



Research Article

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The Handmaid's Tale: Reproductive Labour and the Social Embeddedness of Markets

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Abstract: In episode 6 of the first season of *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–, MGM Television), the Republic of Gilead welcomes a trade delegation of the United Mexican States. Offred's hope that the ensuing trade agreement between Gilead and Mexico would eventually bring the sexual exploitation she and the other handmaids suffer to public are quickly dashed. During a chance encounter at the house of Offred's master, the Mexican ambassador Mrs Castillo confides in Offred that Mexico is suffering a fertility crisis just like Gilead. Her country is seriously considering trading with Gilead in handmaids (season 1, episode 6, "A Woman's Place"). My article will use this episode as a starting point to reflect on the correlation between women's social and economic status. I will illustrate how *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrates that markets are socially embedded and thereby reproduce and amplify social and political inequalities. This series thereby also functions as a powerful validation of the asymmetry thesis concerning markets in reproductive labour.

Keywords: *The Handmaid's Tale*, reproductive labour, androcentric culture, gender inequality, asymmetry thesis

1 Introduction: A cautionary tale

Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) alerts us to the many hidden threats to the achievements of feminism. In the deeply patriarchal Republic of Gilead, women have been utterly disenfranchised to avert the country's fertility crisis that has been brought about by environmental pollution and the aftermath of an atomic war. Fertile women are enslaved and sent to the homes of high-ranking officials to serve as "handmaids," i.e. surrogate mothers that are raped on a regular basis to impregnate them. The ultra-religious Republic of Gilead frames this proceeding as a religious duty and, ultimately, a question of social utility.

In the novel's most recent adaptation for television (2017–, MGM Television), the directors have added an additional sardonic twist to Atwood's story of how easily the gains of women's fight for equality can be lost: In the last episodes of the first season, the Republic of Gilead welcomes a trade delegation from the United Mexican States. Offred,¹ the protagonist of both the novel and the TV-series, considers this a good sign: Gilead is economically weak and therefore, so Offred's reasoning, likely to succumb to any demands of its trading partners. If the rest of the world learns about the sexual exploitation she and the other

¹ The handmaids have no given names but the possessive pronoun and the name of the official they are currently serving – "Offred" hence reads as "the woman of Fred." Offred's real name is June Osborn.

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handmaids suffer, Gilead could be made to stop. Unfortunately, Offred's hopes are dashed: Far from acting bashful, Gilead indeed showcases its system of handmaids and the many (and moreover healthy) children that have been born. And surprisingly, the Mexican delegates seem pleased and impressed rather than shocked. At a chance encounter with the Mexican ambassador Mrs. Castillo, Offred learns that Mexico is suffering a fertility crisis just like Gilead. Therefore, Mexico is in fact considering either to trade in handmaids with Gilead or set up its own system of institutionalized rape and forced pregnancy.²

Especially because of this episode, the current TV-adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* is highly relevant not only from the viewpoints of feminist philosophy or political philosophy, but also from the perspective of philosophy of economics. In a society where fertility is a highly valued commodity, why do the women who possess it suffer such exploitation and deprivation?³ And if it's true that "dystopia can help us spot the symptoms of a sick society,"⁴ precisely which symptoms does *The Handmaid's Tale* help us to see? I aim to demonstrate that *The Handmaid's Tale* dwells on the correlation between a woman's social and economic status. It illustrates that markets are socially and culturally embedded, and that culture can work to invalidate economic laws. In the following sections, I shall offer two analyses to support my argument: I will first establish why and to what extent markets mirror the power structures of "their" society. In drawing on the work of developmental economists Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, I will argue that a society's social and economic institutions are the result of power struggles. I will then build on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's thesis of androcentricity to show that these institutions are deeply gendered. These readings will form the background of Section 4 of my article where I argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* provides a powerful, albeit sometimes misleading validation of the asymmetry thesis concerning markets in women's reproductive labour. The series goes through several arguments that are usually brought forward to substantiate the asymmetry thesis without offering any definitive solution. It thereby encourages an examination of these arguments on part of the viewers.

2 Two nations

Admittedly, Gilead's "market" in reproductive labour does not seem to meet the criteria of a genuine market economy: The Handmaids do neither choose nor enter their labour agreements voluntarily, and they receive no payment but food and shelter. But although Gilead seems no model of a market economy, its structures actually tell a lot about how "real" markets work. After all, the modern market is "an entity created by the government, with rules established by the government."⁵ True, these rules are not always as plain as in Gilead's tightly controlled female labour market consisting of Handmaids, Marthas, Aunts, and Jezebels. Nevertheless, Fred Waterford's remark that "We only wanted to make the world better. Better never means better for everyone. It always means worse for some"⁶ applies to just any form of government, and as such, market. This is because any system of government is the result of a power struggle – if the Sons of Jacob hadn't been successful, Fred Waterford would probably still be working in marketing. Now that he has risen to the rank of a Commander, he and his fellows are in charge, among other things, for "this complex system for distributing the fruits of a society's economic output"⁷ – aka "the market."

