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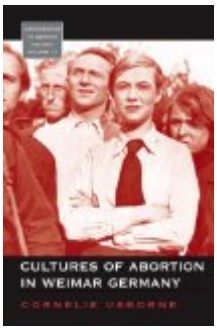
Cornelie Usborne. *Cultures of Abortion in Weimar Germany.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2007. 296 pp. $90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84545-389-3.



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Commissioned by Benita Blessing (Oregon State University)

Cornelie Usborne has been conducting historical research on abortion for many years; she has published some of the results of that work in a previous book and in many separate articles and chapters. The virtue of ***Cultures of Abortion*** is that the book-length form and its focus on multiple cultural discourses allows the author to develop her ideas and arguments more fully and, most significantly, to make provocative connections and comparisons among the various discursive realms the book examines. In particular, she juxtaposes popular cultural representations of abortion with medical discourse, on the one hand, and with the understandings "from below" that emerge from close readings of legal documents arising from criminal prosecutions of abortion, on the other. Although each separate discussion is thoughtful and informative, the comparisons across them are rich and interesting in both historical and methodological terms.

The book begins with popular culture. Usborne offers a reading in chapter 2 of popular cultural treatments of abortion, especially as circulated in several of the Weimar era's classic films, theater pieces, and "New Woman"-themed novels. Her analyses of examples from each of these genres (including Friedrich Wolf's 1929 theater piece ***Cyankali***, Alice Lex-Nerlinger's 1931 poster "Paragraph 218," Irmgard Keun's 1931 book ***Gilgi--eine von uns***, and the 1926 film ***Kreuzzug des Weibes*** [dir. Martin Berger]) point to several leitmotifs that seem to have structured dominant cultural representations of abortionists and their clients (p. 54). "Quacks"--lay abortionists who were typically older women without medical training--are generally presented as evil women, even witch-like. Their typically lower-class clients, or more appropriately, victims, are meant to elicit more sympathy, but their fate is often tragic. Even more sympathetic left-leaning films and novels were quick to circulate the image of the single, pregnant women as the prey of either her seducer or the abortionist or both. On the other hand, medical doctors who perform the occasional abortion for a desperate patient are treated with more sympathy. They are often heroes who come to the

victim's rescue. Class, too, features on or just below the surface. Whereas working-class women are usually presented as victims of their biology and their menfolk, middle-class "New Women," whether seen as feisty or selfish, are more in control. Eugenic considerations figure into the arguments these films and stories make for their rescues of downtrodden working-class women from yet another pregnancy.

These representations, Usborne argues persuasively, reflect the cultural domination of the reformist medical discourse. Still, despite their class biases, their uniformly negative portrait of the lay abortionist, and their paternalistic portrayal of especially working-class women, these popular representations did share a commitment to reform of the draconian anti-abortion laws, and did contribute to the extraordinarily open discussion of unwanted pregnancy as a social problem requiring a solution that characterized Weimar Germany.

Usborne then turns to medical discourse, where she finds evidence of a commitment to reform of the abortion law for the purpose of increasing the safety and availability of medically appropriate abortions. Some left-leaning doctors were even advocating or practicing abortion on social or economic grounds, a position that went well beyond the medical mainstream view that abortions should be allowable if deemed by a doctor to be required on medical grounds. As Usborne points out, these positions were transparently self-serving; they were part of a larger and longer struggle for medical professionalization that would cement the control of medical doctors over obstetrics and gynecology.

Here, Usborne contributes to and complicates even further arguments first introduced by Reinhard Spree in his study of health and medicine in imperial Germany.[1] She builds on the suggestion that doctors were able to impose their authority over rivals despite the lack of evidence that they had been truly effective in improving the health of the vast majority of Germans. The story continues into the 1920s, Usborne argues, when doctors maligned lay abortionists despite their own spotty record in this realm. Moreover, medicalization affected the position of women seeking abortions. Medicalization meant greater authority for doctors over their patients than was the case in relationships between lay practitioners and their clients. Perhaps the most disturbing section of Usborne's chapter on medical abortion is her investigation of the career of Dr. Hope Bridges Adams Lehmann. Lehmann's commitment to providing fertility control, including abortion, to working-class women in Munich, came out of her feminist views. Her competent and successful practice came to light not because of any medical complications or failures but because she was denounced to the police by a midwife. Despite her concerns to bring to poor women a modicum of control over their fertility, Usborne reveals, there is also evidence that she took advantage of her medical authority to sterilize some of her patients without their explicit permission or full understanding, a most contradictory and unsettling tactic for a feminist doctor. In comparison, Usborne suggests, lay abortionists might have been a safer bet in the sense that they related to their clients on a more equal basis and in any event they could not perform sterilizations.

