

GERMAN WOMEN SAY 'NO' TO REPRODUCTIVE AND GENETIC TECHNOLOGIES

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We do not want a discussion of 'chances and risks'; we do not want to consider whether we should live with 'a minor evil'. We think 'the evil' is already far too big! . . . We see our best defense in a massive public and radical REJECTION of these technologies.

These were the words of Dr. Beate Zimmermann, physician and member of the Gene-Archive in Essen and one of the Congress organisers, at the Opening Plenary Session of the *2nd German Congress 'Women Against Reproductive and Genetic Engineering'* which took place in Frankfurt, 28–30 October 1988. Her words were greeted with strong applause. They marked the beginning of an exciting 3 days at which over 2500 women discussed the impact of reproductive and genetic engineering on women's lives in Germany and internationally and devised strategies for resistance. There was no libertarian rhetoric about 'if women would control these technologies they would be OK . . .'; no wishy-washy statements about 'but they give women new choices. . .'. The Congress participants were very clear in their assessment that these technologies *in their entirety* posit a threat to *all* women's well being—and indeed lives—already at present but even more so in the future. The chilling evidence about the present application of these technologies and plans for their further developments provided by speakers from Germany as well as Brazil, India, the USA, Namibia, Australia and many European countries

reinforced the determination among the conference participants to fundamentally and radically oppose reproductive and genetic technology.

The Congress was sponsored by the Feminist Social Science Association, Cologne and the Women's Feminist Health Centre, Frankfurt and organised by 'Women against Reproductive and Genetic Technologies', Marburg University; Autonomous Lesbians' and Women's Committee, Frankfurt University; West German FINRRAGE; the Women's Centre, Bochum; and Women from the Gene Archive, Essen. It was financially supported by (among others) the Green Party in the German Parliament as well as the Green Executive Committee; the Feminist Interdisciplinary Institute, Frankfurt; the 14th Meeting of Women in Natural Science and Technology; and the Ecology Funds of the States of Hessen and North Rhine Westphalia.

The German women must be congratulated for their awesome organisation: there were 52 workshops with approximately 100 speakers and, as far as I could see and hear, they started on time and there was even space to add new ones. There was organised evening entertainment: a humorous, one-woman show on 'surrogate motherhood' by Gilla Craemer; there were nice vegetarian meals including homemade cakes(!); a two woman team (they should be given a medal) who successfully organised mainly private accommodation for the large number of women; a Conference Bureau where you could not only get fresh coffee

but friendly smiles and women ready to help with whatever was needed. Disasters did not seem to happen (or if they did, the organisers certainly knew how to cope). Even the newspaper and radio journalists (women only) seemed content and hurried around getting as many interviews as possible. The only ones who did not seem to get their act together was German TV who did not attend the final Press Conference because, as they informed the organisers, they could not come up with an all-women team!

The event successfully continued the tradition of the historic 1985 Congress where 2000 women (expected were 500) gathered in Bonn for the 1st Congress 'Women against Gene-and Reproductive Technologies'. In the tradition of the first meeting, the organisers emphasized the *international* nature of gene and reproductive technology: its development as well as its application. As they say in the conference reader:

The new reproductive techniques and genetic engineering hurt and concern women all over the world . . . To avoid taking our views which originate in a privileged reality as the criterion, we have invited women from other countries, especially from Asia, Africa and Latin America. The exchange with these women is indispensable because we can only find a common perspective by looking at their realities, views and positions.

This commitment to an internationalist sisterhood was clearly reflected in the care and concern with which women from abroad and especially women who did not speak German were treated. Conference materials—including a reader with selected texts—had been translated into English (although the considerable Spanish delegation did not appreciate this too much). A host of volunteer translators went with the women to the sessions and, as far as I know, provided excellent one-to-one woman translation.

