

University Art Museum, University at Albany

Art, Women, Race, and Class Reading Group

Program organized in conjunction with the exhibit
Carrie Schneider: Rapt, featuring the photographic series *Reading Women*

Thinking about Reproductive Justice

March 6, 2019

Barbara Sutton

Commentary based on “Racism, Birth Control and Reproductive Rights” (In Davis, Angela. 1983 [1981]. *Women, Race, and Class*. New York: Vintage Books)

In “Racism, Birth Control and Reproductive Rights,” Angela Davis exposes the historical fault lines in the feminist demands for reproductive rights in the United States. She discusses activism for “voluntary motherhood” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and in the context of the second wave feminist push for legal abortion (reaching a major victory with the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*). Referring to the early birth control movement, and particularly the activism of Margaret Sanger, Davis notes how a movement that had a progressive potential, and that could have united women of diverse socio-economic backgrounds and ethnoracial identities, succumbed to racist and eugenic ideas. These notions fueled the disproportionate sterilization of poor women of color, including Black, Native American, Puerto Rican, and Chicana women deemed “unfit” to reproduce. If feminism is a movement to end the oppression of women—meaning *all* women—then feminist currents that disregarded sterilization abuse, or the noxious framing that implicitly presented birth control as a “‘right’ for the privileged” and a “‘duty’ for the poor” (Davis 1983: 210), did not live up to its promise. While economically privileged white women did not want to be forced into motherhood (and thus demanded the right to abortion), women of color were being prevented from having children (for example, through compulsory sterilization).

Yet, Davis also points out that that it was not that women of color were disconnected from the practice of abortion or uninterested in the right to legal and accessible abortion. She traces the history of Black women resorting to abortion in the context of slavery as a mode of resistance to the brutality of that system, denying slaveholders additional enslaved people in the process. Davis also talks about how in the 70s, women of color “also wanted desperately to escape the back-room quack abortionists” (1983: 204). Then, how is it that a movement pushing for the legalization of abortion failed to incorporate the perspectives of a significant group of women who could have also

benefited from legal abortion in more substantive ways? After all, while *Roe v. Wade* is premised on the right to privacy, what about women whose privacy has been systematically trampled by the state or who had been confronted with the choice to either lose welfare benefits or be sterilized? How effective is the right to legal abortion if it becomes economically inaccessible for working-class and poor women?

What Davis demonstrated is a much more nuanced understanding of matters related to reproduction than that of the mainstream feminist movement at the time. This understanding emerges from an analysis that centers the lives of women of color. In that way she prefigured the concept of “reproductive justice” developed by women of color in the United States. This framework encompasses “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities.” (SisterSong n.d.: n.p.). Reproductive justice necessitates not only the right to safe, legal, and accessible abortion, but also comprehensive sex education, access to contraception and other reproductive services and information, freedom from sterilization abuse, and the right to have a say on birthing conditions. These rights are seen as embedded in social contexts and the conditions of the communities in which women live. Reproductive justice entails “the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, social and economic well-being of women and girls, based on the full achievement and protection of women’s human rights” (Ross 2006: 14). This is a framework that is intersectional—in the sense of recognizing how race, class, gender, and other systems of inequality intersect and mutually constitute one another—and it is a power sensitive approach.

Interestingly, the reproductive justice framework also has international resonance. Some of the reproductive and human rights violations in the United States that Angela Davis denounced in her book, such as sterilization abuses, have occurred in other parts of the world as well. Population control programs were implemented in countries of the Global South aided by the funding and ideological support of international agencies and organizations based in powerful countries such as the United States (this is documented, for example, in Betsy Hartmann’s book, *Reproductive Rights & Wrongs*, 1995). From a history of mass sterilization in India under the guise of “family planning” (Hartmann 1995) to the sterilization of indigenous women in Peru (Theidon 2014), we can see that women of color in the United States were not alone as targets of population control programs that blamed them for poverty, underdevelopment, and other social ills. More recently we see that even groups with legitimate concerns such as climate change scapegoat poor people of color in the Global South for environmental degradation (Hartmann and Barajas-Roman 2009). They focus on the prevention of population growth while deflecting attention from affluent people,

corporations, and institutions in the Global North that have a disproportionate impact on climate change and other forms of environmental destruction.

The concept of reproductive justice owes not only to the analysis of oppression in the United States, but to the awareness and participation of U.S. activists in global debates (e.g., those unfolding during the 1994 United Nations Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt). In that conference, feminists pushed to shift the paradigm from population control to reproductive rights, grounded in a broader framework of human rights (Harcourt 2009). The human rights framework can be linked to instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and various international conventions. The proponents of reproductive justice saw a promising approach in the language of human rights, which is more holistic than that afforded by a mere focus on privacy and personal choice (Leonard 2017, Ross and Solinger 2017).

Works such as Angela Davis's book prompt us to adopt an expansive and intersectional analysis of the barriers to reproductive freedom. Even if one were to focus on the single issue of abortion, one would see that the legality of the practice—which is now under fire even in the United States—is not sufficient to guarantee this right to all groups of women. For instance, Davis talks about the negative impact of the Hyde Amendment, which turned 40 years old in 2016 and denied federal funds to abortion, with few exceptions over the years (e.g., rape, incest or risk to life). This has disproportionately affected poor and working-class women, and particularly low-income women of color who rely on federal programs for basic health care. Davis notes that while federal funds were restricted for abortion, sterilizations were still “federally funded and free, for poor women, on demand” (1983: 221).