Developmental economists Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson have shown how power struggles shape the political and economic institutions of a society. Their starting point is the analysis of two neighbouring cities: Nogales in Arizona, US, and Nogales in Mexico. Since these cities have the same

² *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 6, "A Woman's Place."

³ This reading of fertility as a resource is encouraged by the series by revealing in flashback that Serena Joy, wife of the official Fred Waterford, was a political writer whose latest book project focused on *Fertility as a National Resource* (Ibid.).

⁴ Di Minico, "Spatial and Psychological Domination," 13.

⁵ Holland, *The Fifteen Biggest Lies*, 51.

⁶ Fred Waterford to Offred, season 1, episode 5, "Faithful."

⁷ Holland, *The Fifteen Biggest Lies*, 51.

people, culture, and geography, there must be a different explanation for the huge difference in wealth. Acemoglu and Robinson attribute this difference to the border which divides the two cities: The inhabitants of Nogales in Arizona have access to the economic and political institutions of the US, whereas the citizens of Nogales in Mexico

live in a different world shaped by different institutions. These different institutions create very disparate incentives for the inhabitants of the two Nogaleses. ... These incentives created by the different institutions of the Nogaleses and the countries in which they are situated are the main reason for the difference in economic prosperity on the two sides of the border.⁸

The development of these dissimilar institutions can be traced back to the respective history of the two cities/countries; whereas the economic and political institutions of Mexico developed under the influence of fierce colonialism, roughly the same kind of colonial policy in the English settlements of North America quickly came to a dead end. Probably because of an extremely low population density (both among the colonists and the native population), the Virginia Company and those English settlers higher up the social ladder did not succeed in establishing a coercive labour regime. In contrast to this, “the population density [in Latin America, J.P.] was as high as four hundred people per square kilometre, more than five hundred times higher. What was possible in Mexico or Peru was not feasible in Virginia”⁹ – for the simple reason that malcontent settlers voted with their feet. If colonial leaders wanted to sustain their settlements, they had to offer their workers some incentives, which in turn influenced the kind of politics pursued in the English colonies. Eventually, this led to the kind of institutions which now sets Nogales in Arizona very much apart from its Mexican namesake.

Acemoglu and Robinson hence point out that the kind of political and economic institutions a society sets up depend on the distribution of political power in that society: “When there is conflict over institutions, what happens depends on which people or group wins out in the game of politics – who can get more support, obtain additional resources, and form more effective alliances.”¹⁰

According to Acemoglu and Robinson, there are two kinds of political and economic institutions a society can establish: extractive or inclusive ones. In states with inclusive political institutions, political power is distributed broadly and subject to constraints. Moreover, this power is also centralized and thereby enables the state to enforce laws and precludes the kind of power struggles typical of so-called “failed states” like, e.g. Somalia, a society

divided into deeply antagonistic clans that cannot dominate one another. The power of one clan is constrained only by the guns of another. This distribution of power leads not to inclusive institutions but to chaos, and at the root of it is the Somali state’s lack of any kind of political centralization ... and its inability to enforce even the minimal amount of law and order.¹¹

Political institutions, then, are inclusive only if they are centralized and pluralistic. If either of these conditions is not met, political institutions are extractive. Such extractive political institutions are designed to “concentrate power in the hands of a narrow elite and place few constraints on the exercise of this power.”¹² This high concentration of political power is then used to set up extractive economic institutions which extract resources from a society for the benefit of its rulers. It is important to note that there is a strong synergy between extractive political and economic institutions. They feed on each other by providing incentives for implementing them. This is why the exploitative economic system of slave-owning societies like those of the American South or the Caribbean relied on the political disenfranchisement of its workforce.¹³

⁸ Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹² *Ibid.*, 81.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Acemoglu and Robinson point out that societies with extractive institutions are politically and economically static since their institutions have the single purpose to secure the ruling elite's wealth and power. This implies that the government adheres to extractive institutions despite the comparatively limited surplus these institutions generate since “[e]conomic institutions that create incentives for economic progress may simultaneously redistribute income and power in such a way that a predatory dictator and others with political power may become worse off.”¹⁴ Therefore, societies with extractive institutions don't implement other, more beneficial ones for the simple reason that the ruling class fears the transformative effects of economic growth. Consequently, “[g]rowth thus moves forward only if not blocked by the economic losers who anticipate that their economic privileges will be lost and by the political losers who fear that their political power will be eroded.”¹⁵ It was this anticipated loss of political power that caused the English aristocracy of the nineteenth century to oppose industrialization and the repeal of the “Corn Laws.”¹⁶ Gilead faces serious economic problems for similar reasons: The economy the Sons of Jacob have established to realize their religious ideals plummets not only because of international trade sanctions,¹⁷ but also because it is so highly restrictive, the ban of female wage labour being a decisive tool for keeping women economically dependent and politically subordinate.

