

BOOK REVIEW

## **Kathleen M. Crowther, *Policing Pregnant Bodies from Ancient Greece to Post-Roe America***

**Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023. Pp. 288. ISBN 978-1-4214-4763-6. \$29.95 (hardcover).**

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*Policing Pregnant Bodies* is two things. It is an account of historical understandings of conception, pregnancy, miscarriage and abortion that still influence body cultures, medical practices and legislatures today. It is also a furious criticism of the degradation of pregnant people's rights in the United States of America right now. While not making new historiographical interventions, this book is timely and exemplifies history's ability to inform our understanding of our own culture, and help us think more critically about it.

Crowther's core argument is that many current assumptions about how people get pregnant, how they gestate fetuses and how they control their fertility are rooted in misogynist and racist cultures of the past. Crowther traces attitudes to fertility and generation from ancient Greece and Rome, through medieval and early modern Europe and the Middle East, and into modern America. She argues that the overwhelming tendency to treat pregnant people as mere vessels, and to transfer individuality and personhood to their fetuses, has caused a plethora of problems for both pregnant people and their infants across millennia.

This argument unfolds across five chapters, each confronting a historical phenomenon that resonates in contemporary culture. Crowther begins with the recent 'heartbeat' bills passed in some American states that have limited abortions to a few weeks after conception. Noting that the premise that a 'heartbeat' can be heard at six weeks is a fallacy, she suggests that the notion's power derives from long-standing associations between heart and soul. Chapter 2 investigates the separation of the fetus from the pregnant person, and how much medical investigation has focused on the fetus exclusively, producing mistaken notions of the role, and the health needs, of the pregnant person. Chapter 3 examines the idea of the womb as an inherently dangerous environment – ironic given that fetuses can only be gestated *in utero*. Examining histories of toxic menstrual blood and of lifestyle advice for pregnant people, Crowther compares the fallacy of these worries with proven, yet largely unaddressed, dangers of poor social safety nets, from medical care to pollution control. Chapter 4 turns to histories of women's knowledge and how male medical writers constructed it as sinister. From identifying the moment of conception to systems for initiating miscarriage, some still assume that pregnant people have more agency in conceiving and carrying a fetus than they do. This, Crowther argues, has shaped laws restricting abortion. Chapter 5 reaches the core issue of abortion, using three case studies spanning from the ancient world to the modern to complicate histories of abortion that have been used in American legislation since *Roe v. Wade*. She identifies several widespread misconceptions, for example that the Christian church

has always opposed abortion, and that prior to the rise of modern medicine women had secret knowledge of safe, effective herbal abortifacients.

While likely of interest to other readers who see the influence of American politics on the world at large, and who share an inheritance of European and Middle Eastern medical approaches to generation, this book is geared towards an American public readership. This is not only apparent in its addressing contemporary American politics, but also in the way Crowther's history is shaped into a trajectory moving towards this point. Other medical histories outside the Western tradition that have influenced American culture, and how this Western history has developed in other places, are not treated.

The history is a synthesis, but it is done skilfully by an expert in the field and would present an excellent introduction for students and wider public audiences. We can assume that this book also addresses a broadly liberal and pro-choice audience, though it might also challenge the assumptions of any undecided readers who encounter it. As Crowther observes, she has long taught histories of reproduction in a very conservative state. This shows in her ability to bring history into eloquent conversation with modern social problems. Although not targeted at academic historians, Crowther's adept blending of history and contemporary politics should act as a model for those who wish to pursue similar crossover projects.

One pitfall the author occasionally falls into, writing for a general audience, is the denigration of knowledge systems of the past. Expressing indignation about misogynistic past medical theories, and their lingering presence in our own culture even when directly contradicted by medical 'fact', Crowther sometimes implies that modern biomedicine is fundamentally 'true', and that older medical systems are consequently 'false'. This flattens understandings of both past and present cultures. Here, however, the rhetorical device is in service of a text that is not primarily historical, but political. The argument is about the failings of reproductive health provision in America, and history serves this end. This aim is also why the book overlooks past cultures that valued, praised or supported pregnant people, though of course such practices existed.

*Policing Pregnant Bodies* makes for sobering reading because it is intended as a wake-up call, an aid to see more deeply and more contextually what is going on in the United States. Yet Crowther does not present us with an alternative, at least not until the last two pages of the conclusion. In these pages she mentions the early modern metaphor of the fetus as guest, the pregnant person as host – a metaphor that is more empowering and positive than many others. Crowther suggests,

If we thought of women's bodies as inherently nurturing, rather than inherently dangerous, we would be less likely to blame and to punish women for poor pregnancy outcomes. If we thought of pregnancy as creative work, rather than incubation, we would be more likely to support and nurture pregnant people (p. 208).

If anything is missing, it is an expansion of this idea, a suggestion of where we might go, and how we might take positive inspiration from our histories; even, dare I say, how we might speak positively and not just defensively about abortion. If Crowther ever writes Volume 2, I, and I think most of her readers, would reach for it eagerly.