Recognizing that “choice” and “privacy” are narrow grounds for reproductive rights and freedom, activists in the Global South have also adopted more expansive analyses and demands. In that sense, I would like to conclude by sharing news from Argentina, my country of origin, where the struggle to legalize abortion is currently raging. In Argentina, abortion has been largely illegal. Yet it has been estimated that between nearly 372,000 and 522,000 abortions take place annually (Mario and Pantelides 2009). The clandestine dimensions of the practice create many complications for women in general, but they particularly hurt the most marginalized women. The illegality of abortion sends those who need an abortion underground, exposing them to unnecessary health risks, stigma, and humiliation. In this context, activists have mobilized for abortion legalization, making significant progress in the last decade. The most prominent coalition demanding a change in abortion legislation in Argentina is the National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe, and Free Abortion, launched in 2005. In 2018, the movement for abortion rights made unprecedented inroads: For the

first time a bill to decriminalize and legalize abortion was debated in Congress. While the bill failed, this historic parliamentary debate energized a massive movement set on repealing and replacing punitive legislation on abortion.

The Campaign includes feminist and other women's movement groups as well as human rights, labor, student, and LGBT organizations, among many others. Its distinctive symbol, a triangular green kerchief, has recently been adopted by people from all walks of life and been proudly displayed in public spaces, including by passengers in subways, demonstrators in plazas, presenters in panels, and students in high schools and universities. The influx of large numbers of young activists has lent the movement renewed vitality. They engage in festive modalities of protest, painting their bodies with green glitter and demanding more than freedom from the risks of clandestine abortion. They reclaim their right to sexual autonomy and pleasure without apology.

Abortion rights activists in Argentina have used a multiplicity of frames to advance their struggle: arguments based on public health, social justice, bodily rights, human rights, choice, defense of women's lives, and as a pragmatic intervention (Sutton and Borland 2013). Their demands go beyond legal and safe abortion to include the right to abortion that is *gratuito*/free (in the sense of free of charge). As the movement expands and popularizes, it has also made its arguments and demands more inclusive, for instance, talking not only about women as the subject of abortion, but anybody with the "capacity to gestate" (e.g. trans men, non-binary and other gender non-conforming individuals) (Sutton and Borland 2018). This has also been a topic of discussion in other parts of the world such as the United States and Canada, offering a glimpse of how abortion rights and reproductive justice movements are transforming.

The struggle for reproductive justice continues to be relevant and very much alive in contemporary society. This movement evolves and shifts in solidarity and conversation with various movements for progressive social change—nationally and internationally. Scholars and activists such as Angela Davis offer an essential analysis that reminds us of the need for an intersectional, inclusive, and expansive approach to reproductive rights issues. Such an approach also requires difficult dialogues, coalition building, sensitivity to legacies of oppression, and crafting movement demands in ways that centrally include the lives, perspectives, and experiences of those most marginalized.

Works Cited

- Davis, Angela. 1983 [1981]. *Women, Race, and Class*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Harcourt, Wendy. 2009. *Body Politics in Development: Critical Debates in Gender and Development*. London: Zed Books.
- Hartmann, Betsy. 1995. *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Hartmann, Betsy and Elizabeth Barajas-Roman. 2009. "Reproductive Justice, Not Population Control: Breaking the Wrong Links and Making the Right Ones in the Movement for Climate Justice." Paper prepared for the WE ACT for Environmental Justice conference on Advancing Climate Justice: Transforming the Economy, Public Health and Our Environment, January 29-30, New York City, New York.
- Leonard, Toni M. Bond. 2017. "Laying the Foundations for a Reproductive Justice Movement." In *Radical Reproductive Justice: Foundations, Theory, Practice, Critique*, edited by Loretta J. Ross, Lynn Roberts, Erika Derkas, Whitney Peoples, and Pamela Bridgewater Toure, 39-49. New York: Feminist Press.
- Mario, Silvia and Edith Alejandra Pantelides. 2009. "Estimación de la magnitud del aborto inducido en la Argentina." In *Notas de Población* No. 87, 95-120. Santiago de Chile: Naciones Unidas.
- Ross, Loretta. 2006. "Understanding Reproductive Justice: Transforming the Pro-choice Movement." *Off our Backs* 36: 14-19.
- SisterSong. N.d. "What is Reproductive Justice."
<https://www.sistersong.net/reproductive-justice> (accessed March 6, 2019).
- Sutton, Barbara and Elizabeth Borland. 2013. "Framing Abortion Rights in Argentina's Encuentros Nacionales de Mujeres." *Feminist Studies* 39 (1): 194-234.
- Sutton, Barbara and Elizabeth Borland. 2018. "Queering Abortion Rights: Notes from Argentina." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 20 (12): 1378-1393.
- Theidon, Kimberly. 2014. "First Do No Harm: Enforced Sterilizations and Gender Justice in Peru." *ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America*, Fall 2014: 84-87.