The opposition to economic change by powerful parties also explains why economic growth is short-lived under extractive institutions: For one, extractive institutions stifle innovation because innovation implies “creative destruction,”¹⁸ which has a destabilizing effect on power relations. Second, “the ability of those who dominate extractive institutions to benefit greatly at the expense of the rest of society implies that political power under extractive institutions is highly coveted, making many groups and individuals fight to obtain it.”¹⁹ Consequently, societies with extractive institutions are prone to political instability. This leads either to chaos, like in Somalia, or to the establishment of a repressive regime, like in North Korea, China – or Gilead.

2.1 A political economy

The Republic of Gilead meets all criteria for a society with extractive institutions. The possibility to partake in politics is confined to men – not even to all men, but a comparatively small group of them. Gilead is hence divided not only by sex, but also by class. And this small group of men use their highly concentrated political power to establish economic institutions for their own benefit – after all, only the Commanders have access to Handmaids. Furthermore, unpaid and forced labour is more than common in Gilead, with its Handmaids, Unwomen, and Jezebels.

Nevertheless, Acemoglu and Robinson have made clear that also societies with inclusive political and economic institutions have developed from power struggles. Their analysis thus runs counter to traditional economic discourse, which has for a long time relied almost exclusively on the neoclassical concept of the market economy. This concept draws on Adam Smith's famous argument that the market economy is based on the natural human propensity to “truck, barter, and exchange.”²⁰ According to this interpretation of economic development, markets are nothing short of a natural and moreover, continuous development. However, this neoclassical account has met with serious criticism, most notably by economic historian Karl

¹⁴ Ibid., 84.

¹⁵ Ibid., 86.

¹⁶ Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox*, 26f.

¹⁷ *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 4, “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.”

¹⁸ The term “creative destruction” was coined by Austrian economist Joseph A. Schumpeter (1883–1950) in his classic *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1942). It denotes that economic change necessarily dissolves old structures – both economic and political ones.

¹⁹ Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 430.

²⁰ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 25.

Polanyi.²¹ In his classic *The Great Transformation* (1944), Polanyi challenges Smith's account by pointing out that the underlying idea of a "natural" propensity in human beings to "truck, barter and exchange" is itself the result of the very kind of market society it seeks to account for. Polanyi locates the origins of the market society not in the human disposition, but in political institutions. The market presupposes active state intervention and a high degree of state centralization to establish its necessary framework. Moreover, it depends on the transformation of non-commodities into commodities. According to Polanyi, this was the case especially with land, labour, and money. Originally "produced for use,"²² they are now being considered "produced for sale."²³

Economic historian John Lie credits Polanyi for highlighting the role of power in the establishment of the modern market economy but nevertheless claims that "the fundamental problem of Polanyi's alternative is his failure to carry his own insight to its logical conclusion."²⁴ Although Polanyi's account significantly broadens common perspectives on economic history, it still misses an important point: "The strength of his account is the introduction of power; its weakness is that it locates power only in the state."²⁵ Departing from both Smith and Polanyi, Lie devises a more integral account that takes into consideration the power struggles in and among *markets*. Such heuristic reading allows him to discern the following mechanisms at work in the development of the market economy: macrostructural changes that result in a new opportunity structure, which in turn gives rise to new groups that fight for their different economic interests and thereby create new modes of exchange.²⁶ Lie illustrates his thesis by describing the development from local markets to a national market in early modern England. On his account, the establishment of interregional trade evolved from two paths: the "entrepreneurial mode," a network between travelling merchants and local shopkeepers, and the "mercantile mode," consisting of middlemen merchants based mostly in London and rural elites. The emergence of the latter "was facilitated by improvements in the technology of transportation and communication. This transformation created an exchange network that brought together London-based middlemen merchants and local notables. Thus the mercantile mode was the construction of the preserve of economic elites."²⁷ Due to power polarization and consolidation, the two modes of exchange ceased to co-exist by the middle of the eighteenth century. Independent shops and trades eventually "became integrated by large mercantile organizations."²⁸ This process was neither smooth nor peaceful but accompanied by immense public resistance and even riots.²⁹ Lie therefore underlines: "Rather than harmonious cooperation ensured by the invisible hand or the coercive power of the state, concrete social groups construct 'markets' through power struggles against other groups and other 'markets'."³⁰

On this account, Gilead is a cruel mirror of how market economies work and how they developed. Social coalitions and conflicts are decisive in shaping a country's economy. Their outcomes affect macroeconomic structures and eventually even settle who will become employed on which terms and in which field, and what recognition (read: pay) they receive for it. It is the successful group that determines the rules of the game, as Waterford's real-political statement that "Better never means better for everyone. It always means worse for some"³¹ suggests. Due to Gilead's male bias, "better" means "better for men": The improved employment opportunities for men result from the exclusion of women from the labour market (at least the

²¹ Other accounts of the development of the modern economy include Appleby, *Relentless Revolution*; Johnson, *Making the Market*; Perrow, *Organizing America*; and Roy, *Socializing Capital*.

²² Cf. Aristotle, who defined property as "tool for life," Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254a.

²³ Lie, "Visualizing the Invisible Hand," 277.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 278.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 279.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 294.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 296.

²⁹ Cf. Porter, *English Society*, and the sources quoted in Lie; Rose, "Eighteenth Century Price Riots;" and Shelton, *English Hunger*.

