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Susanne M. Klausen. *Race, Maternity, and the Politics of Birth Control in South Africa, 1910-1939.* Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. xix + 221 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-3452-9.

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Birth Control, Gender, and Re-Visiting the History of South Africa during the 1930s

Race, Maternity, and the Politics of Birth Control is a book with an admirably lucid title. It traces the rise of state and private organized birth control policy and practice in South Africa from the early twentieth century until roughly the start of the Second World War. (Although not its central focus, one of the many interesting discussions within the book lies in its description of the contraceptive technology on offer.) Susanne M. Klausen, who writes as both a scholar and an activist, centers her history on an examination of two schools of thought driving the provision of contraception. In the first, and least successful, white eugenicists fearful of the decline of the white race advocated the provision of birth control to poor whites. In the second, maternal welfarists, who saw in continual childbirth manifold social evils, provided contraceptive services to an increasingly greater number of women, supported over the decade by white health officials who likewise came to see the benefits of such. The divisions between the maternal welfarists and the eugenicists were never hard and fast, and by the 1940s many of the latter had thrown in their lot with the former. The book, however, is much more than a discussion of contraception.

In chapter 1, entitled "Fears of National Decline and the Politics of Birth Control," Klausen begins by documenting state reluctance towards contraceptive services until roughly 1930. She outlines two reasons for this: in the first, conservative moral agendas inspired by Christianity promoted a view which considered contraception immoral, while in the second, the state was hesitant to encourage practices which might deter whites from exercising their fertility to the detriment of relative black demographic growth. White fecundity, it was thought by both the state and elements of the white population, was the only sure way to reverse the potential "swamping" (a contemporary term) of a "racially superior" minority by an unbridled and "sexually rampant" black population.

In subsequent chapters, Klausen pays attention to the formation of the Race Welfare Society (RWS), the eugenicist wing of the birth control movement and its operation (chapters 2 and 4) as well as the formation of the maternalist Mothers' Clinic Committee (MCC) and its operations (chapters 3 and 5). Although the organizations were formed a year apart, both opened clinics in February 1932. A final chapter deals with state provision of contraceptive services, a move partially inspired by the success of the two organizations. Interestingly, here Klausen points to the way in which the South African state was ahead of its erstwhile imperial companions in advocating contraception, with only Britain introducing state-supported contraceptive services at an earlier date.

The RWS operated primarily in Johannesburg, initially under the leadership of the married couple, Herbert Fantham and Annie Porter. Herbert Fantham believed, in his own words, that "mental and moral differences are almost entirely due to the influence of heredity and ... are but slightly affected by environment" (p. 43). Other members included prominent liberals and medical professionals of the period (not necessarily the same),

united by an ideological outlook broad enough to encompass differing views while at the same time sharing assumptions about class and racial superiority, biology's explanatory power with respect to social problems, a commitment to social activism, a belief in the superior explanatory potential of science over softer views, and a perception of themselves as sharing in an international movement of likeminded professionals (p. 46). For the RWS, the primary threat to white South Africa lay in the dangers posed by a growing number of poor whites, one solution to which could be found in the strengthening of racial stock through limitations on this population's birth rate. Although the organization initially met with opposition from the church and the state, by the late-1930s its efforts had awarded it credibility in the eyes of both.

Despite its commitment to white birth control, the organization was never as successful as the MCC, and nor was it necessarily successful in providing contraception to the really poor. The RWS did not collect much information on its users and so, as Klausen indicates, it is difficult to assess perceptions of its first clinic. Nevertheless, it seems as if women were put off from using the clinic because of its distance from their homes and the associated cost of reaching it, the opposition of husbands, women's distaste for working with their own genitals and the difficulty of using the technology on offer (pp. 97-99). Nor did the RWS help through its patriarchal attitudes and its decision to allow male doctors to work within its clinics (although this had changed by the mid-1930s).

The MCC, formed in Cape Town in 1931, had a very different outlook on the provision of contraception. Its founding members included many of the city's English-speaking elite. The organization was committed to the "notion that mothering was women's primary social role ... and that helping physically exhausted women space, or when medically necessary, avoid their pregnancies ... would strengthen women's roles as mothers and thereby shore up the family and nation state" (pp. 66-67). This was a different view to the RWS, and embraced a strand of white women's feminism prominent in the 1920s and 1930s. The MCC was also linked to the international birth control movement, and Marie Stopes in particular. These links are particularly illuminating for what they show of a continued transnational politics of imperialism (see, for example, p. 82), as at the very points Stopes attempted to intervene in what she saw as the proper functioning of South African society.

