

BOOK REVIEW

PREGNANCY AND POWER: A SHORT HISTORY OF REPRODUCTIVE POLITICS IN AMERICA. By Rickie Solinger. New York: New York University Press. 2005. Pp. 303. \$27.95 (cloth).

Women's bodies have the frequently mentioned capacity to reproduce, to nurture a life into existence; yet women often do not feel in control of this process. We spend hours worrying about what is occurring in a uterus that we cannot see, hoping that either blood or a burgeoning bump will appear. Rickie Solinger begins her book with these sentiments, leading the reader to stop and reflect on this reproductive power.¹ Yet, as *Pregnancy and Power* explores, what occurs inside a woman's body is not a private decision, but one that has been used as a political tool for centuries. *Pregnancy and Power* leads the reader through a history of reproductive politics in the United States, addressing the different ways in which the courts, Congress, hospitals, and public opinion have manipulated women's reproductive capacity to advance particular social agendas.

A central focus of Solinger's work is the effects these social policies have had on varying groups, especially racial minorities and low-income women. The first four chapters of the book examine reproductive politics before *Roe v. Wade*,² beginning with policies directed toward slave women, through the new independence young women found as they migrated to cities and entered the work force, and ending with the advent and marketing of the birth control pill. The book then examines life after *Roe*, focusing on the backlash that followed the legalization of abortion, and the conservative movement's efforts to exert control over women's reproductive choices. In her concluding chapter, Solinger describes a series of recent case studies and addresses some contemporary issues, such as the prioritization of the fetus over the mother's choice and the coercion exercised over female prisoners' reproductive decisions. Unfortunately, Solinger does not fully develop these issues, missing an opportunity to contribute tangible examples of restrictions on women to current debates in the post-*Roe* era.

Throughout her book, Solinger discusses the evolution from reproduction as a biological function to one that is controlled by the market-economy; her comments suggest the possibility of an exciting debate about

¹ RICKIE SOLINGER, *PREGNANCY AND POWER: A SHORT HISTORY OF REPRODUCTIVE POLITICS IN AMERICA* 1 (2005) ("Like many women, I can summon up that old terror at will: being twenty-one and desperate to locate sensations in my breasts, in my belly, the first stains of blood-signs that my period is coming. I can also remember being twenty-eight and thrilled, my period a week overdue. I must be pregnant! Like many women, I learned early and often that sex-and-pregnancy, what I'll call 'reproductive capacity,' can carry profoundly different meaning, depending on a lot of variables.").

² 410 U.S. 959 (1973).

the economics of reproductive capacity. This Review will take her argument a few steps further, bringing to the fore questions that lie just below the surface of Solinger's book. This Book Review will start by identifying some of Solinger's ideas regarding race and pregnancy that form the backdrop for her economic argument surrounding pregnancy. The Review then turns to Solinger's introduction of the phenomenon of consumerism surrounding reproductive capacity, and ends with questions and problems raised by this approach.

BLACK MOTHERHOOD/WHITE MOTHERHOOD

The stark difference between conceptions of white motherhood and black motherhood is at the core of *Pregnancy and Power*. In the first chapter, Solinger poignantly describes the experience of being both a slave and a mother. While white, elite women were told to limit their activities during pregnancy to those that could be conducted in a carriage and to take daily afternoon naps, black women were forced to labor in the field, only given twenty days of rest during their entire pregnancies, and were often forced to return to work only hours after delivering a baby.³ Thus, since before the Civil War, differing measures of worth and social value surrounded motherhood. White women had the right to choose their spouses and raise their children, whereas black women were told with whom they could procreate, and did not have control over their own children.⁴

Solinger continues her argument about the difference in the value given to white babies and babies of color through examples surrounding abortion policies before *Roe*.⁵ In discussing the embarrassment and harassment experienced by women who had an abortion, or knew of someone who had,⁶ Solinger writes, "[t]hese spectacles almost always involved white, working-class women, those who could not buy privacy or protection but whose race made them objects of public interest and concern."⁷ Furthermore, the majority of doctors prosecuted for providing abortions during this time were those with white patients,⁸ a fact which Solinger attributes to a general social preference for increasing the white birth rate, while decreasing the black birth rate.⁹ This assertion is based on the popularity of eugenics-based public policy in the 1930s, which explicitly rejected the reproductive capacity of poor and non-white women, encouraging the medical

³ SOLINGER, *supra* note 1, at 36.