The need for a *2nd German Congress of Women Against Reproductive and Genetic Technologies* had become particularly pressing following the simultaneous raids on over 30 groups and institutions (including strip searches and the confiscation of library material) conducted by the BKA (the Bundeskriminalamt, the federal investigation bureau roughly equivalent to the US FBI)—and the arrest of two women—Ulla Penselin and Ingrid Strobl—in December 1987 (see the reports by the women from the Gene Archive Essen in *RAGE* 1(1) and by Gena Corea in *RAGE* 1(2)). These police investigations were carried out under § 129a—a paragraph concerned with the security of all citizens. Under it, individuals and groups who are suspected of being part of 'terrorist organisations' can be searched and arrested without a warrant. In particular two organisations were targeted: *Die Rote Zora* (the Red Zora) a women's organisation which had previously claimed responsibility for damaging unoccupied research premises of biotechnology companies and *Die Revolutionäre Zellen* (the Revolutionary Cells) a mixed group involved in attacks on *Lufthansa* to strike against sex tourism and the deportation of women seeking asylum in Germany. To get a grasp on these groups' activities, a new term has been created, it is 'anschlagsrelevant' by which is meant anything—theme or action—which, potentially, might lead to or is connected with what is called 'a terrorist act'. The term 'anschlagsrelevant' as it is interpreted by the BKA seems endlessly adaptable; for example it was the label put on the work of the women from the gene archive. Put differently, the collecting, cataloguing and distributing of basic information, as well as critical analyses of developments in gene and reproductive technologies, prenatal diagnosis and the rapidly increasing services of genetic counselling (humangenetische Beratungsstellen) have been given official status as being of

concern to the state security. 'Anschlagsrelevant', too, were Ulla Penselin's meetings with other women critics of gene and reproductive technology as well as international population policies at a women's cafe and—lo and behold—in a *backroom* of that cafe! The label 'anschlagsrelevant—so the message from the German authorities—seems to be pertinent to every critical meeting, group, speech, newspaper article, book review, TV and radio report that aims at highlighting the fascist ideology of control and dominance underlying the new technologies and, specifically, its dangers for women. Ironically, this, as some German feminists commented, for the first time made the women's movement 'official' as a critical mass to be reckoned with and the various house searches and arrests were an attempt to intimidate women in the hope that some might stop being critical in public for fear of being associated with terrorists'.

The 2nd Congress was the joint feminist answer to these intimidations. Clearly they had backfired; radical critics were *not* to be shut down by attempts to criminalise them. A broad spectrum of concerned women had come together to defy these technologies and their makers: not least to point to the huge commercial interest at stake. Among the speakers were academics, women's health activists, lawyers and medical doctors, most of whom had been involved with women's groups against gene and reproductive technology since the 1st Congress in 1985. Many of the speakers from abroad including Ana Regina Gomes dos Reis from Brazil, Gena Corea from the USA, Deborah Steinberg and Jalna Hanmer from the UK, Gundula Kayser from Spain and the Antigena women from Switzerland have also been involved in FINRRAGE (The Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering) since its beginnings in 1984.

It was particularly heartwarming to see

that a good half of the participants were women in their early 20s. They enthusiastically greeted Ulla Penselin who had been released from jail in August without a shred of evidence against her when she told of her experience of three months in solitary confinement at the Opening Plenary and demanded—as the whole Congress did repeatedly—*Treiheit für Ingrid* (free Ingrid), the Austrian writer and ex-EMMA journalist who is still in jail. (A piece written by Ingrid against gene and reproductive technology was read after Ulla's talk.) The audience equally enthusiastically endorsed Gena Corea's passionate speech condemning the liberal rhetoric of 'self-determination' and the right to choose' that some feminists, particularly in the USA use to justify the use of the new technologies for women as '*junk liberty*'. Vibhuti Patel from India and Dessa Onesmus from Namibia emphasised that it is crucial for western women to understand that the new reproductive technologies and genetic engineering represent only one side of the coin: the other is the ongoing experimentation to develop new harmful contraceptives on poor women in the so-called Third World often undertaken by the same pharmaceutical companies that also have invested heavily in (human) biotechnology. (Schering, a German but also multinational drug company, was one of the firms frequently mentioned during the Conference.) Patel and Onesmus along with western women repeated that worldwide solidarity among women and resistance against *all* of these technologies is crucial.

Also speaking at the Opening Plenary was Heidrun Kaupen-Haas from the Institute of Medical Sociology in Hamburg who focused on another important Congress theme: the continuation and actuality of eugenic thinking in past Nazi bio-research politics and today's gene and reproductive technology. She and co-researchers Sabine Schleiermacher, Bene Pfeiffer, Gisela Gränig and others are doing

important research to make visible the ideology in state funded research on sex hormones in Germany—and internationally!—before and during the Nazi Regime in which ‘unworthy’ women (like jews and gypsies) were sterilised against their will and experimented upon (often killed) in order to develop techniques to increase fertility so that ‘worthy’ women (of aryan origin) could be more economically used as breeders in the interest of the German Reich. (The topic was also discussed in a workshop by Susan Zimmermann, Austria.) Then and now such research and its practical application is done under the pretense of ‘Helping and Healing’ (Helfen and Heilen) whilst in reality it amounts to ‘Selection and Eradication’ (Auslese and Ausmerze). Then and now it is an *international* phenomenon and it is sobering to learn that long before Hitler’s rise, bio-medical scientists and doctors worldwide took part in sustaining a racial ideology part of which was always their unquestioned assumption that science and medicine were superior arbiters on what was worthy and unworthy life.

