

The Administration of Pregnancy

by Caroline Muller

While metropolitan France saw the repression of abortion in the early 20th century, against a backdrop of pro-natalist policy, pregnancy terminations were encouraged by authorities on Réunion Island after 1945. These practices shed light on a biopower constructed at the intersection of gender, class, and race.

Reviewed: Fabrice Cahen, *Gouverner les mœurs. La lutte contre l'avortement en France, 1890-1950* (Paris: Ined Éditions, coll. 'Études et enquêtes historiques', 2016), 416 p., 27 €.; Françoise Vergès, *Le ventre des femmes. Capitalisme, racialisation, féminisme* (Paris: Albin Michel, coll. 'Bibliothèque Idées', 2017), 230 p., 20 €.

Since 2015, the question of access to pregnancy termination has been back in the news. In 2015 and 2016, this right was called into question in several European countries, such as Poland and Spain, giving rise to protests. The recent passing of Simone Veil, the woman behind the 1975 French law decriminalising abortion, sparked a host of tributes, some from former opponents who were part of the anti-abortion fight, the earlier stages of which are examined by Fabrice Cahen in his book *Gouverner les mœurs. La lutte contre l'avortement en France, 1890-1950* [*Governing morals. The fight against abortion in France, 1890-1950*]. At the same time, Françoise Vergès's book *Le ventre des femmes. Capitalisme, racialisation, féminisme* [Women's wombs. Capitalism, racialisation, feminism] reminds us that forced abortions took place on Réunion Island in 1970.

A Thesis and an Essay

These two books describe two contrasting modes of public action. Fabrice Cahen offers an account of how abortion was politicised in the context of pro-natalist policy, and how repressive legislation was built and consolidated. Conversely, Françoise Vergès reveals how public authorities on Réunion Island encouraged abortion, to the extent that some doctors even considered it legitimate to conduct abortions without consent.

The two studies have very different aims however. Fabrice Cahen's book is based on a doctoral thesis completed in 2011 and draws on broad and varied documentary sources. His work constitutes a 'model for analysing the construction of public problems' (p. 11). Within an already well-charted historiographical field, this book offers a historical investigation that focuses on the State perspective (p. 25) and seeks to understand which networks worked to politicise the issue, why, and through what means.

Françoise Vergès also offers a shift in perspective and demonstrates that observing policies implemented in the French overseas departments and territories reveals the enduring presence of a colonial approach to the body, and particularly the female body. Her work is 'deliberately hybrid, as it does not fall under any particular discipline and is not part of academic research of any kind' (p. 22) and draws mainly on a corpus of press articles and public reports.

What this documented essay and academic thesis have in common is that they both examine the construction of a form of biopower, that is to say the development of a power exercised over the lives and bodies of populations. A comparative reading of both highlights the discrepancy between pro-natalist discourse in metropolitan France and the restriction of births advocated in the former colonies.

Limiting or Encouraging births

Both books place the issue of abortion in its long-term context. For Fabrice Cahen, three phases can be identified: 'flexible prohibition' (1890-1938) during which anti-abortion groups campaigned for the law to be changed and applied more rigorously; the 'radicalisation' of those involved (1939-1945) who managed to get public authorities to reinforce repression; finally, the move away from a purely punitive approach and the development of new tools to fight abortion after the Liberation. Françoise Vergès's work looks at the period that follows and the policies controlling births in the French overseas departments and territories in the 1960s and 1970s.

Between 1890 and the 1930s, abortion was progressively framed as an issue warranting political debate, as various actors – including the National Alliance for the Growth of the French Population, founded in 1896 – lobbied and challenged public authorities. This constellation of doctors and lawyers, with various different leanings, suggested several solutions: acting upstream by providing financial support to families and appealing to couples' consciences or punishing abortion more severely by tightening the law. F. Cahen studies the development of these positions looking to make abortion an issue in public opinion and political debate.

As for F. Vergès, she retraces the history of a politics of the body in French overseas departments and territories, highlighting how the notion of 'development' began to be applied to women's bodies. In the 1950s, following the report by inspector Jean Finance, the government took on board the idea that Réunion Island was 'overpopulated' and that this needed to be resolved by controlling births and 'exporting the population' (*sic*). This narrative completely overlooked the reasons behind the island's social and health conditions, the product of its colonial past and of neglect by public authorities.

