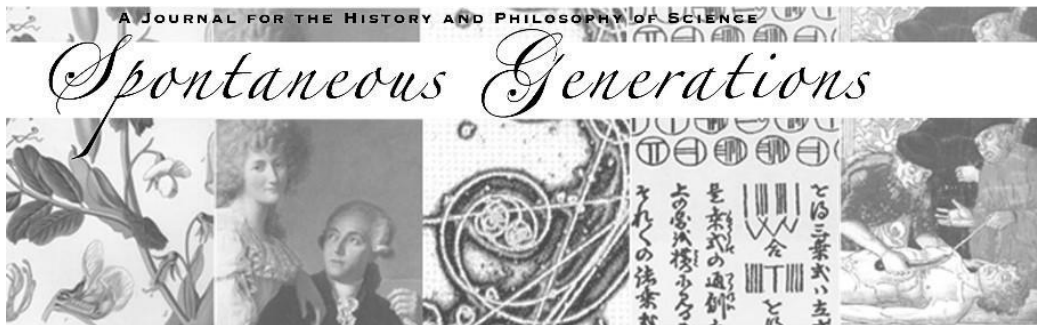




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by Erika Dyck and Maureen Lux. Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's
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In 2019, Canadians celebrated the 50th anniversary of Bill C-150, the famous omnibus Criminal Code reform bill that decriminalized birth control, abortion, and some aspects of homosexuality at the end of the 1960s. However, despite then Minister of Justice Pierre Elliott Trudeau's famous quip that "there's no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation," the decade that followed the adoption of this landmark legal reform revealed inconsistencies in the application of this principle. The paradoxes and contradictions that complicated the landscape of reproductive justice during the 1970s is precisely the focus of Erika Dyck and Maureen Lux's *Challenging Choices: Canada's Population Control in the 1970s*.

The authors convincingly examine an array of sources ranging from government departmental records, public statements by politicians and civil servants, scientific publications as well as newspapers and popular magazines to argue that the liberalization of reproductive rights that occurred in 1969 did not affect nor benefit all Canadians equally. By looking at groups situated at the margins of 1970s progressive reproductive discourses – indigenous women, men and women with intellectual and physical disabilities, men seeking vasectomies, and teenage girls – Dyck and Lux show that the much-celebrated Trudeau-era reform did not necessarily ensure reproductive freedom, but, in some cases, reinforced authoritative power dynamics and structures (15). Their argument steers away from the conventional pro-life/pro-choice dichotomy and instead tackles the complexity of family planning discourses through the lens of race, gender, class, age, and disability (22). While the book appears fragmented at times due to the eclectic nature (both thematically and geographically) of the case studies put under investigation, the authors make good on their promise to disentangle the various discourses surrounding family planning, population control, and reproductive choice that circulated in 1970s Canada. *Challenging Choices* poses a significant challenge to the notion that the 1969 decriminalization of birth control and abortion uniformly provided Canadians with the ability to choose.

The book is 240 pages long and contains (apart from the introduction and conclusion) six chapters, which are divided thematically. Chapter 1 provides context to the 1969 decriminalization of birth control and abortion, setting the stage for the remainder of the book. The authors highlight a severe disconnect between the discourses held by white, male policy-makers in Ottawa – intent on only providing abortions to women if childbirth jeopardized their health (40) – and the position and lived experiences of women involved with the contemporaneous Royal Commission on the Status of Women, who were convinced that gender equality was dependent on reproductive choice (44).

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on Indigenous women and the politics of population in

Northern Canada. When it came to Indigenous bodies, reproductive choice was limited by colonialist population control agendas derived from anxieties concerning overpopulation in the Global South. While the Canadian North was by no means “overpopulated,” the rhetoric of global population control was instrumentalized to motivate government intervention on Indigenous reproductive bodies in the name of alleviating poverty (63). Paradoxically, government bureaucrats and healthcare workers were sometimes reluctant to promote birth control or conduct sterilization surgeries – even when requested by Indigenous women as a means of contraception – by fear that their actions would fuel accusations of cultural genocide (69). As such, Indigenous women not only found themselves under renewed scrutiny in this so-called age of liberalization, but were also denied access to medical services that were becoming easier to obtain for non-Indigenous parents who desired to limit their fertility (71).

