

One-day symposium “Mapping the landscapes of abortion, birth control and power in the United States since the 1960s”.

Université Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris 3, November 18, 2016.

Judith Warner



Publisher
AFEA

Electronic version

URL: <http://transatlantica.revues.org/8307>

ISSN: 1765-2766

Electronic reference

Judith Warner, « One-day symposium “Mapping the landscapes of abortion, birth control and power in the United States since the 1960s”. », *Transatlantica* [Online], 2 | 2016, Online since 02 October 2017, connection on 19 October 2017. URL : <http://transatlantica.revues.org/8307>

This text was automatically generated on 19 October 2017.



Transatlantica – Revue d'études américaines est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

One-day symposium “Mapping the landscapes of abortion, birth control and power in the United States since the 1960s”.

Université Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris 3, November 18, 2016.

Judith Warner

Introduction

- 1 On Friday November 18th, 2016, a one-day symposium entitled “Mapping the Landscapes of Abortion, Birth Control and Power in the United States since the 1960s” was held at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle. The symposium was organized by three Université Sorbonne Nouvelle doctoral candidates: Christen Bryson, Anne Légier and Amélie Ribieras. The parallel between the topic of the symposium and the recent political election and its potential aftermath in the United States was tackled throughout the day and it was related to the symposium’s topic. Indeed, the resonance between the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump and the prospects of a “pro-life” Congress and the Supreme Court hearing a case on reproductive rights made the debates during the symposium seem all the more pressing. Abortion, birth control, reproductive rights and the question of power over women’s bodies are and have been personal and political issues in the United States since the 19th century. The topics of women’s reproductive rights and reproductive justice are bound to matters of social class, race, gender, age, education, and religion. This symposium, in addition to addressing these research perspectives, also raised the question of how geographically-related reproductive rights and legislation are. The symposium aimed at exploring the political, economic, geographic and ideological spaces surrounding women’s rights and reproductive justice.

Hélène QUANQUIN (Associate Professor of American civilization, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3), "The Early Feminists... Were Overwhelmingly Pro-Life: The Place of the Nineteenth Century in Contemporary Abortion Debates"

- 2 Though the symposium intended to focus on reproductive issues from the 1960s onwards, Hélène Quanquin, the first keynote speaker, demonstrated the link between the contemporary debate and the 19th century feminist movement. This foray into the past allowed her to question the legacy and the parallels between the two movements. Revealing the continuities, the ruptures, and the influences of the past on the present, Hélène Quanquin pointed out that the pivotal contemporary question of abortion and abortion rights was not a central debate in the 19th century. The influence of the 19th century movement on today's is mainly to be found through quotes and references to important figures and activists of the time, such as Susan B. Anthony and Margaret Sanger. Women's rights activists of the 19th century tried to keep away from controversial issues, abortion being one, because of its possible link with "free love".
- 3 Hélène Quanquin noted that 19th century and 20th-21st century feminists did not have the same discourse and might not have agreed on some issues. Some 19th century activists might even have been anti-abortion. However, since the issue was not dealt with directly or in public at the time, it remains a blurry point of the 19th century debates. This ambivalence might be the result of the toxicity of such a topic at that time. Nevertheless, this ambiguity has allowed contemporary pro-life activists to claim that suffragettes were, in fact, "pro-life." The relevance of the 19th century feminist movement to contemporary feminist movements therefore stems from the desire to create a sense of continuity between the past and present, and from the use of important historical references and famous figures. However, the present situation has given voice to certain past controversial issues, abortion being prominent among them. The 19th century fight for women's rights was focused on suffrage, but it was certainly not a pro-abortion movement.