⁴ *Id.* at 37.

⁵ *Id.* at 69.

⁶ Women who were the victims of botched abortions would be harassed to give the name of the abortionist (called "dying declarations"), and if they refused, were left unattended to die alone on a hospital bed. *Id.* at 84.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ SOLINGER, *supra* note 1, at 10.

⁹ *Id.* at 115.

profession to stop those populations from reproducing.¹⁰ Solinger also points out that this type of exploitation did not cease with the decline of the eugenics movement.¹¹ As late as the 1970s, coercive sterilization of Mexican American women in California was occurring, often when the women were in the throes of labor pains.¹² *Pregnancy and Power* successfully portrays the ways social policies favored white babies over non-white babies.

THE ECONOMICS OF REPRODUCTIVE CAPACITY

Central to the history of the United States is the nation's strong capitalist base and its reliance upon the market economy to determine what has value. *Pregnancy and Power* also engages in a discourse of "value," but approaches it from an unusual angle. Solinger argues that the right to reproduce in America has become defined as an economic right, and maintains that this shift is a negative one.¹³

Economic issues surrounding reproduction are introduced as a salient force from the beginning of the book. As Solinger argues, one of the principal goals in acquiring female slaves was to increase the labor force through pregnancy.¹⁴ Slave women often could not choose their marital partners (either because of plantation rules or forcible measures such as rape).¹⁵ The laws were also designed so that all children of black, female slaves were born into slavery regardless of their paternity.¹⁶ Black babies were viewed as a commodity, and thus reproduction among black women was encouraged.¹⁷ In post-slavery America, this valuation was no longer applicable.¹⁸

In 1935, the Social Security Act became law, and after realizing in the early 1940s that minority women and children were receiving benefits at lower rates than whites, the federal government tried to increase the overall percentage of women of color on the welfare rolls.¹⁹ At the same time, states enacted their own policies that implicitly and explicitly employed practice of race exclusion.²⁰ The system sent a message that poor women were not encouraged to have babies, and that the state would punish them

¹⁰ *Id.* Solinger notes that in the 1930s, some eugenicists shifted their focus from Southern and Eastern European immigrants to the American black population. *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.* at 195.

¹² See *Madrigal v. Quilligan*, 639 F.2d 789 (9th Cir. 1981) (holding that physicians in the Los Angeles County Medical Center were not liable for the unwanted sterilizations of Mexican women in the early 1970s).

¹³ SOLINGER, *supra* note 1, at 190.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 33.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 40.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 39.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 36.

¹⁸ SOLINGER, *supra* note 1, at 10.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 144–45.

²⁰ *Id.* at 145–46.

for choosing to exercise reproductive freedom.²¹ As Solinger notes, the Georgia welfare policy provided that a mother with an infant over the age of twelve months was no longer eligible for funding if she did not reenter the workforce.²² Additionally, if there was a man in the household (employed or not), funding was cut-off with the expectation that the male household member would provide for the family.²³ Subsequent developments included the capping of benefits if a mother on welfare had more children, monetary incentives for sterilization and dangerous birth control devices such as Norplant.²⁴ Solinger notes the impact of other government policies on women's reproductive freedom: "[w]hen the government pays for a poor woman's sterilization but not for her abortion, what does 'choice' mean?"²⁵ Such policies lead to the inevitable conclusion that poor women's babies are not a welcome addition to the United States population. On the other end of the spectrum rests the celebration of white babies and the perceived boon they bring to the economy.

The role of white motherhood and the reproductive privileges that come with a higher-economic status are emphasized throughout *Pregnancy and Power*. Media portrayals of middle-class pregnancy in the 1960s and the effect of the Hyde Amendment,²⁶ which allows states to exclude abortion from the services provided to low-income women through Medicaid, serve as illustrative examples.²⁷ Regarding middle-class fertility, Solinger writes: "When a middle-class woman had a baby, the birth became an occasion for exercising the family's purchasing power. Her fertility was still the engine of the country's powerful consumer economy. Her sexuality was the spark."²⁸ This description is intuitive, for when a family with economic-purchasing power has a baby, they will be participating in all parts of the economy, from health care to consumer goods to education. A poor woman living on welfare cannot exercise such economic power. By permitting states to eliminate Medicaid-provided abortion, the Hyde Amendment effectively converts abortion from a reproductive right into an economic right, one that can be purchased by the elite, and denied to the poor.²⁹ The law places low-income women in a double bind because they cannot freely terminate pregnancies, but are already punished by government policies for carrying a child to term.