The knowledge that these new technologies are *not* in the interests of women individually and as a social group nor of any other people who are not part of what is considered ‘the social norm’ (the able-bodied, white, human male?), but instead are the re-emergence of a fascist eugenic ideology threatening to tighten the control over people’s lives worldwide was the assumed starting point of all discussions at the Congress. German women do not need to be convinced that this is so—they know it; it is close to home—often from their own painful family history. In the workshops, further evidence was compiled to substantiate this theory: women from the Feminist Health Centre Berlin presented a history of eugenic abortion; women from the Gene Forum, Bremen and the Women’s Cripple Group (this is the name they chose) conducted a workshop on the individual and social impact of prenatal diagnosis.

Together with the growing pressure on women to undergo genetic counselling—at least 40 such counselling centres (humangenetische Beratungsstellen) exist in Germany many of which are private—prenatal diagnosis is seen as both the most promising money-spinner in human biotechnology and a convenient instrument to increase social control. Another instrument of potentially enormous social control is the planned ‘Mädchenpass’ proposed by a new branch of gynecology called ‘Kindergynäkologie’ (children’s gynecology which of course means *girls’* gynecology!). The idea is that at age four every girl is given a passbook in which her regular yearly visits to a gynecologist are to be recorded: a perfect strategy to keep a check on girls’ reproductive functions; and an insidious way of letting girls know from a very early age that ‘experts know best’ when it comes to the functions of her own body! (Another workshop questioned to what extent cancer screening amounts to cancer research: done on live women, again supposedly for our own good!)

Congress participants also heard of the project ‘Predictive Medicine’: the European Community’s attempt not to miss the boat and join the US and Japanese race to map the human genome. The proposal (being discussed among community members at the time of this Congress) invites EC countries to agree to an initial injection of 15 Million EC Dollars (the equivalent of US Dollars) between 1989 and 1991 into the research project. The rationale for this work is the identification of ‘severely jeopardised’ people who suffer from genetic diseases in order to, ‘should this be necessary, prevent the passing on of these genetic traits to the following generation’. Shockingly, among the list of ‘common diseases’ which supposedly have a genetic component, are diabetes, cancer, autoimmune deficiencies and ‘severe psychoses’ (from *Prädiktive Medizin; Analyse des menschlichen Genoms; Vorschlag für eine Entscheidung des*

Rates, June 1988: 3). Eugenic thinking and the economic profit hoped for by a rapidly developing assortment of commercial gene probes to be used in conjunction with prenatal tests such as amnio-centesis, chorion villus biopsy and, soon, preimplantation diagnosis (embryo biopsy on either IVF or 'flushed out' embryos), makes it obvious that research into mapping the human genome is accompanied by rapidly spreading concurrent practical applications.

Another cluster of workshops focused on the feminist critique of science and technology. Again Germany is unique in that it is the first country in which the 1988 Annual Meeting of Women in Natural Science and Technology categorically rejected reproductive and genetic engineering as inimical to life (see *RAGE* forthcoming 1989, for the full text of the resolution). The women from the Gene Archive, Essen, talked about people being reduced to 'molecule machines' by the genetic engineers; Jalna Hanmer from Britain spoke about the contribution that the values inherent in feminism can make to a science which is more life-loving; Helga Satzinger from Berlin discussed the definition of life that modern biology takes as its ideology and the detrimental impact this theoretical underpinning has on women's sovereignty with regard to our (reproductive) lives. Importantly, these and other workshops as well as the part-plenaries on the last day of the conference in which speakers from various workshops used the main ideas that had come up in their sessions as a starting point for further discussion, did not stop at a critique of patriarchal science and technology. There was agreement that we need constructive feminist strategies that provide real alternatives to these mechanistic, misogynist concepts of life, specifically reproduction.

One important strategy delineated is to appeal to women ourselves. We have the possibility—and indeed the responsibility many speakers said—to reject these technologies. We need more irreverence

towards the medical profession, specifically gynecologists. In order to do so, however, especially in the case of pregnancy when you are urged to undergo prenatal screening 'for your own good', or, if you have a fertility problem, when you are told that you should try in vitro fertilisation (IVF), visible feminist solidarity is needed to help women overcome the many dilemmas with which we are faced. This includes, for instance, information on the dangerous nature of the drugs used in the IVF procedure both for the women as well as the few children born (as everywhere else in the world IVF is a failed technology in Germany too with a failure rate of over 90 percent). It also includes offering workshops and self-help groups for women with a fertility problem by Feminist Health Centres (this is already happening in Frankfurt and Berlin). It includes relentlessly asking to integrate people with a disability into society instead of segregating them out.

