

POSTHUMAN GLOSSARY

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PILL, THE (POSTHUMAN ICON)

We propose the oral contraceptive pill as one of the posthuman icons of the twentieth century. It may be easy to forget in contemporary times, where young women in the West have not lived with the fear of unwanted pregnancies, but the classic metal strip supplying three weeks of tiny white pills has had and still has a revolutionary impact on women's lives all over the world. In fact, this small piece of

technology was so successful that it is simply known as 'the Pill'. For the first time in human history the Pill made it possible for women to separate sexuality from reproduction, allowing them to find a sexual freedom that had never existed before. Without fear of unwanted pregnancies, a large number of children, or worse, death in childbirth, women could now enjoy and explore sexuality in ways that were impossible before. Its invention in the 1950s consequently helped push and shape the sexual revolution of the 1960s.

The oral contraceptive pill, a combination of oestrogen and progesterone, celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2010. Since its official approval by the American Food and Drug Administration in 1960 the Pill has achieved global endorsement as the most widely used drug in the history of medicine. And although there have been critiques of the Pill, it still caters to millions of women across the globe as a popular means of controlling fertility, regulating menstruation, detecting or terminating pregnancies and managing female menopause.

The discovery and development of the anti-conception pill and its subsequent adoption was due to sustained efforts on the part of feminists. Following up on the efforts of the first feminist wave to achieve birth control at the end of the nineteenth century, for example by introducing the diaphragm, feminists reinforced their search for safer and more reliable means of birth control after the Second World War. Pioneer of women's reproductive rights, Margaret Sanger, helped found the International Committee on Planned Parenthood as early as 1946, which was to evolve into the world's largest non-governmental international women's health, family planning and birth control organization. In the early 1950s, Sanger encouraged philanthropist, suffragist and biologist Katharine McCormick to

devote a substantial part of her family fortune to subsidize the bio-medical research necessary to develop the first birth control pill. The research was carried out throughout the 1950s by biologist Gregory Pincus and was eventually finalized, patented and sold under the name of Enovid.

From the very beginning of its mass adoption, the Pill became one of the major symbols of second-wave feminist movements in the West. The control of reproduction was seen as a vital means to restore women's ownership over their own bodies, to freely enjoy sexual relations, and to improve their social status. Liberal feminist Betty Friedan – co-founder in 1966 of the National Organization of Women and author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) – was a passionate campaigner for women's access to free and full contraceptive rights. Radical feminist Shulamith Firestone, in *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970), highlighted the role of reproductive freedom and the struggle for free contraception in the liberation of women. Anticipating later developments, Firestone argued that a shift of social priorities from reproduction to contraception and the full development of reproductive technologies constituted the core elements of a feminist revolution.

Politically, the most important contribution of the Pill was to materialize and represent publicly the categorical distinction and separation of sexuality from reproduction. Instigating twentieth-century sexual liberation movements in the West, the Pill de-naturalized reproduction and enabled women to become heterosexually active without the danger of unwelcome pregnancies. Moreover, as a form of contraception it offered many advantages over previous methods: it was convenient, highly effective, female-controlled, separated from the act of intercourse, and it did not require the consent – or even awareness – of a male

sexual partner (Gordon 2007; Kline 2010; Oudshoorn 1994).

The isolation and synthesis of female sex hormones that led to the development of the contraceptive pill also prepared the ground for modern reproductive technologies such as *in vitro* fertilization. Moreover, by opening the possibility of motherhood to single and lesbian women (Rich 1995), the Pill paved the way for the rejection of compulsory heterosexuality through the promotion of alternative kinship systems outside the patriarchal constraints of the nuclear family.

The radical sting of the Pill is that, by making it possible for women to choose whether to have children or not, it facilitated their rejection of traditional family structures (Diepenbrock 1998). Domestic life in the patriarchal family presents clear disadvantages for women by confining them to the role of caretaking in the private sphere at the cost of exclusion from the economic sphere. It isolates men from the lives of their children, and institutes a gendered economy that segregates reproductive labour and family life from wage labour (Labora Cuboniks 2015). The Pill supports a radical sexual politics for alternative family arrangements. This has not escaped the attention of organized religions and conservative political parties, which have waged an all-out war against it. Up until today, the Pill is not easily available in Catholic countries or in countries with a strong Christian fundamentalist presence.

The Pill's detractors have historically offered counter-arguments to stress its mixed blessings. In the 1970s eco-feminists adhered to authentic notions of female nature resulting in the rejection of any scientific manipulation of female bodies. This resistance evolved into the idea that bio-chemical contraception is politically dangerous, because it inserts women's

bodies into institutionalized practices of both liberation and control (Warren 1994). Following Foucault's bio-political analysis of the management of reproduction and sexuality in the 1980s (Foucault 2003, 2010), the radical feminist claim of liberation via technology was disputed. Throughout the 1990s feminist studies of science and technology pointed out the dangers as well as the advantages of working within bio-political systems of hormonal, bio-chemical and genetic management of bodies in a social order based on disciplining and punishing (Oudshoorn 1994; McNeil and Franklin 1991; Haraway [1985] 1991; Roberts 2008).

Queer critiques of naturalized and essentialized gender identities and norms radicalized these critiques. On the one hand Preciado (2013) emphasized the normalizing power of the Pill that builds upon and endorses the underlying hormonal and endocrinological design of 'normal' female bodies. In this framework, the Pill is taken as a 'chemical panopticon', that is to say a micro-instance that reflects macro-power formations – such as medical-legal institutions, the nation-states and global networks of bio-genetic capitalization of life (Cooper 2011). On the other hand, with the privilege of hindsight, it has become manifest that the hiatus between reproduction and sexuality that was introduced by the Pill in the 1960s marked not only a scientific change of paradigm, but also a profound fracture within patriarchal family power formations and the perpetuation of compulsory heterosexuality. It was, therefore, a watershed moment for the feminist movement.

In the light of this rich and complex history, of all the advantages and challenges it represents, as well as its huge impact upon the lives of millions, we wonder why the Pill is not more widely celebrated as the icon of a posthumanist subject position that emancipates women

from a naturalized regime of subjugation. Why are other images so hastily embraced as posthuman icons, like the destructive image of the mushroom cloud of a nuclear bomb, for instance, or the over-exposed mix of metal and wires in robotics? Instead of these rather overbearing images we suggest the humble Pill as one of the posthuman icons. The more modest 'wetware' of the Pill should be recognized for its revolutionary impact: it is a frontal attack on the naturalization of gender inequalities. The Pill testifies to the visceral call that, if nature is unjust, then we must change nature (Xenofeminist Manifesto 2015).

See also Bodies Politic; Geo-Hydro-Solar-Bio-Techno Politics; Pregnant Posthuman; Xenofeminism; Placenta Politics.

Anneke Smelik and Elisa Fiore