Anne LÉGIER (PhD candidate, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3), "The Reverend Spencer Parsons, an Abortion Crusader"

- 4 Anne Légier drew from her doctoral research, focused on Chicago, Illinois, to present on the important work of Spencer Parsons, a clergyman who fought for women's rights to abortion in the 1960s and 1970s. He is a peculiar figure due to his position in society as a white, middle-aged clergyman fighting on behalf of what was at the time a very controversial and illegal procedure. As a clergyman, Reverend Parsons had access to a public platform from which he could advocate for abortion rights, but he maintained his social position of respectability, which allowed him to express controversial matters without having to fear repression. Reverend Parsons officiated in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood, at the Rockefeller Chapel on the University of Chicago campus. Hyde Park,

being a politically progressive area at the time, might have helped him in his endeavor. He fought not only for abortion rights, but also more broadly for women's reproductive rights: from the legalization of birth control to access to condoms and greater respect for women's choice. Parsons could therefore be seen as a precursor/contributor to the contemporary "pro-choice" battle/debate.

- 5 This unique activist led this fight from within his religious sphere. Parsons was a Baptist, an advocate of freedom of conscience, and opposed the Catholic doctrine defining life at conception that supports defining abortion as a crime. The religious aspect of his fight allowed him to reframe the moral and ethical landscape of abortion. Parsons counseled and helped women by giving them information about abortion and birth control, creating a safe space for women to talk about, and deal with, those issues when they were in need. Reverend Parsons's personal and professional status helped him build a different environment where his power was used in a cause not usually associated with the life and occupational hazards of a clergyman. Parsons is therefore an original case regarding the fight for abortion rights in the 1960s as he used his power, social status, and ecclesiastical platform to do something others could not. Though he has been left out of the historiography on this era and location, Anne Légier insisted that Parsons's personal and political distinctiveness merits attention.

Sandrine PIORKOWSKI-BOCQUILLON (PhD, Aix-Marseille Université), "Sterilization in the United-States: The Dark Side of Contraception in the 1960s and 1970s"

- 6 This original research paper touched upon an aspect of birth control that is commonly left by the wayside: sterilization. Sandrine Piorkowski-Bocquillon focused on the historical and ideological dimensions of sterilization in 1960s and 1970s America.
- 7 The history of sterilization is linked to that of eugenics and the idea that the state can exert control over reproduction. In the 1960s, a coercive method of sterilization was used on mostly uninformed female patients. The state's attempt to sterilize uninformed women was especially problematic as it was directly linked to racial and economic inequality: it was mainly poor women of color who were affected by sterilization policies. The targeted women were typically seen as already having too many children. One of the official arguments was that they might not be able to provide for more and would therefore become social and financial burdens on the state. Where white, middle-class and upper-class women could opt to go through this irreversible medical procedure, lower-class women and women of color frequently did not have that choice. In fact, low-income, minority women underwent this irreversible procedure without giving proper consent, because they were misled and coerced or asked to sign documents they could not understand—or read, in the case of non-English-speaking women.
- 8 The ideological and (un)ethical aspect of birth regulation through sterilization can also be linked to a question of ownership of, and power over, women's bodies. Indeed, most members of medical committees at that time were male physicians. Sandrine Piorkowski-Bocquillon highlighted the example of Puerto-Rican women's fight for reproductive freedom and reparation for forced or unconsented sterilization. The practice was widespread on the island, an official measure taken by the state—in

accordance with the Eugenics Board—to control overpopulation. Studying this practice puts the emphasis on the fact that at the time these women did not have full control over their own bodies. Sandrine Piorkowski-Bocquillon's presentation also questioned the link between the feminist movement and sterilization, echoing H el ene Quanquin's talk. Indeed, some 19th century feminist activists, such as Margaret Sanger, held eugenicist views, which adds to the ambivalence of their legacy on the advancement of reproductive rights. Sterilization as a coercive method of birth regulation thus falls within the social, racial, and power-related dynamic of reproductive rights, justice and freedom.