²¹ *Id.* at 148.

²² *Id.* at 146.

²³ SOLINGER, *supra* note 1, at 10.

²⁴ *Id.* at 222.

²⁵ *Id.* at 194.

²⁶ Pub. L. No. 96-123, § 109, 93 Stat. 926 (1980) (initially passed by Congress in 1976).

²⁷ SOLINGER, *supra* note 1, at 165, 201.

²⁸ *Id.* at 165.

²⁹ *Id.* at 208.

Solinger writes movingly about the unfairness of the Amendment,³⁰ and it is easy to feel outraged along with her; however this cannot be the end of the inquiry. For the pro-choice movement, an ideal world would be one in which reproductive choice is available to all segments of the population, regardless of economic status. If, hypothetically, political opposition to abortion rendered it only accessible to those with money, what is the next step? Taking away economic rights to abortion before providing an alternate means to access such care leaves women in a precarious position. Without critically examining an alternative to reproductive rights as economic rights, *Pregnancy and Power* may leave the battlefield unprotected.

LACK OF A FEASIBLE ALTERNATIVE

Policies that treat pregnancy and reproductive capacity as a fundamental, inalienable right of all women (regardless of factors such as race, class, or age), rather than an economic right, are certainly desirable. With advances in health care and medical technology, women now have the potential to control their decision to reproduce, and it is unfair that some women are able to access that control, and others are not. However, a question remains as to how to remove motherhood from the economic sphere, and provide universal access to reproductive capacity.

Raising a child, of course, costs money. In 2004, the average annual expenditure for a family with an average household income of \$26,100 was around \$7,000 for a child under the age of ten and around \$8,000 for a child ten to seventeen years of age.³¹ Spending is greater in higher income brackets, but for the purposes of this analysis, we are mainly concerned with the effect on poor women (who are disproportionately women of color).³² Is it the government's responsibility to ensure that each woman in this country has the money necessary to raise a child? Should the government be responsible for a woman's choice to bear children?

A related set of questions arises when examining the reproductive rights of incarcerated women. Is the state responsible for funding the reproductive choices of the incarcerated woman who has disobeyed the law, considering that it does not pay for such services for law-abiding citizens?

³⁰ *Id.* at 203.

³¹ CTR. FOR NUTRITION POLICY AND PROMOTION, U.S. DEP'T OF AGRIC., EXPENDITURES ON CHILDREN BY FAMILIES 7 (2004), available at <http://www.usda.gov/cnpp/Crc/crc2004.pdf>.

³² See National Organization for Women, *Valuing Diversity*, <http://www.now.org/issues/diverse/valuing.html>; see also ADVOCATES FOR YOUTH, YOUNG WOMEN OF COLOR AND THEIR RISK FOR HIV AND OTHER STIs 1 (2003), available at <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/iag/ywoc.htm#references>.

The answers to these questions are not clear. They are, however, of utmost importance, and they are questions that Solinger does not address or attempt to answer.

Certain measures would alleviate some of the difficulties facing poor women. For instance, repealing the Hyde Amendment would open many doors for the low-income population. But such steps would not eliminate the problem of the economic implications on reproductive rights because access to quality health care, the choice of birth control method, the financial ability to work and provide childcare, and the ability to provide a child with the best quality of life possible, would still be determined by economic circumstances. *Pregnancy and Power* attempts to remove economics from the reproductive debate. However, that may not be the answer. Instead, we should focus on the economics of pregnancy and forge a viable method of empowering women to make their own reproductive choices, regardless of earning and spending power.

CONCLUSION

Solinger's portrayal of reproductive rights in the United States as shaped by politics, race, class, and social forces is thought-provoking and well-supported. Her underlying normative claim that reproductive politics should not be forged by economic concerns is motivated by a desire to give all women a chance to be in control of their reproductive choices. However, *Pregnancy and Power* does not provide an explanation of how a world in which reproductive politics are separate from economic concerns is possible. Solinger does, however, shed light on the ways in which power has been exerted over women's bodies, and pushes the reader to examine what kinds of rights—human, social, or economic—should be associated with reproduction.

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