These positions denouncing or promoting abortion shared the same rhetoric of urgency, based on the use of statistics. Those fighting abortion described by F. Cahen insisted on the urgency of the situation, citing a false number of 500,000 abortions per year. This 'warning cry' aimed to frame pregnancy terminations as 'non-births' and establish the idea that abortion was the main factor behind France's depopulation (p. 79). The same kind of rhetoric can be found among those who, a few years later, referred to Réunion Island's 'massive population growth' or 'population flood'. This emphasis on volume masked the new equilibrium in birth rates due to the end of slavery and a decline in mortality. The fertility of women in Réunion was presented as a threat, with figures in hand (p. 114-115).

Biopolitics at the Intersection of Class, Gender, and Race

The two books encourage reflection about what underpins public action controlling or encouraging births. F. Cahen shows that those fighting abortion drew links between the nation's vitality and its birth rate, tying together patriotism and a commitment to family values and going so far as to qualify abortionists as traitors to their country, so guilty that they deserved to die. In addition to this patriotic preoccupation, there was also a concern with maintaining a sexual order that controlled women's bodies in a context where 'moral panic' and 'outbursts of anti-feminist panic' (p. 60) emerged on several occasions. However, controlling women's bodies can also mean dispossessing them of their reproductive capacities: on Réunion Island, this took the shape of forced abortion and sterilisation.

The link between patriotism and population size implicitly reveals the idea that certain populations are deemed useless, i.e. those encouraged or forced to control their birth rates. Metropolitan France supported the large family model, whereas in the French overseas departments and territories, a decrease in births was encouraged instead. For F. Vergès, this shows that at the very height of narratives of decolonisation, colonial thinking nevertheless persisted and established a hierarchy in the value of different populations, some of which were abandoned to their fate from as early as 1946 (p. 70-71). The forced abortions in the 1970s were the result of a racist vision of the Réunion population, described by public authorities as irresponsible.

F. Cahen and F. Vergès both concur that these politics of the body affected above all the most fragile. Most of the women sentenced for abortion under the Vichy government were from working-class backgrounds (F. Cahen, p. 302), while the women affected in Réunion were those who had turned to free medical care because they had no other means (F. Vergès, p. 29). An intersectional analysis therefore highlights the differentiation of public action according to class, race, and gender. These factors influence the various actors responsible for creating and applying politics of the body.

Civil Society and Public Action

Fabrice Cahen and Françoise Vergès's investigations take the reader into the interstitial spaces of democracy, the zones where decisions are made without public consultation. The anti-abortion movement described by F. Cahen developed different modes of action – petitions, literature, images, parliamentary lobbying – which ultimately led to a 'parliamentary coup' in 1920 passing the law they were demanding (p. 176). As for F. Vergès, she depicts very different rules than those governing metropolitan France, between censure, repression of protests, and collusion between the wealthy and political authorities (p. 43). This context fostered a sense of impunity among figures such as Dr Moreau, a man who became very rich by carrying out numerous forced abortions and sterilisations, then embezzling the reimbursements from social welfare.

Both books underscore the range of actors who took an interest in constructing and applying these politics of the body. F. Cahen analyses the links between doctors, lawyers, members of parliament, associations promoting family values, and feminist associations, but also all those responsible for applying the law: judges, police officers, midwives, and the world of health and social care more broadly. There was no consensus regarding how to fight abortion, which explains the inefficiency of the policies implemented. For example, the refusal to allow breaches in medical confidentiality remained a subject of controversy throughout the period 1880-1950.

F. Vergès also depicts the world of medical and social care, as well as the growing role of social workers that F. Cahen also noted, from the 1950s onwards. She reminds us that the local social services in Réunion, convinced of their civilising mission, took children away from their families to send them to metropolitan France between 1963 and 1982. Both books emphasise the difficulty of identifying the precise boundaries between civil society and the State. Public action is polymorphous (F. Cahen, p. 371) and was often based on private funding and initiatives or on anti-abortion associations' communication materials. In Réunion Island, David Moreau was at once a doctor, a politician (Mayor, General Councillor), and a powerful businessman (p. 46). It is difficult to determine where public action begins and where it ends in terms of the politics of the body.

Finally, Fabrice Cohen and Françoise Vergès's books invite reflection upon the conditions for efficient public action when it comes to controlling or encouraging births. For Françoise Vergès, persisting racist representations led public authorities to cover up and encourage forced abortions. The rhetoric of 'development' concealed the hierarchy established between populations and its direct consequences, namely the violence suffered by women in Reunion in the 1970s. The grand narrative of decolonisation led to a 'process of collective erasure' of these populations' experiences, even in activist and feminist memory.

F. Cahen offers a contrasting assessment of the successes and failures of the anti-abortion fight between 1890 and 1950. Although repressive laws did not manage to significantly reduce abortion, its opponents did contrive to frame it as a public problem: they may have lost the battle on the ground, but they nevertheless won when it came to representations in the collective imaginary.

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