Sophie Jones

Sara Dubow, *Ourselves Unborn: A History of the Fetus in Modern America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, December 2010), 320 pp. ISBN: 9780195323436, £18.99 hardback.

In 1947, the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry opened its exhibition about human reproduction. Based around a collection of foetal specimens originally shown at the 1933-34 Chicago World's Fair, the post-war exhibition changed the title of the display from 'History of Man' to 'Miracle of Growth'. In 1977 the museum added a disclaimer to the exhibition that read:

> The forty specimens in this exhibit show the stages of human development before birth. They offer a unique look at the journey we all made from a fertilized egg to a complete human being. To the best of our knowledge their survival was prevented by natural causes or accidents. (p. 41)

How did the focus of this display shift from the evolution of the species to the development of the individual? Sara Dubow's *Ourselves Unborn: A History of the Fetus in Modern America* traces such changes in the ways that the figure of the foetus has been interpreted and deployed. Dubow, a historian at Williams College in Massachusetts, draws on legal documents, journalism, popular culture and medical literature to explore America's construction of the unborn from the late nineteenth century to the present day.

To the book's credit, Dubow is at least as interested in modern America as she is in the foetus, which is portrayed less as a mirror reflecting cultural tendencies than as a film through which the nation both creates and projects an image of itself. Dubow writes in the introduction that 'stories about fetuses express individual and collective beliefs about individuality, motherhood, and American society' (p. 9). For instance, the nineteenth-century doctor and anti-abortion campaigner Horatio Storer linked procreation with nationalism, invoking 'the unborn' as the beneficiaries of westward expansion and noting of American women, 'Upon their loins depends the future destiny of our nation' (p. 21). Later, the project of extending rights to the unborn gained rhetorical traction through Cold War notions of democracy, which Dubow suggests positioned the foetus as 'a symbol that could somehow represent particular American commitments to the value of individuality and the protection

of personal rights' during a period in which such claims were powerful ideological currency (p. 59). The first two chapters cover the century during which abortion was illegal in the United States, between the 1870s and the 1970s. The final three chapters deal respectively with foetal personhood, foetal rights and foetal pain as phenomena of the era following *Roe* v. *Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court decision which declared the state could not ban abortions performed before the stage of foetal viability. Dubow exhaustively demonstrates the role of the profit motive in the 1970s emergence of corporate foetal protection policies, which prohibited women of childbearing age from working in environments that could place a potential pregnancy at risk. The well-known story of Kenneth Edelin, the African-American doctor at Boston City Hospital who was indicted for manslaughter after performing a second-trimester abortion in the wake of *Roe*, is illuminated by Dubow's commentary on the racial politics of 1970s Boston.

The breadth of Dubow's project distinguishes its intervention into a substantial body of work on the cultural significance of the foetus, which includes Rosalind Petchesky's 1987 feminist critique 'Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction', Barbara Duden's 1993 history *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn*, and Lynn M. Morgan's 2009 anthropological study *Icons of Life: A Cultural History of Human Embryos*. In her introduction, Dubow differentiates her work from these and other investigations by citing the need for a trans-disciplinary study, sensitive to 'the ways in which these different narratives – legal, political, medical, religious, anthropological, sociological, cultural – intersect and interact with one another' (p. 6). Dubow's story of the foetus begins as the first abortion laws are passed in the late 1800s, and ends in the early 2000s as American women find their right to determine when and how they become parents increasingly insecure. *Ourselves Unborn* closes with the beginning of Barack Obama's presidency, highlighting that the history of the modern foetus is far from over. The book nevertheless posits a vantage point from which modern America and its investment in the unborn can be retrospectively assessed.

The analytical depth and thematic focus of the book's later sections departs from the broad chronological sweep of the opening two chapters, which establish the 1870-1970 period as a historicising ground for contemporary reproductive debates. This approach is fascinating, but leaves the book feeling somewhat uneven. Discussing the nineteenth century conflict between scientists Wilhelm His and Ernst Haeckel over the latter's illustrations of embryos in support of his claim that 'ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny', Dubow draws a

comparison with contemporary questions surrounding abortion, IVF and stem cells. This strategy makes a valuable point about the way a period's cultural preoccupations – debates about evolution in the 19th century and discussions of individual autonomy and choice in the 20th century – shape its approach to the foetus. However, several questions are left unanswered. Why does an argument between two European scientists pertain to a particularly American history of the foetus? What is the international dimension of this narrative? Dubow's examples of contemporary controversies are also revealing: although IVF and stem cell research are mentioned briefly here, it is the abortion question that dominates this inquiry.

While the struggle over abortion rights and access underpins the focus and structure of *Ourselves Unborn*, the book's tone is markedly less polemical than many earlier works in the field. For Dubow, the foetus is necessarily constructed: the challenge is not to replace the pro-life model of the foetus with a model more friendly to reproductive self-determination, but to reveal the agents and forces behind prevailing notions of unborn existence. Since the publication of *Ourselves Unborn*, a growing number of U.S. states have passed laws requiring women to see an ultrasound image of their foetus or listen to its heartbeat before terminating their pregnancies. Such rulings take the foetus to be a static object of knowledge, in need of illumination by the combined forces of law and technology. In this context, Dubow's book is a timely and important reminder that every revelation of the foetus is also a construction, bearing the imprint of preoccupations that extend far beyond the domain commonly defined (and often dismissed) as 'reproductive politics'.