

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, which covers a 40-year period (1930–70) one century postemancipation, 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, nonstate activism, and everyday 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 birth control movements, 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” for 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 nonstate 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

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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” and 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 cites 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 bent on fertility reduction by the cheapest means.

Chapter 4 discusses the politics of state and foreign sponsored birth control during the era of political decolonization. Notable analyses 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 family planning into the present, discussing shifts toward reproductive rights as a route of redemption from its oppressive history.

One limitation is the book’s ill-defined use of “decolonization”—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 for instance “resistance” rather than a decolonizing act (p. 214). A holistic analysis of decolonization might have fruitfully illustrated the subtler ways that Caribbean women “struggle[d] for control: over one’s body, one’s family, one’s life” (p. 2)—thus analyzing quotidian examples 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 assiduous history of fertility control during a turbulent era—a must-read for scholars of Caribbean kinship and reproduction.

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