Commodification and the “Yuk” Factor

Feminists have been at the forefront of calling attention to issues of commodification of women’s bodies and labor in areas such as prostitution and surrogacy. In this paper, we distinguish between different forms of exchange, arguing that commodification has had its greatest salience when explicit payment (prostitution?) elicits the “yuk” factor, but that bans on monetary transfers often disguise the creation of class-based markets that replace the crassness of explicit exchange with more subtle, exclusive, and "expensive" (i.e., complex and cumbersome) networks (gold-digger marriages?).

To illustrate the idea, we focus principally on assisted reproduction and the market for gametes. Some states, for example, deal with the problem of crassness in a context like commercial surrogacy by banning the practice altogether. The result either drives the practice underground, or allows the weather and more sophisticated to shop for those jurisdictions that police less savory practices without eliminating payment. In the world of gamete donation, the language of philanthropy conflicts with the realities of the baby market. Many feminists don't like the idea of auctioning eggs to the highest bidder, e.g., Ivy League degrees, blonde hair, and athletic status “merits” $75,000, but we are more ambivalent if the women contribute eggs for college expenses (or if the exchange takes place privately with access restricted to the elite.) If we don't ban the sale of gametes or of babies, then an exclusive private market may flourish. If we regulate, setting a fixed price, then we eliminate the premium for Ivy League and Asian eggs.

Appreciating the realities of the market and exploitation also results in questions of who is being protected by what. This also gets into the disgust factor that motivates some of the anti-commodification critique. Yet the disgust factor proves to be an unreliable basis for banning, or perhaps for even regulation, these practices.

In the paper, we tie class dynamics to the lack of commodification, and then conclude that commodosification may be appropriate, but so is effective regulation that will make commodification work.