
As I was writing this review, James Caan, the star of the BBC television show *Dragons’ Den*, reportedly offered to buy a Pakistani baby girl from her parents for 100,000 rupees (£742).1 The family lived in a village devastated by flooding, and Caan suggested that his (childless) brother would be able to provide the best possible life for her. Regardless of his motivation, Mr Caan’s offer contravened international law; babies cannot be bought and sold on the open market. *Baby Markets* is not about such illegal transactions, but rather about the interplay between commerce, law, politics and the acquisition of children by means other than traditional conception through sexual intercourse. As such, the less-catchy sub-heading, *Money and the New Politics of Creating Families*, is more reflective of the content of this multi-authored book.

Raising a family is no longer the preserve of the fertile couple; infertile heterosexual couples, as well as singles and couples of either gender or sexual orientation, also may now engage in creating a family. They may do so through adoption, surrogacy or artificial reproductive technologies including the use of donor eggs, sperm or embryos. This book, largely based on practices in the United States (US), asserts that in all of these instances money changes hands, and examines the ways that financial interests, economic processes and market dynamics influence how babies and children come to be acquired through adoption or non-intimate reproduction. The fact that *Baby Markets* predominantly deals with American procedures should not deter the European reader. In the first instance there is some material relating to international law, and also of relevance are the chapters dealing with transnational adoption (5 and 7). In addition, an analysis of how politics and economics interact with reproductive matters is surely germane to much of contemporary debate on this issue, regardless of geographical location.

The first chapter concerns adoption, and takes as its starting point Landes’ and Posner’s seminal and controversial article from 1978, *The Economics of the Baby Shortage*.2 This paper argued that US public policy opposed to the sale of babies had “created a baby shortage (and, as a result, a black market) by preventing a free market from equilibrating the demand for and supply of babies for adoption” and “a glut of unadopted children maintained in foster homes at public expense”. While these two outcomes might appear contrary to each other, the shortage was in white babies, the ‘glut’ was of black babies and older children, particularly if

they were “physically or mentally handicapped”. The paper was widely criticised by commentators who insisted that economic concerns had no place in an altruistic process like adoption. But, as Michele Bratcher Goodwin (and Mary Hansen and Daniel Pollack (chapter 9)) cogently illustrates, money matters. Most prospective adopting parents are white and relatively wealthy. They want to adopt white babies (p8), and appear willing to pay up to $100,000 to do so, although placement fees are typically in the range of $10,000-40,000 (p49). This is not a direct payment to the child’s mother, but rather transactional costs incurred through the use of intermediaries. Often a single charge is levied which covers agency salaries and fees, medical expenses for the birth mother, and transportation costs. Agency charges typically include application, home-study and programme fees. The transactional cost involved in adopting a black baby is rather less (approximately $4,000), even though black babies take longer to place with adoptive parents. The fee differential is hard to explain away in any terms other than market forces; individuals that express an aesthetic preference for a scarce resource have to pay more to acquire it. A study published by the National Center for Health Statistics indicated that while 86.4% of black women would accept a white child, only 72.5% of white women would accept a black child, and most would prefer a white child with profound disability to a healthy black child. In adoption, the politics of race also matters.

Although over half a million children are in foster care in the US, a quarter of whom are eligible for adoption, many of these are over five years old and/or black and/or have special needs.3 Thus, many Americans have chosen to adopt abroad rather than at home, despite the fact that older, minority or special needs children can be adopted for anything from zero to $2,500 because of state or federal aid. The costs of transnational adoptions are substantial. Following the fall of the Ceausescu regime in Romania, aid agencies rushed in to help deal with the appalling circumstances in that country’s orphanages. Adoption agencies quickly followed, and the transactional costs for adopting a Romanian child multiplied 5-6 fold within a year.4 Now, an international adoption may cost up to $30,000 dollars (p. 8). Adoption agencies within the US are largely unregulated, and provide a service (usually for profit) in an environment where demand outstrips supply. Few (American) states place limitations on the fees and expenses charged to prospective parents. Whether their activities can accurately be described as a market or not depends on the definitional terms applied. What is undoubted is that substantial sums of money change hands, and the amounts involved are proportional to the gender, race and genetic preferences of the prospective parents.

Given that there is a profit to be made, adoption abuses are likely to occur. Allegations of frank baby buying and kidnapping have lead to the closing down

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4) Ibid.