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## **the foetal condition: a sociology of engendering and abortion**

Luc Boltanski, translated by Catherine Porter, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2013, 448pp., ISBN: 978-0-7456-4731-9, £19.99 (Pbk), ISBN: 978-0-7456-4730-2, £60.00 (Hbk)

In *The Foetal Condition*, social theorist Luc Boltanski turns his analytical lens to the subject of abortion. His previous publications, rooted in moral and political sociology, have considered processes through which individuals justify their actions to others, and the transformation of capitalist societies in the late twentieth century. This body of work provides the context for *The Foetal Condition*, translated from the 2004 French edition. Indeed, the author references his previous texts throughout.

Boltanski's work is a theoretical examination of abortion, and draws on anthropological and philosophical texts. His engagement with the existing literature is supplemented by observations made in abortion clinics and interviews with women who had experienced abortion. Boltanski begins his book by asserting that abortion has rarely been a topic of study for European sociologists, contrasting this with the vociferous debates observed among academics within the United States from the early 1980s. He notes the 'polemical' tone of this work, with much written in support of positions 'favourable' to abortion (p. 2). For his examination of abortion, Boltanski states that he adopts a 'neutral' stance so that the matter 'may be considered from the outside', despite the suspicion that this may encounter from readers (p. 3). From this (problematic) position, Boltanski draws on anthropological texts to demonstrate the contradictions represented by the practice of abortion. For example, although encountered almost universally throughout history and across cultures, abortion is nevertheless often subject to condemnation—an 'open secret' (p. 16). Furthermore, abortion exposes our understanding of the human condition as at once entailing human beings who are singular and unique, but simultaneously replaceable (as members of the human race).

To explain how these contradictions are managed by societies, Boltanski turns his attention to 'engendering', a term he uses to describe the processes through which new human beings come to take their place in society. He argues that to belong to humanity, these beings must exist in flesh, but also be configured through speech—actively confirmed as members of a human group through the recognition and actions of others (p. 41).

Boltanski argues that although engendering and the (pre-)confirmation of human beings would historically have been understood in terms of religion, kinship or the state, today this takes place in the context of the 'parental project' (with Boltanski referring exclusively to heterosexual couples). In this context, he asserts that the power to confirm lies with women. With the legalisation of abortion, a woman is able to end a pregnancy should this arise from 'sexual intercourse without engendering' (p. 92), or because of the failure of the parental project. In these cases, foetal beings may come into the flesh but not be confirmed by speech. Here,

Boltanski draws a distinction between the 'authentic' foetus, confirmed and fully enrolled into the parental project, in some cases before birth, and the 'tumoral' foetus, hidden from others and 'leaving the fewest possible traces in the world' (p. 127). In the more philosophically oriented parts of the book, Boltanski examines how the existing literature has attempted to 'legitimise' abortion, but maintains that it nevertheless continues to be depicted as a 'lesser evil' as opposed to a social good.

In what are the most engaging chapters, Boltanski includes quotations from forty in-depth interviews with women who had experienced abortion. These were conducted with a snowball sample of women, initially sourced through Boltanski's 'circle of personal relations' (p. 8) and those of his research team. Although consequently representing a limited range of experiences of abortion, these accounts bring the book to life, peppered throughout a text that is at times difficult to read because of the complex style of writing. Women's narratives raised significant issues, including the embodied experiences of abortion and its aftermath, and the unexpected sensations provoked or stopped by a sudden termination of pregnancy. For some, these continued to be experienced for months following the procedure. The communication of experiences such as these to women in pre-abortion consultations may make these easier to manage. Some women's accounts also pointed to ambivalence regarding the procedure, resonating with Katrina Kimport's recent work complicating accounts of abortion as experienced either in terms of 'regret' or 'relief'. Further *The Foetal Condition* may be seen to contribute to the destabilisation of the 'foetal subject', along with writers such as Lynn M. Morgan and Monica J. Casper. The book demonstrates the cultural and historical contingency of the foetal subject and outlines some of the mechanisms through which it has assumed a place within public consciousness, such as foetal imaging.

I did feel, however, that Boltanski's work at times frames childbearing as an inevitable pursuit for women, not least because of his constant referral to pregnant women as 'mothers', which is particularly inappropriate for a study of abortion. Furthermore, his assessment of women's experiences of fetuses as either 'authentic' or 'tumoral' did not allow for the fact that conceptualisations of the entity within may be experienced as in flux over the course of gestation. Equally problematic was Boltanski's assertion that the only way to attenuate the fierce debate over abortion is to 'reduce its social presence', for example, through medical abortions accomplished at home (p. 234). I wonder if this would be better achieved through an appreciation of the complexity underlying women's (and their partners') decisions to proceed with abortion and increased attention to the voices of women themselves. For me, these represented the book's most important contribution.

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