³⁰ Lie, "Visualizing the Invisible Hand," 280. Emphasis in the text.

³¹ Fred Waterford to Offred, *The Handmaid's Tale*, season I, episode 5, "Faithful."

one for *paid* work), and the forced sexual availability of the Handmaids increases (some) men's opportunities for reproduction. But Gilead is not the only country with a male bias that seriously curtails women's opportunities. According to American writer and feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935), we all live in a “man-made world.”

3 Our androcentric culture

Perkins Gilman states that “[w]e have been so taken up with the phenomena of masculinity and femininity, that our common humanity has largely escaped notice.”³² According to her, this overemphasis on sex differences has its roots in male supremacy:

Our historic period is not very long. Real written history only goes back a few thousand years, beginning with the stone records of ancient Egypt. During this period we have had almost universally what is here called an Androcentric Culture. The history, such as it was, was made and written by men. ... We have, so far, lived and suffered and died in a man-made world. So general, so unbroken, has been this condition, that to mention it arouses no more remark than the statement of a natural law. We have taken it for granted, since the dawn of civilization, that “mankind” meant men-kind, and the world was theirs.³³

On this view, woman is perceived as the deviant “other” (or “the second sex,” according to French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir³⁴), whereas male characteristics (either of mind or body) are passed off as the normative ideal for humanity in general. This dichotomy has led to the exclusion of a significant group of society on the grounds of what Perkins Gilman considers a marginal difference at best. She argues that the biological differences between men and women have some bearing only when it comes to human(!) reproduction: “Woman’s natural work as a female is that of the mother; man’s natural work as a male is that of the father.”³⁵ But human society displays, and is advanced by, a multitude of tasks and accomplishments: “Every handicraft, every profession, every science, every art, all normal amusements and recreations, all government, education, religion; the whole living world of human achievement: all this is human.”³⁶ Put differently, the organization of society along the lines of sex differences simply does not capture the advanced complexity of civilization. Yet the “androcentric culture” does not aim at providing an account of the world as accurately as possible; it is no scientific or philosophical endeavour. Rather, it aims at an interpretation (and correspondingly, a structuring) of the world according to male inclinations and interests: “That one sex should have monopolized all human activities, called them ‘man’s work,’ and managed them as such, is what is meant by the phrase ‘Androcentric Culture’.”³⁷ Women are treated merely as men’s “main labour supply and comfort.”³⁸

Perkins Gilman stresses that this male-centred attitude has led to a deeply “partial civilization”³⁹ that is best described as an “androcracy”⁴⁰ rather than a democracy. In a society that caters exclusively to male interests (or interests that bear masculine connotations), women appear necessarily out of place. According to Perkins Gilman, this is especially true of politics, where any demand to include women in the decision-making process is met with fierce resistance: “‘They cannot play the game!’ cries the practical politician. There is loud talk of the defilement ... the total unfitness of lovely woman to take part in ‘the rough and

³² Perkins Gilman, *The Man-Made World*, 13.

³³ *Ibid.*, 17f.

³⁴ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

³⁵ Perkins Gilman, *The Man-Made World*, 25.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 211f.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 222.

tumble of politics’.” Perkins Gilman argues that this is essentially a self-fulfilling prophecy: “In other words men have made a human institution into an ultra-masculine performance; and, quite rightly, feel that women could not take part in politics *as men do*.”⁴¹

Given that so many social fields and endeavours have been turned into an “ultra-masculine performance,” other values have faded into the background. According to Perkins Gilman, this seriously threatens social well-being. Since masculinity was always defined in dissociation to perceived femininity, “manly” characteristics like aggression or desire have been pushed to extremes, increasing the likelihood of armed conflicts. Moreover, Perkins Gilman sees androcentricity also at play in conceptions of science and industry that paint an incomplete (or even distorted) picture of their desirable, or even possible, task or achievements. Perkins Gilman holds that this is especially true of the economy and as such, the labour market. She emphasizes that the “malign features of our industrial life are distinctly androcentric”⁴² insofar as the economy is driven by competition and profit-orientation rather than supply and care. In her view, the antagonistic orientation of the economy has proven highly inefficient in the allocation of resources:

We find people living too thickly for health and comfort in some places, and too thinly in others; we find most people working too hard and too long at honest labour; some people working with damaging intensity at dishonest labour; and a few wretched paupers among the rich and poor, degenerate idlers who do not work at all.⁴³

Perkins Gilman asserts that the laws of supply and demand and even the establishment of something like a labour market stem from an androcentric world view: “Our current teachings in the infant science of Political Economy are naively masculine. They assume as unquestionable that ‘the economic man’ will never do anything unless he has to.”⁴⁴

The androcentricity of economics has long been established.⁴⁵ It also features in economist’s Gary S. Becker’s anticipation that women’s status will eventually increase in traditional societies since they have become scarce due to sex-selective abortion. He claims that “the value of girls as wives and girlfriends, and in other ways, rises because they are scarcer,” whereas “the value of husbands and boyfriends tends to fall.”⁴⁶