The landscape of reproductive choice during the 1970s was further complicated by the shadow of eugenics as well as unresolved tensions between rapidly evolving notions of individual rights with that of collective responsibility. Dyck and Lux explore in Chapter 4 the murky legal territory that came with the liberalization of surgical sterilization as a means of birth control, especially for Canadians with mental disabilities. As patients returned to their communities with deinstitutionalization, reproductive choice was complicated by the triangulating of the decision-making process. In Alberta, for instance, parents could decide to sterilize their dependent adult children – considered incompetent to provide legal consent – as policy-makers sought to avoid the abuses of the eugenics era (92-93). The surgery appealed to many parents and medical experts who deemed children with disabilities “unfit” for parenthood, but still considered sexual relations to be part of a fulfilling life (105). By the 1980s, the enshrinement of individual rights in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms turned this argument on its head. The Supreme Court of Canada ruled in its 1986 *Eve* decision against parents who had recommended the sterilization of their disabled daughter, effectively making sterilization as a form of birth control and menstrual hygiene inaccessible to this group of Canadians (110).

The two final chapters of the book deal with individuals who, while presumably white and non-disabled, fit awkwardly in 1970s progressive discourses on sexual liberation and reproductive choice. Chapter 5 describes and explains how vasectomies – contrary to the wishes of population control advocates and early eugenicists – were increasingly embraced by white, educated, middle-class men during the 1970s (113). Despite initial misgivings and anxieties regarding loss of reputation, masculinity, and sexual ability, vasectomies were reconceptualized as a safe, responsible, “selfless act, a courageous decision to help save the environment by not contributing to population growth, and, of course, the greatest gift a man could give his wife” (114). Finally, Dyck and Lux address the moral panic surrounding teenage pregnancy and abortion that arose after decriminalization in Chapter 6. As Therapeutic Abortion Committees were organized in Canadian hospitals during the early 1970s, teenage girls were subjected to paternalistic attitudes that contradicted the era’s liberalization of sexuality and reproductive choice (132). Dyck and Lux further complicate this picture by demonstrating that discourses concerning teenage reproductive bodies were not necessarily aimed at pregnancy or abortion themselves, but rather at the prospect that teenage mothers might become dependent on the state (142) – a notion that echoed the concerns of 1930s eugenicists (155).

Challenging Choices provides a rich and impressively diverse analysis of 1970s reproductive discourses in Canada. Its astutely nuanced interpretations benefit from authors Erika Dyck and Maureen Lux’s expertise in the history of eugenics and Indigenous-government relations, respectively. The book constitutes a welcome contribution to the historiography on eugenics, deinstitutionalization, and disability as

well as reproductive and Indigenous rights in Canada. As for the question of expertise, *Challenging Choices* specifically addresses how various groups – ranging from economists, eugenicists, physicians, psychiatrists, and government bureaucrats to feminist scholars, First Nation activists, and patient advocacy groups – laid claim to expertise in family planning amidst the changing landscape of 1970s reproductive justice. Parsing the cacophony of voices involved in the public debate on birth control and abortion during this period exposes awkward and sometimes uncomfortable alliances. The book also provides valuable social commentary on current issues related to reproductive choice, sex education, and global population control. One limitation of the book is that it draws predominantly on English-language sources. This is regrettable as the period under study coincides with Trudeau-era debates in French-speaking Canada on bilingualism, multiculturalism, and Quebec sovereignty, which presumably have deep historical ties with French-Canadian pronatalism and the politics of population.¹ Nonetheless, Dyck and Lux's work will undoubtedly serve as a rich resource for historians pursuing further research on the topics of Canadian reproductive justice and population control.

¹ Works that problematize the issue of population in French-speaking Canada before the 1970s include Bruce Curtis, *The Politics of Population: State Formation, Statistics, and the Census of Canada, 1840-1875* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Angus McLaren and Arlene Tigar McLaren, *The Bedroom and the State: The Changing Practices and Politics of Contraception and Abortion in Canada, 1880-1997* (Toronto: Oxford University Press Canada, 1997); and Denyse Baillargeon, *Babies for the Nation: The Medicalization of Motherhood in Quebec, 1910–1970*, trans. W. Donald Wilson (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009).