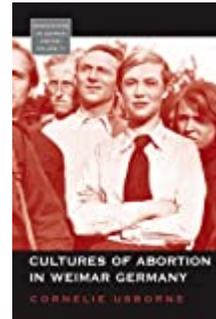




Cornelie Usborne. *Cultures of Abortion in Weimar Germany.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2007. 296 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-389-3.



Reviewed by Jennifer Lynn

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C. Usborne: Cultures of Abortion

In *Cultures of Abortion in Weimar Germany* Cornelie Usborne utilizes Alltagsgeschichte, cultural anthropology, micro-history and the history of the body in order to illuminate the multiple and contradictory attitudes and experiences concerning abortion in Weimar Germany. This work serves as a valuable addition to her earlier study, *Politics of the Body in Weimar Germany*. Usborne, Cornelie, *The Politics of the Body in Weimar Germany. Women's Reproductive Rights and Duties*, London 1992. In her most recent work, Usborne questions both existing scholarship and contemporary accounts which portray Weimar Germany (and Berlin in particular) as the embodiment of modernity and rationalization. She argues that scientific and medical discourses relating to reproduction and abortion existed simultaneously alongside superstitious and traditional beliefs grounded in pre-scientific language. Arranged thematically, this monograph seeks to explore contesting representations of abortion in mass media, deconstruct medical and lay discourses and investigate women's own perceptions and experiences of abortion.

After her introduction, which situates the study in

current historiography and outlines her theoretical and methodological approach, Usborne concentrates on investigating cultural texts in chapter two, *Abortion on State, Screen and in Fiction*. The popular plays, novels and films that she examines reveal a desire for abortion law reform, but from a variety of perspectives. Female working-class protagonists, for example, often symbolized female passive victimhood while middle-class women represented the *New Woman*, whose dangerous sexuality challenged traditional gender norms and whose attempts to rid themselves of an unwanted pregnancy led to personal disaster.

In chapter three, *Medical Termination of Pregnancy: Theory and Practice*, Usborne focuses on two court cases from Bavaria. The first involves a young male, general practitioner investigated for illegal abortions and the second, a well-known Munich gynecologist Dr. Hope Bridges Adams Lehmann. The author argues that these cases exemplify the divergence that existed between official standards of medical ethics and obstetric training, on the one hand, and the actual behavior of individual doctors on the other (p. 24). Dr. Hope Bridges

Adams Lehmann, for example, a self-proclaimed feminist, also performed sterilizations on patients seeking abortions, without asking their permission. Lehmann was convinced that this improved women's lives because it liberated women from the worry of getting pregnant and therefore improved women's psychological health (p. 84). She also shows how doctors, who were often protected from public criticism, enjoyed the status that continuing professionalization afforded them. While publicly condemning the practice, some medical doctors were still willing to perform abortions for their patients.

In *Abortion in the Marketplace: Lay Practitioners and Doctors Compete*, chapter four, Osborne argues abortion became a stage for academic medicine to discredit and marginalize lay practitioners in an attempt to medicalize all terminations of pregnancy (p. 94). The author disabuses readers of the common assumption that lay practitioners were dangerous, unqualified and untrained to perform abortions. Rather, she posits that many of the so-called quacks were highly skilled, developed a wide social network based on reputation and maintained a good safety record. Using evidence provided by the well known Berlin doctor, gynecologist and government advisor, Max Hirsch, alongside legal records, Osborne argues that lower class women usually chose lay practitioners, not only because they were less expensive, but because they shared the same cultural and social values and views on family planning.

Osborne skillfully unearths women's voices using court records and police interviews, alongside newspaper articles, diaries, letters and publicity material for abortion services in her fifth chapter. In *Women's Own Voices: Female Perceptions of Abortion*, she concentrates on the ways in which women discussed and described their own bodies and experiences with abortion (including procuring, providing and assisting in abortion attempts and procedures). Women were often well-versed in medical and scientific language regarding reproduction, fertility and family planning. Yet, women also implicitly and explicitly invoked traditional or pre-scientific language to describe the interruption of their normal menstrual cycle or describe their bodily experiences. For example, women often used the term *blocked menses* to claim that a natural, healthy return to one's normal cycle was the motivation for visiting abortion practitioners. While the term *blocked menses* could also constitute a strategy for women to obtain abortions as well as avoid prosecution, the author contends

that this concept seems to correspond more accurately to how they perceived their own bodily changes, outside of terms including *gestation* or *pregnancy*. Osborne takes seriously women's voices, opinions and choice of language, uncovering their rich, ambiguous and sometimes contradictory statements. While official discourse presented abortion as a tragedy to be avoided, many working-class women perceived abortion to be a normal custom and remained a frequent topic of conversation among female social networks.

In chapter six, *Abortion as an Everyday Experience in Village Life: A Case Study from Hesse*, Osborne reveals both male and female agency and knowledge in both securing and providing abortions. She focuses on the practice of Frau Kastner and her husband, who performed abortions for women in seventeen different villages for more than five years before they stood trial in 1924 for illegal abortions for commercial gain. This case study not only shows the diverse types of women who asked the Kastners for assistance (differences between marital status, age and class), but also blurs the traditional assumptions surrounding urban/rural or Catholic/Protestant dichotomies. Religious affiliation, she shows, made little difference concerning individual attitudes towards abortion. Osborne also disrupts the notion that abortion was a female-only experience. She demonstrates that men, too (albeit on a different level) were part of the community that supported the Kastners' practice. While some men helped women to secure abortions for their own purposes (to uphold their own honor or avoid marriage), Osborne shows that many husbands or boyfriends aided women with both practical and emotional support.

In her conclusion, Osborne reiterates that abortion was and remains today a highly contentious issue fought over by competing groups for the right to define, organize, mediate and regulate it (p. 202). This revealing study teases out the various ways that official discourses often clashed with women's everyday experiences and attitudes towards abortion. While analyzing a variety of gendered conceptions of femininity (including the New Woman and the Wise Woman) one might wonder how differing conceptions of masculinity functioned within abortion debates and representations, beyond the male authority of doctors, policemen and jurists. Overall, this monograph is an important addition for any scholar interested in abortion, the body, medical discourses, gender and modern Germany.

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