However, Becker’s argument makes sense only if women are reduced to their biological function, the only function in which they differ from men. In this respect, it is the value of women’s reproductive capability that increases, not the value of women *per se*. It is this exaggerated valuation of reproductive capability that intensifies the suppression of women. Due to the over-accentuation of one function, all other “functions” of woman (as a social rather than a biological being) fade into the background. In Gilead, fertility is such a scarce capability that it becomes the only aspect perceived about women. Men focus on woman’s only capacity that he lacks and therefore seeks to seize and control. That the valuation of a person’s biological function is not synonymous with the valuation of that person as such shows in the poor social status of the Handmaids: they hold a lower rank than the infertile wives of Gilead’s Commanders not despite but precisely *because* of their fertility – it is the only thing they are being valued for. Their poor status is the inevitable result of the androcentric point of view from which we continue to structure, interpret, and organize the social world. The fact that it was a woman, Serena Joy, who provided the ideological underpinning for Gilead’s handmaid system only demonstrates that the androcentric view has become so pervasive that people fail to ponder its origins, let alone its appropriateness: “So general, so unbroken, has been this condition, that to mention it arouses no more remark than the statement of a natural law.”⁴⁷

⁴¹ Ibid., 223. Emphasis in the text.

⁴² Ibid., 234.

⁴³ Ibid., 230.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 235f.

⁴⁵ See especially Elson, “Gender Awareness;” Ferber and Nelson, *Beyond Economic Man*; and Kuiper and Sap, *Out of the Margin*.

⁴⁶ Becker and Posner, *Uncommon Sense*, 33.

⁴⁷ Perkins Gilman, *The Man-Made World*, 17.

4 What's wrong with surrogate motherhood?

The aim of the past sections was to establish that (1) social and economic institutions are the result of power struggles, and (2) these institutions and the way we think about them are deeply gendered because of male dominance. In this section, I want to build on these results to demonstrate how *The Handmaid's Tale* gives validity to the asymmetry thesis concerning markets in women's reproductive labour. Since Atwood's novel is essentially "an engagement with the backlash against women's reproductive rights that gained momentum in the US and Canada in the early 1980s,"⁴⁸ it comes as no surprise that it has also been linked repeatedly to ethical issues surrounding commercial surrogacy/contract pregnancy.⁴⁹ I aim to show that *The Handmaid's Tale's* recent TV-adaptation buys into similar tropes, yet accomplishes something new. Whereas the novel problematizes surrogacy *per se*, the series offers a more nuanced approach to the issue of contract pregnancy in providing a complex examination of the asymmetry thesis by means of some of its TV-characters.

According to the asymmetry thesis, markets in women's reproductive labour ought to be treated differently than markets in other forms of human labour.⁵⁰ Specifically, proponents of the asymmetry thesis claim that "treating reproductive labour as a commodity, as something subject to the supply-and-demand principles that govern economic markets, is worse than treating other types of human labour as commodities."⁵¹ This is of course the central idea of both the novel and the TV-series – it's precisely Gilead's surrogate mothers that continue to shock readers and viewers, not its Marthas or even Jezebels. Yet I believe that the series does more than "just" shock its viewers. It encourages a collective inquiry on part of viewers into why we find the institution of handmaids, which is essentially about surrogate motherhood, so objectionable.⁵² Specifically, *The Handmaid's Tale* alerts its viewers to two issues: first, it illustrates the gendered foundations of our society and economy, and second, it elaborates on the problems surrounding surrogacy that stem precisely from these gendered foundations. Nevertheless, this message is well hidden. Even though Gilead's gendered social and economic foundations build the necessary framework of the whole plot, they become increasingly blurred. They are being overshadowed by characters who each represent a different argument for the asymmetry thesis. Their highly dramatized storylines tend to make the viewer oblivious of the background conditions against which they develop – the message being that gender inequality is so pervasive that we fail to spot it.

In the following, I will discuss three of the show's characters that each exemplify a different stance towards the asymmetry thesis for markets in women's reproductive labour: Janine, Moira, and Ofglen. Janine and Moira represent an essentialist argument for the asymmetry thesis by highlighting either the corrupting effects of contract pregnancy on motherhood (Janine) or the naturalistic properties of reproductive labour (Moira). The case of Ofglen suggests that contract pregnancy is not different from other forms of human labour, and can even have empowering effects. All three examples encourage viewers to critically reflect on the implications of contract pregnancy.

⁴⁸ Latimer, "Popular Culture and Reproductive Politics," 215.

⁴⁹ Levaque, "Margaret Atwood and Assisted Reproduction;" Matthews, "Gender, Ontology, and the Power of Patriarchy;" and Miceli, "Religion, Gender Inequality, and Surrogate Motherhood." Here and in the following, I use the terms "contract pregnancy" and "surrogacy" interchangeably.