Importantly, it also includes reflection on 'self-determination' and what this concept—the unquestioned basic assumption of women's struggle for women-controlled abortion since the early 70s—*really* means for women. Once more, sociologist Maria Mies must be congratulated for her courage in opening the discussion on this dicey theme in 1987. (At the Congress it was also discussed in workshops by Gerburg Treusch-Dieter, Berlin and Dorothea Brockman, Bremen and in an article in the Congress Reader by the Writers' Collective, Bochum.) According to Mies, the concept of self-determination always implies simultaneous 'other' or 'alien'-determination. This dialectic relationship, one of the mainstays of the bourgeois philosophy of the enlightenment (which, as we know, also produced the mechanistic science against which we fight today), has put women in the position in which we may succumb to believing that 'self-determination' provides us with 'rights' to decide over the fate of parts of our bodies (i.e., a

growing fetus) thus falling *ourselves* into the trap of perceiving our bodies as machines. This is particularly true of women in the west who have often internalised the capitalist rules of the marketplace (the right to a 'healthy' child, whatever that means, is seen as an act of 'self-determination'). Whilst Maria Mies makes it very clear that above all *no one else* (e.g., the state) should be able to use this divide-and-conquer logic to force women to have abortions (or restrict women from having them whatever the dominant ideology), she also asks women to reconsider our own relationship with our bodies: every abortion, as well as every technological intervention (i.e., IVF), says Mies, is an act of violation that a woman undergoing the procedure allows to be committed against herself. To call this self-determination is to internalise the libertarian rhetoric of those who see life (and the production of human life) as a commercial process with 'rights' to be bought (or sold) by both the woman and the supposed 'other': the developing embryo/fetus (see also Maria Mies: 'From the Individual to the Dividual: In the Supermarket of Reproductive Alternatives', *RAGE* 1(3): (1988). Mies concurs with Corea that this supposed 'right to control'—self-determination by another name—is nothing but a 'junk liberty': the (capitalist) industrialisation of reproduction. She asks women to consider that in letting ourselves be dominated by these concepts, we collude with the patriarchal 'dissecters' and exploiters of women and promote an ideology of 'me-ism' (i.e., my right as a white, western, privileged middle-class woman is all that matters). This applies as much to heterosexual women calling the 'right' to have sex 'self-determination' (although it may necessitate an abortion), as to lesbians who demand the 'right' to use the new reproductive technologies to have children without men. (In another workshop participants discussed the dilemma that the desire for a daughter versus the use of sex selection techniques

poses and spoke out against the use of these techniques for lesbians.) Maria Mies and other Congress speakers urged women to develop new concepts of 'untamed living'—this was the term used in the Conference Resolution—by which is meant 'to debate in public, to meet internationally, and to organise'. The Conference Resolution also asked women 'to devise strategies of resistance to think more clearly, to reconsider [existing concepts] more fundamentally, to act more decisively!'

Perhaps because reproductive and genetic engineering is so totally rejected in West Germany in its entirety—spanning the gamut from prenatal diagnosis in all its forms to IVF and embryo research—it is understandable that the group of feminist lawyers at the Conference decided to argue against supporting any laws against these technologies. As in all other countries, pending proposals for laws in Germany do not consider the impact of these technologies on women, but instead are embryo-centered. Furthermore, they are all of a regulatory nature. As Maria Jose Varela Portela and Gundula Kayser reported, Spain has just passed the first such regulatory law anywhere in the world which basically gives free rein to doctors and scientists. German lawyers fear that by endorsing any such laws (or drawing up our alternatives, as some women from the Green Party had done) feminists might end up with an unintended endorsement of the technologies by agreeing to a regulation of its worst excesses. Therefore, so their argument goes, it is better to totally oppose any laws; they say that the present state of 'Rechtsunsicherheit' (meaning legal uncertainty as to what is allowed and what is not) is preferable to regulatory laws. While I can certainly appreciate the many dangers of endorsing regulatory legislation, I cannot quite understand the reluctance to argue for total prohibition at least of IVF and embryo experimentation. It seems to me that it IS possible to