Unlike the RWS, the MCC had more success with its clinics, which also catered to both black and white women. Klausen advances a number of reasons for this, including the greater involvement of the MCC members in the actual provision of services, as well as a greater range of contraceptive devices on offer. The MCC also used female staff in its clinics. By the end of the 1930s, the MCC had also moved into the provision of educational material on contraception.

Although it is possible to read the book as a history of contraception alone, the book is also more than this. During the 1980s and 1990s, much historical writing on the politics of the 1920s-1940s (when it did not deal with labor) was underlain by assumptions about the nature of the primary political issue of the period, so that for some writers the central question of the interwar period lay in white political maneuvering, while for others the so-called Native Question took this position.[1] Proponents of the former view, quite rightly, point to the battle for power then being conducted between English and Afrikaans-speaking white South Africans and their political affiliates. For the latter, while differences existed between these groups, the preeminent questions of the period centered on the control and subjugation of black political aspirations, labor, and mobility. Despite the nuanced nature of some of this work, its cumulative effect is a tendency towards a bifurcated historiographical tradition, in the sense that it focuses our gaze either on white policy or black resistance. To an extent, the problems associated with this view have been pointed out in more recent work, including that which came out of a reassessment of South Africa in the 1940s. In his introduction to that volume, Alan Jeeves writes of the need to integrate "competing strands in the intellectual and political history of the period" with its more conventional accounts, most of which are predetermined by the Nationalist victory in 1948.[2]

Klausen's work, while centering on the 1930s, begins to suggest some of the agenda for a history of the period that achieves what Alan Jeeves was suggesting. Her work, certainly in her introductory chapters, moves beyond this rather narrow vision of the interwar period, through the way in which it links together issues of gender, race, and class, the non-reductive treatment of which represents something of a holy grail for academics. Here I am referring to the way in which she juxtaposes elite white fears about poor whites and racial degeneracy, with white fears of a nascent black working class, expressed in a concern for women's bodies, using the view from the empire to illustrate which issues were particular to South Africa and which flowed from a common imperial experience.

For instance, while "swamping" is referred to in much of the literature on the period, Klausen broadens debate about it through the linkage of this discourse to constructions of sexuality and transnational maneuverings. The focus on contraception allows Klausen to show how white South African fears about "race suicide" and "race degeneration" (p. 16) were echoed in, and dependent upon, debates in other colonial territories, not the least of them being South Africa's Dominion partners. As is discussed within the imperial and transnational literature on the early twentieth century in Europe, the period was characterized by increasing national anxiety as imperial control diminished and new national forces came to characterize western politics and society. Some of these anxieties found expression in a concern for motherhood and childbirth, especially as repositories of a nation's identity. In this respect, Klausen's work postfigures Anna Davin's on imperialism and motherhood, though bringing it solidly back to the South African situation.[3] As a result, Klausen is able to suggest a way in which to see South Africa as wholly unexceptional (though not in the sense intended by regular critics of South African "exceptionality") by virtue of its view from the empire, while also turning on its head the rather quaint notion that still bedevils a spectrum of the South African historical *oeuvre*, that gender is unimportant.

At roughly 150 pages, the book is easily manageable and would do nicely for students wanting to get their teeth into a book that deals with a coherent and gender-sensitive subject. If anything, the book is too short, and some of Klausen's arguments are rather truncated in their exposition. This may also explain why certain subthemes are missing from the book. For instance there could have been more discussion of masculine opposition to contraception, as well as masculine expectations of sexual fulfillment. I also thought the book could have given more space to the issue of why the RWS did not advocate contraception for black South African women. Nevertheless, the book is deservedly worth reading, and one of the more interesting I have read in the last year.

Notes

[1]. For the first, see for instance, Dan O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme: Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism 1934-1948* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983); and for the second, see for instance, Adam Ashforth, *The Politics of Official Discourse in Twentieth-Century South Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

[2]. Saul Dubow and Alan Jeeves, eds, *South Africa's 1940s: Worlds of Possibilities* (Cape Town: Double Storey, 2005), p. 11: articles in this book were first published as *South African Historical Journal*, 50 (2004).

[3]. Anna Davin, "Imperialism and Motherhood," in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

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