⁵⁰ Satz, *Why Some Things Should Not be for Sale*, 115.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² One might object here that I'm putting Gilead's handmaid system on a level with voluntary surrogacy. However, mark that the novel itself insinuates a genuine contractual relationship between Gilead and its Handmaids. In chapter 16, Offred says about the Ceremony that "rape [does not] cover it: nothing goes on here that I haven't signed up for" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 126). Besides, my aim is to call into question the very idea that surrogacy can be fully voluntary given the gendered foundations of our social and economic institutions. *The Handmaid's Tale* (both the novel and the TV-series) simply exaggerates to make a case. Cf. Di Minico's argument that "dystopia can help us spot the symptoms of a sick society" (Di Minico, "Spatial and Psychological Domination," 13) and Stein's observation that *The Handmaid's Tale* belongs to a genre "which addresses its exaggerated version of present evils ... and, by this means, hopes to bring about social and political change" (Stein, "Margaret Atwood's Modest Proposal," 59).

4.1 Motherhood corrupted?

One argument in support of the asymmetry thesis for markets in women's reproductive labour is that contract pregnancy has a corrupting effect on the mother–child bond. On this interpretation, the asymmetry thesis is valid insofar as the relationship between a mother and her foetus/child is not the same as that between a worker and her product, especially in consideration of the long duration of pregnancy and the experience of childbirth. In the light of these singular characteristics, philosopher Elizabeth Anderson has argued that a woman who sells her reproductive labour becomes alienated from her “normal” and justified emotions.⁵³ Moreover, the venality of reproductive labour reinforces patriarchal views of pregnant women as mere incubators of men's genetic material, which ignore women's specific gestational labour.⁵⁴ This attitude features very prominently in *The Handmaid's Tale*: Offred has internalized Gilead's official credo that “we're two-legged wombs,”⁵⁵ and Aunt Lydia frequently compares the handmaids to flowers “waiting to be seeded.”⁵⁶ Both figures of speech buy into the idea that women are mere incubators; a view that is further encouraged by the fact that it's the women that need to be replaced in case a couple fails to have children: The handmaids are framed as necessary substitutes for the barren wives of the Commanders.⁵⁷ In Gilead, infertility is entirely a women's problem, as the viewer learns from Offred's voice-over reaction to the comment of her gynaecologist that “Waterford's probably sterile”: “Sterile. That's a forbidden word. There's no such thing as a sterile man anymore. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren.”⁵⁸ In the light of Waterford's infertility, Offred's gynaecologist suggests that he impregnates her and underlines “[i]t could be the only way for you. If Waterford can't get you pregnant, they won't blame him. It'll be your fault.” This patriarchal conviction implies that a handmaid that cannot get pregnant simply fails to provide a healthy environment for a man's faultless genetic material.

However, this devaluation of women's gestational labour is just one aspect of the “corruption-of-motherhood” thesis. The other, as before mentioned, touches on the effects of contract pregnancy on the bond between a mother and her foetus/baby. This aspect is at the core of one of the most disturbing storylines of *The Handmaid's Tale*: The one about “[o]ne-eyed bat-shit-crazy Janine”⁵⁹ alias Ofwarren and her baby Charlotte/Angela she gives birth to in the second episode of season 1.⁶⁰ This episode contrasts the “real” labour Janine undergoes with the “as if”-ceremony of the Wives: Mrs. Putnam and her friends act as if she were in labour just like her surrogate mother. In what seems like a variation of the “Ceremony” the handmaids have to endure every month, the intended mother⁶¹ even takes place behind her handmaid as she delivers, and continues to act as if she were in labour, too. This suggests that the motherhood of the Wives is essentially fake, and that motherhood isn't something you can simply decide to take up or re-live. Rather, biology is key.⁶² This is emphasized further by Janine's reaction after delivery: being denied the possibility to hold her child, she starts to cry when it is given to the intended mother, who immediately

⁵³ Anderson, “Is Women's Labor a Commodity?,” 81.

⁵⁴ Cf. Satz, *Why Some Thing Should Not be for Sale*, 121, footnote 19. Satz refers to several US Court rulings that denied surrogate mothers custody on the ground that they are “gestational homes” rather than “mothers.” The idea that women's contribution to human reproduction is limited to providing a “home” for male semen dates back to Aristotle.

⁵⁵ *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 2, “Birth Day.”

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, episode 4, “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.” In episode 9 of season 1, “The Bridge,” Aunt Lydia tells Janine to go to her new posting with Commander Daniel Monroe “like an open flower.”

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, episode 1, “Offred.”

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, episode 4, “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.”

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, episode 2, “Birth Day.”

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ I borrow this term from actual terminology used to refer to those who engage a surrogate mother: the intended parents. See Harrison, *Brown Bodies, White Babies*, 2.

⁶² This reading is encouraged by Naomi Putnam's inability to soothe “her” baby, see *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 9, “The Bridge.” It is being carried further in season 2, when baby Angela/Charlotte suffers from a mysterious illness and recovers only after her biological mother, Janine, has been fetched to the hospital. See *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 2, episode 8, “Women's Work.”

names the child “Angela.” Neither she nor the other wives pay any attention to the devastated Janine, who is being consoled by the other handmaids and Aunt Lydia, who have been present at birth as well.

