
Reviewed by Marjorie Levine-Clark (Department of History, University of Colorado at Denver)  
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Vaccination and the Body Politic

Nadja Durbach’s *Bodily Matters* is an engaging study about the politics of anti-vaccinationism in England from 1853 to 1907. Durbach explores anti-vaccinationism on its own terms, questioning the validity of statistics to discern the efficacy of the practice, and locating vaccination as an “invasive, insanitary, and sometimes disfiguring procedure” (p. 3). In Durbach’s story, the state is the representative of coercive policies of compulsory vaccination, fought against by the combined forces of medical, social, and religious dissent. These were alternative healers, liberal individualists, and the poor whose bodies were the targets of the offending legislation. The groups that argued against vaccination did so from convictions about society, politics, and the body that could be violently at odds with those making policy and those wielding the “parliamentary lancet.” Durbach convincingly shows how the anti-vaccination movement was fundamental to debates about medicine, the state, and society, and in fact represented “popular understandings of bodily economy and assumptions about the boundaries of state intervention in personal life” (p. 4). Anti-vaccinationists challenged official claims to and knowledge of the body, proposing alternative medical, political, and bodily understandings.

Durbach’s chapters are thematic and chronological. She begins with an investigation of the medical cultures of the mid-nineteenth century and their relationships to the first compulsory vaccination legislation passed in 1853, and takes her story through the legislative approval of a broad definition of conscientious objection in 1907, which effectively ended vaccination’s compulsory status. Along the way, she investigates questions of citizenship, liberalism, class formation, vampires and vivisectors (or the “gothic body”), and the impact of the germ theory of disease. A good social and cultural historian, Durbach pays attention both to what anti-vaccinationists did and what they said, and establishes that anti-vaccinationists very quickly took control of the discourse from those in favor of vaccination. They had excellent grass roots organization, forceful popular demonstrations, and a lot of publicity through a well-circulated anti-vaccination press. Their politics was national in the shape of anti-vaccination leagues and publications, but more importantly, it was expressed locally and related to local cultures of dissent and working-class strategies of mutual self-help.

Durbach shows that the working poor objected to compulsory vaccination on the grounds of both principle and experience: they were opposed to compulsion and to being “experimented” upon. Both middle-class and working-class antis positioned orthodox medical practitioners as evil aristocrats parasitically feeding on the bodies of the poor. Here was old-fashioned radical politics that joined together the disparate forces opposed to old corruption as represented by the medical profession (decidedly middle class, rather than aristocratic). Durbach argues that working-class identity, in reference to the politics of vaccination, was formed around
a “shared bodily experience” (p. 28), while middle-class opponents of vaccination shaped their opposition around abstract principles. The anti-vaccination leadership, indeed, could be patronizing to its working-class constituency, and Durbach highlights class tensions in the movement that were covered over by populist discourse and an inclusive rhetoric of citizenship. Good citizens, the movement claimed, expressed their belonging through resistance, not through submission to vaccination, which was seen as inherently un-English. Yet it was only members of the working class who were pursued by the state for failing to vaccinate; they were the ones who were subjected to what they saw as the unclean, stigmatizing practices of vaccination, or fined repeatedly if they avoided them.

Durbach demonstrates the ways that the vaccination debate was implicated in wider discussions about the medical profession and medicine’s relationship to the state. Many anti-vaccinationists were alternative healers or somehow outside the boundaries of official medicine. They (correctly) saw compulsory vaccination as an attempt by professionalizing medical men to gain authority over state medical policy, and a variety of medical dissenters, feeling threatened by the professionalization of medicine and their own marginalization, came together around the issue of anti-vaccination. In discussing the movement’s medical position, Durbach emphasizes the centrality of ideas about purity, cleanliness, and the maintenance of the healthy body—a different regimen of prevention than compliance with vaccination. Anti-vaccinationists were flexible enough to incorporate new medical theories into their opposition: rather than bowing down before the authority of the germ theory disease in the last decades of the nineteenth century, they adapted it to their own purposes, stressing the relationship between germs and dirt, in effect domesticating a potentially radical threat to their claims. Anti-vaccinationists, according to Durbach, criticized orthodox medicine for ignoring the social roots of disease, such as poverty. In this context, Durbach sometimes seems to portray the antis as social justice crusaders, which is perhaps somewhat at odds with her detailed discussion of the ways the middle-class leadership fell short of really understanding the body politics driving working-class resistance.

The class and gender aspects of anti-vaccinationism inform Durbach’s approach to her subject throughout. While her attention to the class politics embedded in the movement stresses the gaps between reality and rhetoric in terms of class solidarity, she is more positive regard-
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the reconstruction of the state provision of health care in relationship to citizenship.

Durbach clearly admires the success of this popular politics of anti-vaccination; her story is a triumphant one that illustrates the power of the people to change state policy and practice. Yet, while there is no question that vaccination in the nineteenth century had its problems, it also had its benefits. By upholding the termination of compulsory vaccination legislation as the heroic end to the story, Durbach perhaps underplays the very real dangers to public health that are a consequence of the freedom to say no. This underplaying is probably the result of Durbach’s insistence on the importance of the power of the anti-vaccination movement itself—a point she establishes without a doubt, with persuasive evidence, and through a lively narrative.

Note


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