

The Nation.

Fusion Biopolitics

In the next few weeks the Senate will hold hearings and vote on legislation that would outlaw the cloning of human embryos, either for the purpose of medical experimentation or the birth of a human being. The House already passed a similar bill in July. Until now the cloning debate has been viewed in Washington and the media as a classic struggle pitting social conservatives, antiabortion activists and the Catholic Church against the scientific community and progressive forces, with Republicans lined up on one side and Democrats on the other. Below the surface, however, another reality is beginning to take shape. Although reluctant to acknowledge it, some social conservatives and some left activists find common ground on the cloning issue [see Ralph Brave, "Governing the Genome," December 10, 2001]. An example of this convergence is a statement issued by sixty-seven prominent left progressives on January 23 supporting legislation to outlaw the cloning of human embryos.

The progressives backing this legislation worry that the market for human eggs that would be created by such research will provide unethical incentives for women to undergo health-threatening hormone treatment and surgery. They are also concerned about the increasing bioindustrialization of life by the scientific community and life science companies and are shocked that clonal human embryos have been patented and declared to be human inventions. On the other hand, few, if any, on the left oppose research on adult stem cells, which can be taken from people after birth and which have proved promising in animal studies and clinical trials. This approach poses none of the ethical, social or economic risks of strategies using embryo stem cells.

What about cloning a human being? Most members of Congress on both sides of the aisle would oppose a clonal birth. But for many in Congress, and in the scientific community and the biotech industry as well, opposition is solely based on the fact that the cloning technique is still unsafe and could pose a risk of producing a malformed baby. Far fewer members of either party would be against cloning a human baby were the procedure to become safe and reliable. After all, argue proponents, if an infertile couple desires to pass on their genetic inheritance by producing clones of one or both partners, shouldn't they be able to exercise their right of choice in the newly emerging biotech marketplace? Moreover, we are told not to be overly concerned, because even though the clone will have the exact same genetic makeup as the original, it will develop differently because its social and envi-

ronmental context will be different from that of the donor.

What unites social conservatives and progressives on cloning issues is their commitment to the intrinsic value of life and their opposition to what they perceive to be a purely utilitarian perspective on biotech issues. To be sure, the social conservatives and left activists differ in the "life issues" they embrace and champion. The former crusade for what they regard as the rights of the unborn and family values and rail against infanticide, euthanasia and pornography. The latter speak out on behalf of the poor, women, abused children, fellow animals and the global environment. Both groups come together in opposition to cloning—but for different reasons.

Many on the left argue that with cloning the new progeny become the ultimate shopping experience—designed in advance, produced to specification and purchased in the biological marketplace. Cloning is, first and foremost, an act of production, not creation. Using the new biotechnologies, a living being is produced with the same degree of engineering as we have come to expect on an assembly line. For the first time in the history of our species, we can dictate, in advance, the final genetic constitution of the offspring. The child is no longer a unique creation—one of a kind—but rather an engineered reproduction.

The left also warns that cloning opens the way to a commercial eugenics civilization. Already life science companies have leaped ahead of the political game being played out in Congress and the media by patenting human embryos and stem cells, giving them upfront ownership and control of a new form of reproductive commerce, with frightening implications for the future of society. Many on the left worry that human cloning, embryonic stem cell research and, soon, designer babies, lay the groundwork for a new form of biocolonialism, in which global life science companies become the ultimate arbiters of the evolutionary process itself.

Neither the social conservatives nor the left activists are entirely comfortable with the new alliance, and they will continue to disagree in many areas. But on biotech issues both of these groups will increasingly break ranks with their traditional political affiliations—the social conservatives with market libertarians and the left activists with social democratic parties.

The biotech era will bring with it a very different constellation of political visions and social forces just as the industrial era did. The current debate over cloning human embryos and stem cell research is already loosening the old alliances and categories. It is just the beginning of the new biopolitics.

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