A telling scene in the following episode suggests that the Wives’ arrogation is ultimately self-destructive: After being asked about an injury at her hand, Naomi Putnam tells the other Wives: “Angela had finished her breakfast, and I was picking her up. And that girl, that ungrateful girl, she snapped at me.”⁶³ The unbelieving “She bit you?” by one of her friends is met with a casual “You know how they get” from Naomi, which suggests that such incidents are pretty common – the message being that biological motherhood cannot be contained. This thought is even more forcefully played out in one of the closing episodes of the first season where Janine has abducted that child and threatens to kill herself and her baby. Offred is fetched to prevent Janine from jumping into the freezing river with her child. She succeeds by appealing to Janine’s responsibility as a mother: “Janine, you have to do what’s best for your daughter now. You have to give her the chance to grow up.”⁶⁴

This storyline gains much of its persuasive power from its appeal to traditional conceptions of motherhood (one that might even be shared by some viewers and hence lead to an even stronger engagement on their part with Janine). According to such traditional views, pregnancy and childbirth give rise to a maternal “instinct” and a sacrosanct bonding between mother and child that are almost impossible to overcome, let alone regulate.⁶⁵ Proponents of this view hold the asymmetry to be valid because contract pregnancy is inconsistent with what they consider the “natural” sentiments that come with motherhood. But as Debra Satz has convincingly argued, such perspective faces a serious challenge: “Indeed there is a dilemma for those who wish to use the mother-foetus bond to condemn pregnancy contracts while endorsing a woman’s right to choose an abortion. They must hold that it is acceptable to abort a foetus but not to sell it.”⁶⁶ That a society as traditional as Gilead has opted for the reverse (since it is acceptable for handmaids to “sell” a foetus for board and lodging, but not to abort it) highlights the extent to which the “corruption-of-motherhood” thesis relies on wishful cultural preconceptions rather than any genuine concern for the well-being of women.

4.1.1 The essentialist thesis of reproductive labour

The thesis that is exemplified by Janine is closely related to the one represented by Moira, Offred’s friend from college. In one of Offred’s flashbacks in season 2, Moira confides to June that she has decided to become a surrogate to pay off her student loan. June is worried that Moira “might get attached to that little fucker,” which Moira dismisses with forced casualness: “You can worry about that, and I will worry about my giant pile of money.”⁶⁷ Yet as her pregnancy advances, it becomes increasingly clear that Moira tries hard to distance herself emotionally from her foetus. Despite June’s encouragement and her gynaecologist’s repeated proposal, Moira declines to have an ultrasound picture of her “little alien.”⁶⁸ When the baby is eventually handed over to the intended parents, a close-up of Moira, who watches from a distance, reveals that she is clearly struggling. Similar to the case of Janine discussed above, the show conveys that pregnancy and childbirth establish a special bond between mother and child that can hardly be suppressed. Moreover, it is even suggested that the baby itself senses such biological connection, as Moira’s baby son starts crying as soon as he is handed over to the doctor who will take him to the intended parents.⁶⁹

The idea that biological motherhood creates an exceptionally strong connection surfaces time and again in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and despite changing circumstances: Moira opted for surrogate motherhood

⁶³ Ibid., episode 3, “Late.”

⁶⁴ Ibid., episode 9, “The Bridge.”

⁶⁵ Cf. Satz, *Why Some Things Should Not be for Sale*, 122.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ *The Handmaid’s Tale*, season 2, episode 7, “After.”

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

well before the Sons of Jacob have seized power, i.e. her decision passes as a voluntary one. However, things are different when it comes to Janine and the other Handmaids, who all deliver children that are essentially the result of rape. Nevertheless, the series continuously buys into essentialist assumptions about motherhood. In the episode where Gilead welcomes a Mexican trade delegation that I choose as the starting point of my analysis, the regime showcases its “children of Gilead” at a festive banquet. The contentment and pride on part of the Commanders and their Wives and the looks of surprise and joy on the faces of the Mexican delegates is contrasted with the reactions of the present Handmaids: their facial expressions convey sadness and grief when they view the children being paraded across the banquet hall. The changing shots between the faces of the Handmaids and single children suggest that the Handmaids look for family resemblance to spot “their” offspring.⁷⁰ The viewer hence gets the impression that women bond with their children regardless of the precise circumstances of conception and even whether they genuinely wanted children. Probably meant to highlight the inhumanity of Gilead’s handmaid system, the series’ emphasis on the strength of “maternal” feelings nonetheless carries the troubling message that women *always* bond with their foetuses, even if they result from rape. The series’ condemnation of Gilead’s patriarchy thereby builds on arguments that are patriarchal themselves. In Debra Satz’s words, “[a]ssumptions of ‘normal’ maternal bonding may reinforce traditional views of the family and a woman’s proper role within it.”⁷¹ It is therefore unfeasible to sustain the asymmetry thesis on the grounds of mothers’ “natural” feelings.

