
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 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, 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
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 hugglers 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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Birth Control in the Decolonizing Caribbean: Reproductive Politics and Practice on Four Islands, 1930–1970

Nicole C. Bourbonnais


Get A Copy. Amazon. Request PDF | On Jan 1, 2019, Neici M. Zeller published Birth Control in the Decolonizing Caribbean: Reproductive Politics and Practice on Four Islands, 1930â€“1970 | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate. Spanish women were present in the Caribbean almost from the outset, although their experiences have scarcely been addressed in the scholarly literature. Understanding the ethnic, socioeconomic and political context of the islands sheds considerable light on the circumstances in which these women lived.

Read more. Article. Reseña de "Islands at the Crossroads. Politics in the Non-Independent Caribbean" de Aarâ’n Ramos y An January 2001. Laura Muñoz. Reproductive Politics and Practice on Four Islands, 1930â€“1970. Search within full text. Get access. Nicole C. Bourbonnais tracks the complex politics of birth control in the decolonising Caribbean, illuminating the way that local contingencies shaped broad global population policies. Deftly navigating competing interpretations of birth control as liberation or as coercion, her study encompasses both the debates surrounding the provision of contraception and the lives of those affected by it. This is a work of profound importance.' Philippa Levine - University of Texas, Austin. Birth Control in the Decolonizing Caribbean: Reproductive Politics and Practice on Four Islands, 1930â€“1970, by Nicole C. Bourbonnais. December 2018. New West Indian Guide 92(3-4):375-376. DOI: 10.1163/22134360-09203035. Authors Understand the ethnic, socioeconomic and political context of the islands sheds considerable light on the circumstances in which these women lived. Read more. Article. Socio-Economic and Political Aspects of the Aid Provided by Japan to the Fishing Industry in the Sma B Petitjean Roget. Read more. Article. Full-text available. The Structure and Reproduction of Dasya haitiana sp. nov. (Dasyaceae, Rhodophyta) from the Caribbean June 1986. Suzanne Fredericq. James N Norris. Dr. Nicole Bourbonnais, Assistant Professor of International History at the Graduate Institute, recently published Birth Control in the Decolonizing Caribbean: Reproductive Politics and Practice on Four Islands, 1930-1970, an insightful in-depth study of the increase of access to modern birth control methods in the Caribbean. What is the main argument of the book? The book has two central arguments. First, I argue that reproductive politics were deeply entwined with decolonisation movements across the region from the 1930s-70s. Colonial officials and nationalist leaders alike saw birth rates a