Ibidem* Roberts E.

7 Zelizer V.A. (2005), *The Purchase of Intimacy*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey.

8 Rapp R. (1999), *Testing Women, Testing Fetus. The Social Impact of Amniocentesis in America*, Routledge, New York.

page”. The following chapter, Money, investigates the financial side of journey, highlighting some interesting points regarding the economic aspect of surrogacy. The majority of the people think about money as the most relevant resource because surrogacy is an extremely expensive process. Berend points out that money is not the only important resource; in fact, economic issues are intertwined with all the other resources that surrogates provide throughout the journey, such as fertility, generosity, and willingness to sacrifice. Surrogates consider their ability to gestate and give birth, to be able to follow all the rules and all the medical protocols as a kind of resource. Berend collected a lot of stories in which surrogates emphasize their agency, as well as their ability and their resources.

Money is directly related to the concept of Gift, the last chapter of the book. Economic and gift exchanges characterize surrogacy arrangements. Throughout over ten years of fieldwork, Berend discovered several meanings regarding gift-giving beyond the oft-repeated phrase of “giving the gift of life”. It would be very simplistic to think of the baby as the precious gift, because there is a whole long list of things that surrogates define as gifts. During the journey, there are material goods that are exchanged as gifts between the parties, while at the same time some relational exchanges are read as gifts, like the gift of trust and attention. Surrogates see the trust that they are receiving from the couples trusting them to carry “their baby” - as a gift.

Overall, the book demonstrates Berend’s unique dexterity in working with online discussion threads as data for US surrogacy and bringing together different perspectives to analyze this practice in systematic way. As emerged in this research, surrogacy can be described as a sophisticated intertwining of relationships, where the intimate and the financial components are so interrelated - in a continuum rather than opposition – in where altruism coexists with commercial practices.