

The Biological Clock

Call for Paper for an Issue of *Body Politics*

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The investigation of the female body, its reproductive capacity and its social constitution and discussion by gender historians was central to the establishment of the field of “the history of the body” (Körpergeschichte) in Germany. Similar to the “soldier's body”, the female “reproductive body” has always been charged with political significance and thus became the venue for open as well as hidden power struggles. This has been underscored by a wide range of research, ranging from Women's and Gender Studies, Cultural History, Cultural Anthropology, History of Science and Technology to the History of Sexuality.

These works have shown the immense importance of social, but also biological reproduction and examined the effects of biological attributions (women alone are responsible for reproduction) and cultural-historical postulates (the reproduction of future citizens through education). Two aspects that seem to be of central importance for shaping a broad social discourse on reproduction and processes of reproductive decision-making still lack scholarly attention: time and visualizations of (passing) time – condensed in the image of the “biological clock”. This is where our proposal sets in.

The focus on processes of reproductive decision-making and their social framing offers an ideal starting point for fresh research. Although we now know that reproduction was perceived as “decision-making” for the first time around the middle of the 20th century, the framework of decision-making for couples and families has considerably expanded with the spread of contraceptive technologies and family planning strategies, such as IVF during the last decades of the 20th century. This has allowed more people to have children and at a later stage in their lives. However, we do not know yet in which ways reproduction as a cultural-historical decision-making process on the one hand and social practice on the other hand not only had an impact on biological bodies, but was also shaped by bodies and body-images. In this special issue of *Body Politics* we will thus ask how time (in the sense of passing time) and pictures of developing bodies (embryos, fetuses), changing bodies (pregnancy) and aging human bodies were introduced and used as arguments in reproductive decision-making processes.

Time / Age:

- Time as well as timing plays an important role in reproductive decisions, i.e. the decision for or against having children. For example, the temporal metaphor of the “biological clock” is used to alert women to their social obligation to reproduce, especially once they have reached their thirties. Women's bodies – their reproductive capacities – “belong” to society and no longer to their owners. In public discourses surrounding reproductive decision making the “right time” to reproduce has also been controversially discussed. Women should do so as early as possible, when the biological clock is “not ticking yet”, but not too early, as very young mothers have been considered less responsible and insufficiently prepared for the task of mothering. The age of the reproducing body was and is therefore a central target for reproductive debates, in particular regarding the female body.
- For men, their “biological clock” has rarely been an issue in public discourse. In recent years, however, research has suggested a link between “aging” semen and mental disorders in children, such as ADHD or autism. This raises the question whether the “biological clock” also affects male reproductive bodies – a link that yet seems invisible. It would also be interesting to consider changes in the public image of the father, who has been increasingly portrayed as a young, participating father since the 1970s, compared to the absent, older fathers of the mid-20th century.
- With the spread of reproductive technologies since the late 1970s, the relationship between age and reproductive capacity has become even more complex. The “biological clock” was slowed down and women were promised that they could fulfill a late “desire for children” beyond the age of 40 with the help of “social freezing”. Not only did it become possible to have children later in life, but also the group of people for whom it was suddenly possible to biologically reproduce increased considerably. Same-sex couples have long been denied a desire to have children by society. The new reproductive technologies, however, also opened alternative paths into parenthood for gay and lesbian couples. Since the 1990s, biological reproduction (beyond stepchild adoptions) has become an option for same-sex couples. The “biological clock” started ticking for gay men and lesbian women as well. By transferring reproduction to other, younger (often non-white) bodies, new family relationships emerge, producing new ethical, legal and social problems.

Time / Visualization:

- Regarding the visualization of time, scientific and pseudo-scientific concepts of the unborn are of particular interest. In particular, in debates about abortions, the age of

the fetus served as an argument to denounce abortions as “killing human life.” For example, in many countries abortions are only legal until the twelfth week of pregnancy, when the embryo turns into a fetus. Here, it would be interesting to investigate the influence of visualization media such as ultrasound devices and film on debates on legal abortion and the protection of the life of the fetus. In other words, how is the idea of the “biological clock” translated into visual media or made visible through technologies? How did debates on reproductive decision-making stage, visualize and refer to the passage of time during pregnancy? Did these techniques lead to a personalization of embryo and fetus?

In this issue, we would like to offer the opportunity to explore the relationship between time and reproductive bodies in a variety of ways. Contributions to all the topics discussed above are welcome. We especially encourage articles focusing on the period between about mid-20th to the beginning of the 21st century as well as proposals that investigate concepts of reproductive decision-making and time up to the 19th century. The editors also welcome contributions that deal with current problems of reproductive decision making, e.g. the discussion surrounding “Regretting motherhood” or the scandalization of “abortion advertisement” in Germany. Equally, we encourage suggestions that address regions that do not belong to “the West” or “Western societies”, i.e. Northern and Western Europe and the USA. Contributions should be submitted either in English or German.

We look forward to receiving **short abstracts (1 page max), working titles and biographical sketches until October 31, 2018** to verena.limper@uni-muenster.de. Contributors will be notified by mid-November. Finalized contributions are due by **January 2019** as the **issue is scheduled for 2019**. The articles will be peer reviewed by two referees that will be chosen by the board of *Body Politics*.