

The Circulation of Science and Technology

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HORMONAL CONTRACEPTION, GENDER AND SOCIETY IN SPAIN (1966-1979)

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Abstract

Social studies focusing on women's health, women's history and/or medicine for women are not always elaborated using gender as a category of analysis. In the last twenty years in Spain, many scholars have made important contributions on contraception focusing on demographic, political or ethical aspects, but few of them have discussed their results from a gender perspective. These studies usually do not include woman's medical, scientific, social and religious definitions; the role of women as doctors, health administrators, scientific researchers, and/or health activists; the contribution of women's and social movements to the improvement of women's life conditions; the relations between sanitary and women's movements, the construction of collective gender identities, the experience of real women in accessing and using oral contraceptives and so on. In Spain, during the last years of the Franco dictatorship and the democratic transition (1970-1982) there was a widespread movement towards the legalisation of contraception, prohibited since 1941. In this paper we want to look at the discourses surrounding the legalization of the pill as represented in the press, and at the role played by the feminist movement and the medical professionals in this debate. For this purpose we analyse, on the one hand, the information on the hormonal contraceptives that was published in the Spanish general press, feminine magazines and different kinds of feminists' publications during the 1970s, as well as in the main gynaecology handbooks used in Spanish faculties of medicine during this period. On the other hand, we will use oral interviews with health professionals and feminist activists.

Introduction: intersectional approach in the historiography of oral contraceptives

Numerous works on the history of oral contraceptives have been published during the last two decades. These studies include a spectrum of topics ranging from, among others, the first contraceptive pill, contraceptive implants, to injections and emergency contraceptives. Many of these works apply intersectionality as a tool for in-depth analysis of the relationship between categories such as gender, class and ethnicity in the processes of the design, production and commercialization of contraceptive drugs. Gender as a category of analysis has also been adopted by some contemporary historians and sociologists interested in psychotropic drugs (Metzl 2003; Tone 2007; Romo Avilés, Gil García 2006).

An intersectional perspective is considered to be one of the most important theoretic contributions of women's studies (McCall 2005, 1771). For the social history of drugs, intersectionality has become a useful concept to analyze with more precision and complexity the process of circulation of drugs in its social and scientific context. Intersectionality also helps situate the analysis in the cultural, economic and ideological diversity of women who produce, publicize, consume, or reject drugs, thus, providing the medication with a new symbolic content which goes beyond its pharmacological properties.

An intersectional perspective makes it possible to study, following the proposal made at the end of the 1980s by the historian Linda Gordon, how different collectives and people can simultaneously be agents and victims, and discriminate and be discriminated against (Gordon 1988). Intersectionality also makes it possible to analyze the role of pharmaceutical technologies within the context of gender, race, ethnicity and class hierarchies. Lara Marks and Elisabeth S. Watkins, the first scholars who published on the history of the contraceptive pill from a gender perspective (Marks, 2001b; Watkins 1998), have been followed during the last two decades by authors who incorporate categories of race, ethnicity and class into their studies of the processes of producing and testing drugs. These works focus on different responses to contraceptive and reproductive technologies among women of different races, ethnicities and classes, and the possible uses of these technologies by state institutions and agencies providing family planning, as well as the benefits and social problems these practices generate (Grant 1993; Ross 1998; Roberts 1997; Rodrique 1998; Nelson 2003; Solinger 2005; Schoen 2005). They also study issues such as abortion, sterilization, oral contraception and single parenthood from the particular perspective of African American women and analyze the practices of resistance used against the institutional attempts to impose certain contraceptive methods on women of colour, such as sterilization or hormonal implant. These works are limited to US or British contexts, where there has been a more articulated academic interest in the ways in which categories of gender, race and class have closely interacted during the past two centuries. Other authors focus on Puerto Rican women and discuss, among other topics, their participation in the late 1950s in large scale clinical trials of Enovid, the first oral contraceptive commercialized in the US (Briggs 2002; López 2008).

Using gender, race, ethnicity and class as categories of analysis does not necessarily guarantee avoiding victimization. Some recently published works, especially those by Roberts (1997), Briggs (2002) or López (2008) focus more on women as subjects of racist and sexist discrimination rather than on examples of their agency. Furthermore, these authors do not give sufficient space to the practices of using different contraceptive technologies as possible strategies of resistance and empowerment.

