

Future Directions in Feminist Phenomenology
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David Chu International Centre, WSS 2130

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Hannah Arendt and Pregnancy in the Public Sphere

Abstract

Feminists tend to be skeptical of applying Arendt's work to reproductive justice. She relegates reproduction to the private sphere, making it seemingly irrelevant to speech and action. I contend that reproduction can be understood as a public activity on Arendt's terms. As a reference point, I turn to contract pregnancy, the practice of hiring a woman to gestate a fetus. Feminists worry about contract pregnancy because it seems to reinforce a problematic public/private distinction, in which women are relegated to the private sphere. Because of the way contract pregnancy exemplifies the blurring of the public and the private, it is a good example to use to think through an application of Arendt's thought to reproductive justice more broadly.

One way contract pregnancy becomes public is through the problem of the social, which I supplement with Foucault's concept of biopolitics. I bring these problems together under the term the "social-biopolitical." Understanding contract pregnancy through the social-biopolitical reveals the oppressive aspects that obstruct political agency. In this sense, contract pregnancy is public, but in an impoverished way. It is an instance of economic concerns replacing political ones.

The second way contract pregnancy is made public is through the exercise of political agency. To make this argument, I look at two strategies for understanding how Arendt uses the public/private distinction. According to the Location Strategy, certain activities are fixed in one realm (i.e., reproduction is rigidly designated to the private realm). I propose gendering the Location strategy so as to "fix" reproduction in the public sphere as a political activity. This suggestion, however, must be rejected because it invites essentialist connections between women and reproductive capacities. I suggest adopting the Narrative Strategy. On this reading, how an agent takes up a particular act determines whether it is private or public. Contract pregnancy can become a site of political action, for instance, against the lack of power contract pregnant women tend to have in negotiating contracts.

In response to feminist worries about any talk of a public/private distinction, I suggest that the value Arendt places on privacy makes a useful contribution to feminist theories. By incorporating privacy into theorizing, feminists gain a methodological check that helps prevent us from giving homogenous accounts of women's experiences.