4.2 Ofglen, or: How demeaning is reproductive labour, really?

But maybe the asymmetry thesis simply cannot be sustained? Maybe our reservations about surrogacy are unfounded? This idea comes up in a telling scene from episode 5 of *The Handmaid's Tale*: Offred’s new shopping companion rebukes her for having been overly familiar with the convicted “gender traitor” Ofsteven. She warns Offred: “I’m not going to let you mess this up for me.” When Offred retorts “This isn’t messed up?,” Ofglen gives her (and the viewers) a different perspective on Gilead’s handmaid system:

You’re cute. You used to do yoga classes ... Spinning or something ... Before? And your man liked to cook? ... You guys had a first floor walk-up down Back Bay, with a garden. ... I used to get fucked behind a dumpster just so I could buy a sixth of Oxy and a Happy Meal. I’m clean now. I’ve got a safe place to sleep every night and I have people who are nice to me.⁷²

This scene is important insofar as it raises the issue of class: Ofglen’s mock deliberations about June’s socio-economic background suggest that middle-class women might consider the current situation debasing, but from the perspective of a former prostitute/drug addict, the opportunity to work as a handmaid is a big improvement. The class issue features also very prominently in philosophical debates on surrogacy, with some thinkers objecting to surrogacy precisely because it’s usually women from socio-economically weak backgrounds that opt for surrogacy,⁷³ whereas others point out that a well-meant ban of surrogacy would merely backfire insofar as potential surrogates might be compelled to do other things that are even more exploitative, or even dangerous.⁷⁴ Since beggars can’t be choosers, and not all women can find employment as book editors or lecturers,⁷⁵ why foreclose a valued employment opportunity for the less fortunate? The answer to this lies in Ofglen’s closing sentences that tell us what she appreciates her new post for: She has “a safe place to sleep every night and ... people who are nice to” her.⁷⁶ But although Ofglen’s assessment is

⁷⁰ Ibid., season 1, episode 6, “A Woman’s Place.”

⁷¹ Satz, *Why Some Things Should Not be for Sale*, 122.

⁷² *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 5, “Faithful.”

⁷³ Cf. Parks, “Care Ethics and the Global Practice of Commercial Surrogacy.”

⁷⁴ Cf. Wilkinson, “The Exploitation Argument Against Commercial Surrogacy.”

⁷⁵ These were the occupations of June/Offred and Emily/Ofglen 1/Ofsteven, respectively, before Gilead was established. Cf. *The Handmaid's Tale*, season 1, episode 2, “Birth Day.”

⁷⁶ Ibid., episode 5, “Faithful.”

certainly rational, it still appears untenable, as Offred's reaction suggests (and since Offred's the main character and we experience Gilead mainly through her eyes, it's clear whose perspective we are expected to endorse). The exchange between the two women indicates that there are things like "indecent" employment and illegitimate choices; women should not be so economically vulnerable that they consider the posting as a handmaid a blessing. But what precisely makes the commodification of women's reproductive labour more problematic than other forms of labour? Why do Gilead's handmaids appear more offensive than its Marthas, women whose confinement to domestic service relies on similarly traditional views about "a woman's place"?

I think that's because handmaids, or surrogate mothers, "trade" their biological capacities rather than their genuine labour force. Speaking with Perkins Gilman, they make economic use (or rather, *are forced* to make economic use) of precisely those capabilities on whose basis they are being "othered" and devalued by the dominant male sex. This is why the handmaids are at the lower end of the social stratum even though their fertility has become a highly valued commodity: their work is framed as *nothing but* women's work, no matter how essential it might be. Woman continues to be assessed from a male perspective that exaggerates sex differences to establish itself as normative.

Debra Satz has observed that "[m]arkets in women's reproductive labour are troubling to the extent that they reinforce gender hierarchies."⁷⁷ It is because of our deeply gendered society that the asymmetry thesis concerning markets in women's reproductive labour should be sustained. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with contract pregnancy. As Ofglen's distressing past indicates, it can even be a valued alternative to other, more harmful forms of employment. But the problem with contract pregnancy is that "the body that is controlled belongs to a woman, in a society that historically has subordinated women's interests to those of men, primarily through its control over women's sexuality and reproduction."⁷⁸

5 Conclusion

This article has argued that *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a careful examination of the asymmetry thesis concerning markets in reproductive labour. The starting point of my inquiry was the low social status of the handmaids, which seems at odds with the rare and hence highly valued "commodity" they possess, their fertility. I have detailed that *The Handmaid's Tale* dwells on the correlation between a woman's social and economic status, and thereby illustrates that markets are socially and culturally embedded. I built on the work of developmental economists Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson and philosopher Charlotte Perkins Gilman's account of androcentricity to show (1) that a society's social and economic institutions are the result of power struggles, and (2) that these institutions are deeply gendered – arguments I believe are also developed in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

This TV-series illustrates the gendered foundations of our society and economy and elaborates on the problems surrounding surrogacy that stem precisely from these gendered foundations. I therefore read this series as a powerful defence of the asymmetry thesis on the grounds that the commodification of women's reproductive labour sustains and reproduces the existing, pervasive gender inequality.

Conflict of interest: Author states no conflict of interest.

⁷⁷ Satz, *Why Some Things Should Not be for Sale*, 117.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

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