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Nicole C. Bourbonnais  
*Birth Control in the Decolonizing Caribbean: Reproductive Politics and Practice on Four Islands, 1930-1970*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. xiv + 253 pp. (Cloth US$ 99.99)

Peopled by imperial design since the sixteenth century, the modern Caribbean is no stranger to population control. Amerindian genocide precipitated demand for Europeans, enslaved Africans, and indentured Asians to power the plantation machine. And by the twentieth century, as laborers agitated for equitable living standards, statehood and citizens’ rights, population returned to the agenda—this time to be controlled in response to scarcity and “disorder.”

*Birth Control in the Decolonizing Caribbean*, whichcovers a 40-year period (1930-70) one century post-emancipation, examines efforts to regulate Caribbean fertility during this era of imperial recession. Focusing on Barbados, Jamaica, Bermuda, and Trinidad, Nicole Bourbonnais offers a thoroughgoing account of birth control at three analytical levels: national politics, non-state activism, and grassroots experience. Methodologically, Caribbean and metropolitan archives, family planning records, newspaper debates and personal letters were consulted. The book consists of a rich introduction, four chapters, and a concise conclusion. The introduction, which carefully contextualizes the global and regional emergence of Caribbean birth control, reveals how metropolitan women’s rights and neo-Malthusian and eugenicist discourses were mobilized by activists, administrators, and elites to justify population controls.

Chapter 1 (1930-40) untangles such emerging debates in Bermuda, Barbados, and Jamaica, amidst a decade of regional labor uprisings. It reveals how administrators and planters asserted birth control as “the answer” to the discontent of the “overpopulated” and “riotous” lower classes (p. 59), while middle-class reformers posited it as a short term “aid” to alleviate economic pressures (in lieu of labor, land, and voting reform). Religious leaders and black nationalists mobilized to oppose birth control, which they saw as promoting “promiscuity” and “race suicide.”

Chapter 2 (1930s-50s) documents the transition from birth control policy to practice, showing how the Colonial Office adopted a “welfare” rhetoric to promote eugenicist population controls that never came to fruition (p. 85). Simultaneously, British and American non-state actors developed alliances with local middle-class nurses and doctors concerned with black social “upliftment” (p. 144), together establishing the region’s first family planning clinics.

Chapter 3 (1930s-60s), the book’s standout chapter, foregrounds the voices of family planning users. As alluded to in her introduction, Bourbonnais is historiographically sensitive to the “the powerful silences that haunted public debates and politics” surrounding birth control (p. 27); hence, she excavates the muted narratives of working-class Caribbean women. From dressmakers to “domestics”, higglers to factory workers, these reproductive histories “paint a vivid picture of the weighty load of childbearing on these women’s lives” (p. 136). Bourbonnais uses personal letters and clinic records to intricately reveal how these women’s personal concerns contrasted with the abstract ideas of governing elites, and the welfare agendas of middle-class reformists. She amplifies these subaltern voices, revealing how patients negotiated reproductive control of their bodies by flexibly accepting methods that worked for them, while refusing others that had been inappropriately issued (such as diaphragms, which deteriorated in tropical weather) —often by international donors more bent on saving costs and reducing fertility than on promoting choice.

Chapter 4 discusses the politics of state and foreign sponsored birth control during the era of political decolonization. Notable histories of Barbados’s emergence as a “world leader” in family planning (p. 174), the appearance of USAID, the WTO, and Britain as family planning donors, and cross-party agreements on Jamaican and Trinidadian state-funded family planning, all feature. The conclusion brings Caribbean family planning into the present, discussing shifts toward reproductive rights as a potential redemption from its oppressive history.

One limitation is the book’s ill-defined use of the “decolonization” idiom—a trendy yet seldom theorized buzzword. Bourbonnais writes of “political decolonization” as the journey to independent statehood, but identifies women’s use of gossip (“bush radio”) as “resistance” rather than as a decolonizing act (p. 214). A broader analysis of decolonization might have fruitfully illustrated the subtle and quotidian ways that Caribbean women “struggle[d] for control: over one’s body, one’s family, one’s life” (p. 2)—each arguably a mode of reproductive decolonization. Furthermore, Bourbonnais’s references to “anecdotal evidence” encountered during fieldwork (p. 133) suggest that she could have centered the oral testimonies of her living informants as valid contributors to the history being told. First-hand interview quotes would have enriched the arguments of Chapters 3 and 4.

Overall, the book is a valuable and thoroughgoing history of fertility control during a turbulent era— a must-read for any scholar of Caribbean kinship and reproduction.

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