demand that IVF be brought to a halt: why not prohibit any tampering around with (including drug use), extracting, exchanging, or invading of female body parts with regard to reproduction? In other words, the new procedures that are constantly added to the unsuccessful IVF instrumentarium would still be covered by the above broad definition. (Such a ban on IVF currently exists in two cantons [states] in Switzerland although this may be declared unconstitutional.) The argument that such regional bans would only lead to new IVF clinics opening up in other part of the country (or in other countries) does not really hold: firstly, if feminist resistance to those technologies is international (and the presence of many FINRRAGE representatives in Frankfurt speaks to this fact) legislation to prohibit IVF could simultaneously be pursued in many countries. Moreover, as is clearly the case in Victoria, Australia, some mild restrictions on IVF and embryo research (e.g., prohibiting the use of the experimental microinjection technique on women), are a clear source of irritation for the local technodocs: much as they threaten to leave the country most of them obviously like their lucrative local kingdoms and are not very keen to abandon them for foreign shores. According to self-regulatory guidelines advocated by an ethics committee in Germany embryo experimentation is not allowed in Germany now. This means that 'officially' such experimentation is allowed only on 'abnormal' embryos—an elegant way of still being able to continue one's research (and keeping up with the international test-tube clique). Perhaps, because embryo experimentation is by necessity kept rather low key in Germany, its enormous significance in the area of reproductive technology and genetic engineering may not necessarily be obvious. However, in my view to oppose the legal prohibition of IVF is to underestimate the technodocs' crucial need of access to women who undergo IVF. In order to develop further

experimental procedures, specifically embryo screening (and therapy), embryos are needed. But embryos come from mature eggs which in turn come from women undergoing IVF or being hormonally stimulated as egg donors. (This may not be true for very much longer: once the eggs can be matured in vitro—and this may happen tomorrow—any woman's ovary or a slice of it will do.) To maintain IVF clinics—and show demand from women—is crucial to keep reproductive and genetic engineering going. This is why I believe we must try to stop IVF: by appealing to women, by offering them support and self-help groups, by lifting the stigma and taboo from infertility—AND by seeking laws to ban IVF!

Undoubtedly, all these topics will be the subject of heated debate at further conferences in Germany and other European countries (further conferences in Basle, Switzerland and Cologne were announced). At the Closing Plenary, the Congress Resolution reiterated the strong opposition of German women to gene and reproductive technologies and their determination to work towards a different kind of science: one that is woman-affirming. The Resolution also calls on all women nationally and internationally to resist these technologies; to resist the 'liberation' of some western women at the expense of the exploitation of women in the so-called Third World; to find solidarity with other women; to fundamentally question the libertarian rhetoric of individual self-determination. Items added to the Resolution by the Plenary included: the boycott of prenatal diagnosis, the demand for a different education and training of doctors, specifically gynecologists, the closing of institutions that offer genetic counselling; the abolition of § 218 (the paragraph currently restricting abortion); the rejection of proposed embryo protection laws. The Congress ended with a passionate call to *all* women to resist further intimidation through the

criminalization of radical critics of reproductive and gene technology and repeated the national and international demand: Tree Ingrid'.

The Closing Plenary was followed by a Press Conference. Just as this event was coming to an end, a group of about 250 Congress participants who had left earlier to demonstrate in front of the Frankfurt prison symbolically demanding the release of Ingrid Strobl (and other political prisoners; Ingrid in fact is in jail in Munich), were herded back on campus by what can only be called a simultaneously outrageous and ridiculously large police contingent: fidgeting around with big sticks and shields, between 50 and 100 helmeted policemen were running after the shouting and laughing women till they had reached the grounds of Frankfurt University. Sirens were going, there was a helicopter circling and cars sealed off the streets. Local women intimated that this demonstration of police force is now the norm in Germany. To this observer from abroad this incident was scary; it made it very clear that feminists as a political force opposing gene and reproductive technology are taken seriously in Germany and that the bravery and courage of German women deserves admiration and support.

To this day both the 1st and the 2nd German Congress remain unique in their scope and breadth as well as the sheer numbers of women who unequivocally

oppose these technologies: a great sign of hope and courage for those of us who live in countries where we not only have to fight against the technodocs, but also against liberals of all sorts (feminist liberals included) and, above all, against inertia amongst feminists to join us in opposing one—if not the—most dangerous current development in the world at large. I returned from the conference empowered: determined to plough on with our multifaceted resistance, despite the odds.

The Conference Organisers urge all women to send letters of protest about Dr. Ingrid Strobl's continuing detention—it is now over a year—as well as letters of support to Ingrid c/o GEN-ARCHIV, Führichstrasse 15, 4300 Essen 1, West Germany.

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