The evidence presented in chapters 3 and 4 undermines the argument common in contemporary discourse and subsequent medical history that medicalization meant greater safety for women seeking abortions. Nevertheless, in her efforts to correct this view, Usborne does at times overstate her evidence about the relative safety of lay versus medical abortion. Usborne consistently emphasizes medical doctors' more sinister or commercial motives at the expense of their concern for their patients, as well as their failures. The evidence here is at best indirect and partial, since Usborne only rarely alludes to more general or statistical analyses. She explicitly defends her use of discourse analysis "rather than more quan-

titative approaches of social or crime history in that it often offers explanations that elude large-scale studies" (p. 66), which is a defensible position. However, at times she pushes her evidence to make an implicitly quantitative argument (women were as safe with lay abortionists as with medical doctors) without really wanting to present an actual quantitative analysis. Where she does present quantitative evidence (e.g., the statistics on land distribution or on the birth rate decline), the numbers are confusing or mistaken. Obviously, any attempt to arrive at statistical certainty about the relative safety of medical versus lay abortions would be methodologically challenging, if not impossible. But I would have liked to see here--and at several other moments in the book--more grappling with those aspects of the argument that require quantitative analysis (not only the safety of abortion but also, for example, regional and class variations in the trends in fertility control), to see Usborne bring her ample and wide analytic talents to bear on these types of arguments and sources. Still, it must be said, her comparison of medical and lay abortion claims and practices provides a necessary corrective to the usual framework which equates medical abortions with safety and idealistic motives and lay abortions with ineptitude, quackery, and greed.

Usborne's two chapters based on abortion trials are original and adept readings of legal sources; her analysis here offers insights into views on abortion "from below." Chapter 5 deals primarily with urban cases--mainly from Berlin and Munich. Chapter 6 treats the "monster case" involving ninety-three defendants in the network of lay abortionist Hermine Kastner and her husband Adolf in Hesse in 1924. Usborne's close reading of the testimony of those accused of performing abortions and also their clients called both as witnesses and also as defendants charged with having aborted, offers perspectives that are distinct from both those purveyed through the mass culture and those available in medical discourse. None of these discourses, of course, are pure forms hermetically sealed off from each other. Usborne's earlier chapters demonstrated that medical discourse permeated the films, for example, even if the latter offered at times more ambiguous or challenging possibilities. So, too, the trial testimonies reflect both the strategic language of the courtroom situation and a variety of vocabularies drawn from the different cultural streams that fed into women's understandings of abortion. These discussions included popular culture and medical discourse, but other sources as well, often more local, personal, and subterranean. Usborne contextualizes this material through her careful examination of the testimonies for what they reveal in particular about women's knowledge about their menses and pregnancies, about the nature and causes of flows of blood and interruptions of those flows. She documents lively and ongoing conversations among women--friends, neighbors, and female relatives--about their bodies and their anxieties about pregnancy. Perhaps more surprising are the conversations that include men as a matter of fact--friends, neighbors, lovers, and husbands--all interested in trying to find ways to establish a modicum of control over fertility in a situation where contraception was untrustworthy or unavailable. Usborne here presents strong evidence that lower-class women, far from being the hapless victims presented in popular culture, were fully engaged in efforts to understand their bodies and to limit their fertility. This was true in large metropolitan areas but also in the rural villages in Hesse undergoing a transition from a predominantly agrarian economy to one where most households made their living through a combination of agricultural and industrial work. It was the case for many Catholic as well as Protestant women.

Usborne argues that the women who sought abortions and the networks of friends and relatives who supported them were "rebels" against the prevailing law and medical discourse. This claim raises questions about the relationship between this form of rebellion and the more formal-

ly political activity of the Weimar parties and organizations that were engaged with the abortion reform question. Usborne makes a persuasive case that the abortion reform movement--beyond the political movement well documented by Atina Grossmann and others--was also based in a grassroots propaganda of the deed.[2] It is probably not inappropriate to term "rebellious" the act of seeking or helping others to seek an abortion despite the risks involved, even if the tactics of secrecy aimed to reduce these risks entailed avoiding politics and privatizing abortion even as they defied the state and church and often the medical profession.

Usborne concludes with provocative suggestions about how her findings about abortion cultures in Weimar Germany contribute to broader historiographic, conceptual, and comparative arguments. For example, she alludes to comparative historical evidence that suggests that in British working-class culture of this same era abortion was not only not politicized; it was barely even speakable. In contrast with the multiple and contentious cultures of abortion in Weimar Germany, there was virtually no public discussion of abortion law, no films or novels that problematized fertility control or abortion, nor, as oral histories suggest, even much discussion about birth control or abortion between a husband and wife in the privacy of the bedroom. This comparative note is a fitting one on which to conclude this study that, because of its careful analysis of multiple discourses, makes clear how innovative the debate over abortion in Weimar Germany was. The popular cultural evidence and the medical discourse and the criminal law cases tell us somewhat different things about how abortion was understood at this historical moment; Usborne's analysis and juxtaposition of these various meanings is masterful and persuasive.

Notes

[1]. Reinhard Spree, ***Health and Social Class in Imperial Germany: A Social History of Mortality, Morbidity, and Inequality*** (New York: Berg, 1992).

[2]. Atina Grossman, ***Reforming Sex: The German Movement for Birth Control and Abortion Reform, 1920-1950*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

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