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Review of Manon Parry, *Broadcasting Birth Control: Mass Media and Family Planning*

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Book Review

**Manon Parry, *Broadcasting Birth Control: Mass Media and Family Planning*,
New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013. Pp. ix + 192. \$24.95.
ISBN 978 0 8135 6151 6.**

As Manon Parry explains in her interesting new book, ‘Many of the women who wrote [to the *Birth Control Review*] noted that they had read about [Margaret] Sanger’s work in the press, confirming the important role of the mass media in publicizing and building support for the movement’ (p. 13). Therein lies the crux of Parry’s project: the use of publicity was central to the family planning movement and a sustained analysis of its use over time is long overdue. To that end, she challenges several long-standing historiographic assumptions and unearths more than a few fascinating stories. For example, she refutes the long held view that in its early days the ‘birth control movement traded controversy for propriety in their efforts to win mainstream approval.’ Parry persuasively argues instead that each new publicity effort brought a new round of ‘outrage and censorship’ (p. 3). Additionally, in charting the shifting publicity mediums—from film, to radio, and finally to television—she illustrates how the particularities of each shaped the messages the family planning movement delivered.

Parry begins her analysis by looking at the birth control movement’s use of film in the early decades of the twentieth century, revealing how they seized upon this new medium with vigour. In a slew of movies, birth control proponents brought their messages to female audiences who increasingly made their way into movie houses. Reaction against such films was swift; anti-birth control movies appeared and by the early 1930s the Hays movie code ‘pushed birth control propaganda out of mainstream Hollywood’ (p. 29). This prompted a shift to radio but because radio was a completely different experience, new opportunities and criticisms arose. Although darkened, the cinema was still a public place and its audience could be restricted. In contrast, the radio was broadcast directly into the home—unmediated and within earshot of all of its inhabitants, including children. Here again the birth control movement seized upon this medium with gusto, asking radio stations across the nation to broadcast their programming, first as educational lecture panels and then the more popular soap opera-type skit. Despite renewed opposition, birth control advocates experienced greater success in radio than they had in film, in part because they adhered to models of decency but also because the radio industry was keen on maintaining its educational mission.

Parry uses the remainder of the book to focus on the birth control movement’s use of television from the 1950s through to the early 2000s in the USA and overseas, giving a nod to the Internet at the end. In these chapters, she covers a lot of territory. Fascinating are her accounts about the incorporation of sex education messages (both pro-life and pro-choice) into mainstream programming by the 1970s, in shows like *Marcus Welby, M.D.*, *Maude*, and *The Bold Ones*. Striking too is her analysis of Planned Parenthood’s failure to counteract the

graphic imagery increasingly used in pro-life campaigns. In taking her story overseas, Parry begins by exploring the campaign started in the 1950s by American family planners to export their message abroad. These were met with limited success. Not only did family planners struggle with limited infrastructure, but their messages were also often out-dated and suffered from white Western biases that did not translate well to non-Western audiences. In addition, they found themselves facing mounting criticism from feminists and conservatives. Rounding out her transnational focus, Parry examines the successful incorporation of sex education messages into the telenovela. First begun in Mexico in the 1970s and spreading across the globe thereafter, this soap opera-style format lacked the heavy-handedness of those broadcast on American radios in the 1930s and 1940s. And, as Parry further argues, they 'also reintroduced a key ingredient that had long been missing from [birth control] material—sex'. Usually the emphasis was on the 'economic benefits of smaller families' (p. 127), but here in these telenovelas, they made clear the sexual freedom the use of contraceptives afforded.

It is clear that Parry's book offers a lot; in fact, the above account merely scratches the surface. But there were, admittedly, things I wondered about. One point in particular stands out. I understand Parry's decision to focus on the production of the media materials rather than their reception (just ask any film historian the difficulties in documenting viewer response). But I was surprised that she chose not to analyse the materials' content. Page after page, I waited eagerly for her to address it, only to realise later she had chosen not to. But this seemed to be a strange decision. If the goal, as Parry puts it, is to 'reveal the intentions, assumptions, and strategic decisions that shaped the finished product' (p. 9), then an analysis of the finished product—in this case, the nitty-gritty details about how to practise birth control—would help illuminate precisely what she wanted to uncover. Indeed, the nitty-gritty details the producers chose (or chose not) to include spoke volumes about their opinions about some fundamental issues, like who should practise birth control, who should have authority over its use, and why. But then again, attention to such matters is my preoccupation. Following her own curiosity, Parry reveals to us many other important parts of the story we have for too long overlooked.

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