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Book Note**BANKING ON THE BODY: THE MARKET IN BLOOD, MILK,
AND SPERM IN MODERN AMERICA, by Kara W. Swanson¹**

MAYA PEARLSTON

THE MEDICAL HISTORY OF the development of three body banks—milk, blood, and sperm—is chronicled by Kara W. Swanson in *Banking on the Body: The Market in Blood, Milk, and Sperm in Modern America*. The author argues that the socio-political circumstances accompanying the development of each of these body banks has produced a dichotomy that has narrowed our focus of the market in body products to be either “gifts” or “commodities.” Swanson asserts that the negative conceptualization of body banks as commercial enterprises must be overcome as human organ transplantation advances and accomplishes new feats.

In chapter one, Swanson provides a brief history of the collection of human body products as the need for these products increased following the disembodiment of milk and blood. The author examines the emergence of the “heroic and respectable”² professional donor—female milk donors and male blood donors—who became a central figure in body product exchange. As the use of paid donors became increasingly commonplace, concern shifted to ensuring sufficient funding rather than the procurement of product.

Chapter two details the establishment of the first “blood bank,” whose objective was twofold: first, to promote the use of stored blood for more efficient surgical procedures, and second, to eliminate the professional donor and its associated costs. This novel model appealed to patients who were unable to pay for blood, instead necessitating an “in-kind payment of blood debts.”³ Swanson further examines the evolution of the blood donor following the advent of World

1. (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2014) 352 pages.

2. *Ibid* at 42.

3. *Ibid* at 57.

War II; these new “civic-minded unpaid donors”⁴ who gave blood for strangers were primarily motivated by a sense of patriotism.

Chapter three explores the conflicting views on the appropriate source for the national blood supply system that existed during the Cold War era, or what is termed the “battle of the blood banks.”⁵ Blood bankers endorsed an individual responsibility on patients to repay bank blood loans, while the Red Cross blood program advocated for free blood for all civilians. The chief distinction between these two entities was their characterization of “blood as private market property [versus] blood as a public resource,”⁶ a question that Swanson leaves unanswered throughout the remainder of the book.

Chapter four shifts the discussion from whether patients should pay for banked blood to whether donors should be able to sell their blood—a fundamental question that evaluates the consequences of treating human blood as a market commodity. Although the medical profession resisted the notion of free blood, it also recognized the legal implications of “paid blood,” namely the available legal recourse to patients under product liability law. There was a resultant national push to ensure that banked blood be defined as a service rather than a good, which ultimately helped safeguard other body products from becoming subject to commercial law.

In chapters five and six, Swanson draws upon two parallel, yet contrasting, examples of body banks in order to highlight the historic variability in the market in body products. Chapter five details the evolution of the milk bank and emphasizes the nature of the unpaid donor, one who is motivated by “maternal kindness”⁷ and a sheer sense of obligation to provide free milk to another child. Chapter six explores the emergence of the assisted reproductive industry and the sperm bank, which, in contrast to the milk bank, is a profit-minded business that relies on the compensated donor. By focusing on the mainstream categorization of milk and sperm as gifts or commodities, Swanson sets forward a discussion that challenges the conventional way in which body product exchange is perceived.

Swanson’s historical narrative of body banking encourages the reader to revisit the core motivation behind the development of the body bank—“a means of harnessing private property to the public good.”⁸ She argues for the establishment of a more efficient framework that looks beyond the “gift/commodity dichotomy”

4. *Ibid* at 68.

5. *Ibid* at 87.

6. *Ibid* at 118.

7. *Ibid* at 177.

8. *Ibid* at 13.

and instead focuses on innovative ways to distribute body products in a changing market that now includes other body products such as kidneys, bone marrow, and eggs.