Carole JOFFE (Professor, Dept. Of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Sciences, University of California, San Francisco), "Race and Abortion in the United-States"

- 9 The second keynote speaker, Carole Joffe, specializes in research about reproductive justice. She referred to reproductive justice rather than reproductive rights as she explained that the struggle for legal rights was not enough and reproductive justice encompasses more than just legal rights. The latter also includes access to enough resources for women to raise their children in decent living conditions, the ability for women to prevent or end unwanted pregnancies, and the ability to have the children when they want.
- 10 Carole Joffe talked about the central and ever-present role of race and class in the debates and discussions on abortion. Race and class were already factors in the eugenics movement. Echoing Sandrine Piorkowski-Bocquillon, Carole Joffe stressed the fact that, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, some white ethnic minorities were believed to have too many children—such as the Irish, Italians, and Eastern Europeans—as were Blacks and Latinos living in rundown urban centers. Also echoing Sandrine Piorkowski-Bocquillon's presentation, Carole Joffe briefly reminded the audience that the first birth control campaigns were funded by the government, thus birth control and reproductive justice have long been governmental and political issues linked to race and class, since the primary targets were and still are ethnic minorities and poor women. In economically disadvantaged and racially stratified areas today, these two factors often collide as the women targeted are often African American and poor. The issue of reproductive justice thus becomes part of gender politics. Therefore, the discussion surrounding race, class and abortion is also demographic. Carole Joffe sees women of color as collateral damage of a fight against abortion led by anti-abortion activists and economic conservatives. In addition, the fight against anti-abortion is made difficult in these communities because of deep religiosity, memories of eugenics, a general mistrust of the healthcare system and because members of NGOs or foundations that reach out to women of color are mostly white Americans. Thus, Carole Joffe argued that in those communities, anti-abortion activists are sometimes successful in their fight.
- 11 The discussion surrounding abortion in the United States at the moment focuses on two main topics: the controversies around Planned Parenthood clinics and the reproductive movement's fight for genuine reproductive justice. Both the pro- and anti-abortion movements broach these two topics in hope of gaining ground.

Amélie RIBIERAS (PhD candidate, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle), "Phyllis Schlafly and the Polarization of the Political Landscape: Making the Republican Party Pro-life"

- 12 Amélie Ribieras's presentation focused on one particular activist, the anti-abortion, pro-life, conservative Phyllis Schlafly. For many years, Schlafly struggled to shape the political landscape within the Republican Party. She is best known for her STOP ERA campaign in the 1970s, which successfully prevented the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Schlafly's militancy subsequently became rooted in the pro-life movement. She adopted a pro-life ideology and an anti-feminist attitude. Schlafly's struggle was vocal from the 1960s-1970s until her death in 2016. Amélie Ribieras argued that the pro-life movement has been instrumental in the growing strength of the Republican Party and Schlafly played a pivotal role in this reshaping. Schlafly's militancy was presented as both strategic and well-conceived. By adopting an anti-feminist attitude, Schlafly built a strong conservative discourse based on moral matters from the 1960s to the 1980s. She opposed recreational sex and the Women's Liberation Movement (1960s-1970s), demonizing sexual liberation and the demand for access to abortion as endangering life and devaluing motherhood. Schlafly addressed abortion through her public struggle against the ERA. Visually and ideologically speaking, her anti-abortion/pro-life campaigns were in continuity with the anti-ERA campaign. The moral part of her struggle allowed her to appeal to religious conservatives and their defense of the life of "unborn babies," thus adopting the pro-life ideology, also called "embryo politics," that a fetus already is a living being. Though Schlafly's fight was not political at first, Amélie Ribieras argued, she became a central figure in the transformation of the Republican Party into the pro-life party. Schlafly's militancy became strongly political in the 1980s. Ronald Reagan's campaign and presidency were anti-abortion, and the moral righteousness of the anti-abortion argument was combined with an economic argument. Abortion was presented as a waste of taxpayer's money and became central to Reagan's campaign for the presidency. The Republican Party, from 1980 to 1982 at least, was a strong pro-life party, though the pro-life and pro-choice division reappeared later. According to Amélie Ribieras, Phyllis Schlafly helped establish the ideological and organizational strength of the Party. Her influence as a vocal public figure and a successful conservative activist allowed her to embed the defense of the life of "unborn children" into the Republican doctrine. As such, Amélie Ribieras concluded, Schlafly was a "cultural warrior" of the pro-family movement, though she remained a very controversial and highly criticized figure throughout her life.

