

BIERNAT, Carolina and Karina RAMACCIOTTI, 2013, *Crecer y multiplicarse. La política sanitaria materno-infantil. Argentina 1900-1960*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Biblos. 165 pp.

In recent years, there has been an increase in so-called gender studies in academic literature on the history of women. These studies seek to emphasize the socially and historically constructed unequal relations between genders. Carolina Biernat and Karina Ramacciotti's book, *Crecer y multiplicarse*, forms part of this proliferation of publications written from the perspective of social and institutional history.

*Crecer y multiplicarse* invites us to review the creation of maternal and infant public policies during the first half of the 20th century in Argentina. The period begins at a time when population policies with exogenous causes – immigration – were brought into question by others that had an endogenous character – maternal and infant care – and ends in 1960 when this tension-filled discussion became weighted toward the second perspective. In tune with this development, the creation of an interventionist state provided the basis for official intervention in the private lives of individuals through public policies.

According to the authors, current maternal and infant public policies reflect the Argentine neoliberal scenario scene that puts maternal and infant mortality on the public agenda. The book thus provides a history of the problem of maternal and infant mortality, as well as government responses to the issue.

The objective of the study is to inquire into the process of constructing maternal and infant health policies in the public sphere between 1900 and 1960 by exploring the debates and conflicts that shaped these policies, as well as the limits and achievements in their implementation.

The analysis is structured around three areas of focus. The first is the realm of the ideas and ideological debates in favor of the legitimacy of state intervention. The second centers on public policies intended to respond to the issue of high levels of maternal and infant mortality and low birthrates. Finally, the third theme analyzes the bureaucratic and administrative (re)organization which these policies brought about.

The three chapters of the book correspond to these areas of focus. The first chapter explores the ideological background of the debate about healthcare policies designed to respond to maternal and infant mortality and low birth rates. According to the authors, the two debates that drove these policies were population growth and the "social question." The first, despite having had a long history in Argentina, was part of the problematics of modern

states in formation, and the provision of incentives to immigration was seen as the solution. But the authors find that by the beginning of the 20th century, this idea had begun to lose its legitimacy because of the value placed on endogenous population growth that resulted from a sharp decline in the birthrate and negative characterizations of European immigrants. At the same time, the effects of the modernization project and the second theme under debate, the "social question" – poverty, marginality, criminality, overcrowded housing – led to disturbances of the peace, a situation which worsened after the world crisis of 1929. Thus, quantitative and qualitative population reproduction played a crucial role in state intervention, given the acknowledgement that mothers – as procreators – and their children – future citizens – were the principal target group of health policies. It was in this context, according to the authors, that local eugenics in medical interventions related to racial improvement and declining birthrates – called *denatalización* – became relevant; at the same time, it was the continuation of the eugenics-centred population debate that made it possible for the government to intervene via biopolicies regarding the bodies of mothers and children.

In the second chapter, Biernat y Ramacciotti analyze how public policies related to female workers as mothers or future mothers were developed. The authors note that the reproductive health of women had been of interest to the government since the last decades of the 19th century and this led to growing intervention through policies that protected mothers, but not all of them. There were two principal areas of intervention. First, female labor, which was considered dangerous to women's reproductive capacities. Thus, when increasing numbers of women entered the labor force, the government was obliged to legislate and regulate the wage labor of women. The second area of intervention was the pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting process. The authors researched Argentine legislation, looking for laws that had been promulgated or legislative proposals promoted by doctors, politicians, and jurists regarding these issues. Specifically, they concentrate on the debate that led up to the creation of the Maternity Fund (Caja de Maternidad) in 1934 and then continue on to review the political discussions about working mothers during the First Peronism, whose particular characteristic, according to the authors, was obscured by issues such as social health insurance, which targeted the "universal" illnesses of workers.

The third chapter analyzes the parliamentary discussions about health policies and the degree to which these were really implemented, concentrating on the Office of Maternity and Infants (Dirección de Maternidad e Infancia, 1936) – charged with the protection of mothers and infants. The authors note that the organization of the public system of healthcare for children and mothers was a double novelty in comparison to the previous period. First of all, in the 20th century, there was a change in public and private institutions related to the individuals to be protected: the emphasis shifted from abandoned children

to the provision of assistance to the mother-child pairing. Second, a conflictive process of centralization of private and municipal and/or provincial institutions began that led to the organization of a national health system. The Office of Maternity and Infants promoted national projects that were complemented by measures on the provincial level, but its implementation was hampered by a scarcity of resources, local political resistance, and the institutions of the Charitable Society (Sociedad de Beneficencia), which were also disinclined to change. In this sense, the authors argue that the role assigned to the Eva Peron Foundation (Fundación Eva Perón) in the area of health and social assistance limited the autonomy of the Office of Maternity and Infants. Finally, they describe the interests and tensions behind the creation of health policies and the disputes around social interventions by government institutions.

In conclusion, Biernat and Ramacciotti briefly review the key elements of their book in order to emphasize the **long duration** of the problematics around the creation and implementation of maternal and infant health policies. At the same time, they emphasize the importance of Latin American and international conjunctures in these debates. Finally, they emphasize the need for a new research agenda on the role of social demands, the study of charitable institutions, and the tensions between national policies and their practical implementation at local levels of government.

*Crece y multiplicarse* offers us an interesting review of maternal and infant health policies in the first half of the 20th century in Argentina, noting the tensions and contradictions between state actors. At the same time, it clarifies the currency of the concern for mothers and their children as a socially relevant issue. Still, the study does not allow us to discern the actual impact of the policies adopted and their reception by the mothers they were intended for. In addition, while the authors intend to analyze the tensions created on the local level by the centralization of the national health system, their approach loses sight of the specificity of these tensions and the resistance to the application of policies in each one of the provinces. These questions mark the beginning of a new research agenda on the topic.

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