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Book Review: *Surgery and Salvation: The Roots of Reproductive Injustice in Mexico, 1770-1940*¹

Reviewed by Madhavi Venkatesan²

In *Surgery and Salvation: The Roots of Reproductive Injustice in Mexico, 1770-1940*, Elizabeth O'Brien surfaces how the development of medical knowledge is connected to race, discrimination, marginalization, religion, and politics. Specifically addressing obstetrics and reproductive rights in Mexico, O'Brien highlights how the forced sacrifice of marginalized women helps to further our understanding of women's reproduction and how their marginalization persisted through the lens of intergenerational perceptions and eugenics. Across nine chapters organized chronologically into five sections, the reader is led through the religious origins of obstetrical procedures to the present perception of obstetrics as a science.

Chapters one and two, which cover the period 1745-1840 and constitute Part I, focus on the relationship between caesarian operations and priests, establishing that the informal religious perception that life begins at fertilization. Introducing the reader to salvation caesarianism, a procedure that ensured the baptism of an unborn child, O'Brien provides an often-overlooked aspect of colonization and coerced religious indoctrination. Her discussion reveals the construction of power provided by Spanish monarchs to the church, as only priests were able to perform last rites, while also providing the foundation to question how priestly intervention in obstetric procedure may have affected the perception of birth and death at a time when both infant and maternal mortality rates remained high. However, O'Brien also leaves questions unanswered. Specifically, what were the economic incentives for the intervention of priests? Was the rationale solely related to both religious control over defining life and the imposed legitimacy of a singular faith? The lack of discussion on these points leaves the story relayed in these chapters incomplete.

Part II addresses the post-colonial period defined as 1840-1876. In chapters three and four, which constitute this section, O'Brien discusses how the changing perception of the soul from a spiritual to a human embodied form provided the biological basis for the subordination of women. Marginalization was further compounded by ethnic differences which favored those of Western origin relative to Indigenous populations. In addition, formalized papal definitions of the beginning of life created the outcome of excommunication for termination of pregnancy. The latter, O'Brien discusses, became the basis for artificial premature birth, which was in effect an abortion performed by a physician but labeled as a birth to circumvent religious restrictions. Access to assistance for artificial premature birth would likely have been limited to those women who could afford the procedure and at the physician's discretion. Though not addressed by O'Brien, this is arguably paralleled in the present, even as abortion has become secularized.

Part III furthers the discussion of ethnic variations and explores how socially constructed hierarchies referenced as "race" affected the perception of duty of care and furthered exploitation of Indigenous and marginalized women. Their subordinated status was the basis of experimental procedures and uncompassionate care responses. To the extent the latter were recorded or used in teaching, the prejudices of one generation were transferred forward. Part IV continues this discussion with the inclusion of eugenics. O'Brien spotlights the significance of eugenics in the treatment of marginalized women and furthers the discussion with data on involuntary sterilizations.

¹ O'Brien, E. (2023). *Surgery and salvation: The roots of reproductive injustice in Mexico, 1770-1940*. University of North Carolina Press.

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O'Brien ends her formal chapter discussions with Part V, which aligns to the period from 1911 to 1940. During this time, O'Brien shares that women's despair over gynecological treatment was given voice and heard. In her epilogue, O'Brien relays how violence toward women includes reproductive care. She addresses the perceptions of women with respect to their medical treatment, as well as the trauma women experience from not having control over their own bodies due to restrictions on reproductive freedom. This discussion along with the historical narrative provided within the book is applicable to the present-day discussion related to abortion rights and abortion access, where the first limits procurement and the second further limits access based on economic circumstances. As O'Brien also makes evident, throughout the historical period discussed, it is men making decisions on reproductive capabilities of women, where regulations serve as constraints to only low-income and marginalized classes, where the former group is disproportionately comprised of members of the latter.

Overall, in *Surgery and Salvation: The Roots of Reproductive Injustice in Mexico, 1770-1940*, Elizabeth O'Brien provides an accessible discussion of the role of marginalized classes in the development of medical care, and her work adds significantly to scholarly knowledge. She also surfaces how marginalization in the present is both tied to the past and persists due to stereotypes that are institutionalized in medical care. However, what may be of most interest to readers is the connection between priests and obstetrics from which O'Brien presents another perspective on the relationship between religious faith and the perception of life.