Christen BRYSON (PhD, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, CRAN, CREW), "Family Planning in Idaho and Oregon: Shared Borders, Divided Politics"

- 13 To conclude the symposium, Christen Bryson's presentation continued on the political and geographical dimensions of abortion and reproductive rights by studying two states—Oregon and Idaho—that have different political and cultural treatments of the question

of sex education. Focusing on these two opposite states allowed her to question the ideological, social and geographical mapping of the debate on reproductive justice in the contemporary United States.

- 14 The Population Institute is a non-profit that promotes family planning and gives grades to each state based, in part, on the “quality” of sex education in schools. Oregon received an A+ whereas Idaho received an F-. Idaho State law 33-16-08 (1970) provides that sex education should be, first and foremost, carried out in the home. The church and schools should only be complementary to the sex education taught by parents. The Idaho Health Content Standards requires sex education courses in public schools to rely exclusively on scientific knowledge, i.e. the study of anatomy and physiology of reproduction. Abstinence played a primary role before the standards were reformed in 2010. Nevertheless, parents can opt out of their children attending these classes. In some Idaho schools, teaching children about the sex act is problematic for fear that the school or school board may be accused of encouraging premarital sex. With its newly enacted focus on scientific knowledge, Christen Bryson argued, Idaho appears to be moving towards a more progressive form of sex education. Yet, when looking at the school curricula of the state’s two largest school districts, there is much debate as to whether or not that is actually the case. In Oregon, by contrast, sex education classes and curricula are much more progressive. The courses focus on overall health and a fight against the spread of STIs. In 2005, the state adopted a “sex positive” approach: sexual activity is presented to students as a natural and healthy part of their personal development. The way sex education is taught reflects more general ideological and political divisions regarding states policies. Supporters of sex education in public schools defend the idea that young people should receive information and become sexually responsible adults. Supporters of abstinence, on the other hand, fear that sex education teaches young people how to have sex, overrides parental authority and, in some extreme arguments, promotes homosexuality.
- 15 According to Christen Bryson reproductive health, rights and justice also raise the issue of the local and state-level access to birth control. Population Institute assessments rely on four criteria: effectiveness, affordability, accessibility and prevention. In 2016, Oregon had already reached the highest standards, as had Washington. Yet, their neighbors—Idaho, Utah and Wyoming—all failed. In Oregon reproductive health and rights are treated as basic human rights, no laws obstruct access to abortion and abortion providers are easily accessible, which is not the case at all for Idaho. The latter is populated by social, political and religious conservatives who frame the political debate regarding these issues in moral terms. It is also harder for women to have access to abortion clinics because they are geographically scattered throughout the state and not as easily accessible to rural women. Christen Bryson concluded her talk on the role that pro-life politics played during Donald Trump’s presidential campaign and his expressed belief that questions about abortion and reproductive rights as a whole should no longer be handled at the federal level. If in the future the Supreme Court rules in accordance with such a view, geographical discrepancies on these matters will only intensify.

Conclusion

- 16 This one-day symposium was fueled with the tensions and questions raised by the new President-elect and his future administration. The topics of abortion, reproductive justice

and health appeared to be especially pressing. This symposium tackled issues regarding the moral and geographical dimensions of reproductive justice, rights and health in the United States since the 1960s, but also in the near future. It debated the definition of the family since the 1960s through the 2015 legalization of same-sex marriage, and the way the Trump Administration may handle it in the future. The symposium laid the basis for discussions of the past, present and future, as well as the different political, moral and ideological perspectives surrounding abortion, abortion rights, and reproductive justice and freedom.

ABSTRACTS

United-States, reproductive rights, reproductive justice, abortion, women's rights, women's health

INDEX

Mots-clés: États-Unis, droits reproductifs, justice sexuelle et reproductive, avortement, droit des femmes, santé des femmes

AUTHOR

JUDITH WARNER

Université Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris 3