

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

### **Polluting the Waters of the Most Vulnerable**

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**Maia Boswell-Penc, *Tainted Milk, Breast Milk, Feminisms, and the Politics of Environmental Degradation*, State University of New York Press, 2006.**

In her introduction to *Tainted Milk*, Maia Boswell-Penc leads off the meticulous research in this important work by relating how manufacturers of infant formula recently persuaded the American Academic of Pediatrics to pull ads publicizing that the use of infant formula leads to an increased risk of leukemia (up 30 percent), diabetes (up 40 percent) and ear infections (up 20 percent). The fact that corporations worked to keep statistics on the health deficits of their product out of the public eye is no surprise to those who have followed the corporate hawking of infant formula in the Third World, where its use is implicated in increased infant mortality rates resulting from malnutrition and diarrhea.

But *Tainted Milk* also reveals a similarly troubling if more submerged history in which mainstream environmentalists and feminists have played into the corporate agenda by avoiding attention to the growing contamination of breast milk. Some U.S. feminists have been reluctant to support nursing as a function of the biological motherhood they see linked to gender stereotypes and women's oppression. They have not wanted to limit women's options in terms of making the choice *not* to breastfeed. (Boswell-Penc indicates how the banking of breast milk might meet the concerns of mothers who cannot or do not wish to breastfeed). For their part, environmentalists have not wanted to discourage the few U.S. women who do breast feed from this environmentally sustainable choice by bringing up the issue of breast milk contamination.

As the latter indicates, a central reason for the inattention to this issue on the part of both environmentalists and feminists in the U.S. is the fact that breastfeeding is not widely practiced here. By contrast, in the European Union, where breast feeding is well established and widespread, publicity around breast milk contamination has lent impetus to public policy curtailing the manufacture of certain chemicals and instituting the precautionary principle to address surrounding issues of environmental contamination.

But U.S. culture sports a view of "progress" that holds that science can improve on nature, and thus can do a better job of nourishing babies than can a woman's body. This is set in the context of the links between the "natural" and the "animal" in racial and gender stereotypes, the historical identification of wet nursing with lower-class employment in Europe and slavery in the United States, and the manipulated guilt of modern mothers who want the best for their children

and careers for themselves. The resulting low rate of breast feeding among U.S. women is coincident with an activist focus on breast milk contamination generally limited to particularly polluted locales.

Given their contrasting perspective on the intertwining of social and environmental issues, the environmental justice and ecofeminist movements have been notable exceptions to the trend of ignoring breast milk contamination as a systemic concern. Not incidentally, these movements also evince critical perspectives of modern capitalism, as well as models for women empowered both as community leaders *and* as mothers. At the grass roots level, non-white and poor communities who suffer the most environmental degradation have been most active in protesting breast milk contamination.

The inattention to breast milk contamination on the part of more mainstream groups has resulted in harm to the most vulnerable among us: nursing infants, people of color, and the poor. Harming these, in turn, harms us all as it undermines social justice. It also harms us in a basic physical sense: *Tainted Milk* notes that the contamination of breast milk is an indication of the parallel contamination carried in each of our bodies. As is the case with all such environmental contamination, we can only remedy it with social and environmental policies, not merely with individual “lifestyle” approaches.

Altogether, *Tainted Milk* builds a solid case for avoiding the divisions of race, gender, class and misplaced assumptions about progress (“maldevelopment,” as Vandana Shiva terms it). As a potential class text, *Tainted Milk* does an admirable job of balancing careful research with readability. As she respectfully unpacks feminist and environmental theories in the context of the history of breast feeding, Boswell-Penc avoids getting lost in jargon. The conclusion of this work is especially useful, summarizing a vast amount of detail in a clear and concise way as it takes a conscious stand against “racism, classism, colonialism, sexism, and corporatization.” In this conclusion Boswell-Penc also presents the successful model of Sweden, where public policy prohibiting the use of pesticides and fire retardants has made the environment healthier for all its citizens at the same time that it has ensured the safety of breast milk.

*Tainted Milk* would be a valuable text for classes whose topics include feminist and environmental theories; the relationship between cultural context, history, and activist choices; and critical perspectives on capitalist social divisions. This work also provides a window on the way in which the alienation of labor to which Marx first drew attention might become a wholesale alienation from our bodies susceptible to corporate manipulation.

On a final note, Boswell-Penc indicates that the trend of neglecting breast milk contamination in the U.S. seems to be changing. This is good news. It would be even better if we instituted progressive policies to protect the most vulnerable among us on the Swedish model.