

Centre for Reproduction Research Seminar Series

Wednesday 30 January 2019, 12 – 1.30

Please note room change: the seminar will now take place in Gateway House 3.79

Ilana Lowy, Inserm, Paris

‘Prenatal diagnosis and disability rights’

As places are limited, please email CRR@dmu.ac.uk if you wish to attend to secure your place.

Abstract

This paper will discuss the intersection of prenatal diagnosis and disability rights. An abortion for a foetal anomaly (the refusal of *this* child) is presented today by many disability activists as more condemnable than an abortion for rejection of maternity (the refusal of a child *in general*), because it is argued a termination of pregnancy with an impaired fetus is an implicit statement that life with disability is worthless. This argument, named “expressivist objection” to selective abortion, is presented in absolute and immutable terms: a “eugenic abortion” is, and always has been, morally wrong. Yet attitudes to the definition of life and the status of embryos, fetuses, and even premature babies have changed over time, as have those to an abortion for a fetal anomaly. Moreover, the emotionally powerful “expressivist objection” to selective abortion is a problematic concept. It lumps together very different situations and levels of disability, extrapolates from “exemplary disabilities” often compatible with autonomous life, to all the other inborn impairments, and neglects the thorny issue of care for severely disabled children and adults, usually provided by family members, mothers in particular. Disability activists’ strong claims also mask the existence of important differences of opinion among people living with disabilities. Arguments advanced in debate for and against abortion following an infection with Zika virus during pregnancy display the multiple layers of the debate on abortion for a fetal impairment.

Speaker biography

Ilana Löwy is a Senior Researcher Emeritus (Directrice de Recherche) at Inserm Paris (<https://www.inserm.fr/en>). Initially trained as a biologist, she then retrained as a historian of science and medicine. Her main research interests are relationships between laboratory sciences, clinical medicine and public health; with a special interest in the intersection between gender studies and biomedicine in areas such as female cancers, contraception or the medicalization of pregnancy; and the history of birth defects and prenatal diagnosis, with a special focus on links between prenatal testing, clinical genetics and the rise of new genetic technologies. She is currently researching the Zika epidemic in Brazil and juridical abortions in Rio de Janeiro.

She is the author of numerous books including the recent *Tangled Diagnoses: Prenatal Testing, Women, and Risk* (2018) and *Imperfect Pregnancies: A History of Birth Defects and Prenatal Diagnosis* (2017).