The pill in the Spanish press: aims and methodology

In 1960, when the first contraceptive pill was commercialised in the United States, all contraceptive methods were prohibited in Spain. From January 1941, six months after the victory of Franco's army over the republican state, until 1978 there existed a law for "the protection of natality, against abortion and contraceptionist propaganda" (Federació Local de Sindicats de Barcelona 2008), which prohibited the sale and publicity of any contraceptive methods.

Nevertheless, the pill started to circulate in Spain in 1964. A year later, a new law would broaden the variety of drugs that could be used by doctors, including hormonal drugs. Prescribing the pill became possible but was limited to cases of gynaecological disorders (Ministerio de Gobernación 1965; Jones 1977). The commercialisation of the contraceptive pill and the publication of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 generated ten years of great interest and lively debate on contraception that culminated with the legalization of contraceptives in late 1978 in large part due to a successful struggle from the feminist movement.

In Spain, as far as we know, intersectionality has never been applied to the study of the history of the contraceptive pill. Specific academic production on the history of hormonal contraceptives is limited to an unpublished thesis that focuses mainly on ethical aspects and lacks any gender perspective (Sánchez Carazo 1998). Moreover, in Spain during the 1960s and 1970s, an intersectional analysis was confined to categories of gender and class, considering that ethnic diversity was practically limited to gypsy collectives. Including ethnicity is beyond the scope of this paper, although we do not exclude it from our further studies.

In this paper we look at the debates surrounding the circulation and legalization of the pill in the 1960s and 1970s in Spain, a period that comprises the last fifteen years of Francoism and the beginnings of Spanish democracy, by using gender as a category of analysis. We pay attention to the actors and discourses that appeared in the daily press, medical press and feminist press. We review two of the oldest Spanish daily newspapers: *La Vanguardia*, a liberal newspaper published in Barcelona, and *ABC*, a conservative newspaper published in Madrid. We also review six years of *Tribuna Médica* (Madrid, years 1964-1969), the most prominent general Spanish medical journal during the 1960s and the 1970s, and *Vindicación Feminista* (Barcelona), the first feminist magazine to be published in Spain from 1976 to 1979.

The pill in the daily press

The dominant participants in the debate on hormonal contraception in both newspapers are foreign and Spanish physicians. Among the Spanish experts, the two most prominent figures seemed to be Professor Botella Llusía and Dr. Ángel Sopeña Ibañez. Each of them exhibited a different position; whereas Professor Botella Llusía was quite conservative, Dr. Ángel Sopeña Ibañez seemed to be more open and favourable to contraception. Botella Llusía (1912-2002), cited in the late 1960s and 1970s, was a professor of gynaecology and obstetrics at the Complutense University of Madrid. He was author of numerous publications on gynaecology, sterility, gynaecologic endocrinology and oral contraceptives, and founded the most important school of gynaecology in Francoist Spain (Díaz Rubio 2003, 28-29). Ángel Sopeña Ibañez (1913-1991) was consulted more frequently in the second half of the 1970s, when he was a professor of gynaecology at Complutense University in Madrid. He was a member of the Spanish Communist Party, and collaborated with the feminist family planning movement in the Spanish capital (Ortiz and Ignaciuk 2010). The debate on the pill was not limited only to gynaecologists and obstetricians, but other medical specialists, including dermatologists and psychiatrists, also participated.

Another category of experts whose opinions were frequently presented was that of Catholic priests, who appeared in all the important articles or multi-expert debates on the pill in which they stated their opposition to the pill as something unnatural and unacceptable within a Catholic marriage. This opinion was well represented in both newspapers. However, some priests exhibited a more moderate point of view, and even questioned the legitimacy of the church to participate in the debate on contraception. Still other priests defended sexuality as one of the pillars of a Catholic marriage, and criticized the rhythm (or Ogino) method as psychologically destructive (Ortiz and Ignaciuk, in press).

The most striking fact in the debate on the pill in the reviewed press is the nearly complete absence of voices from women and feminists. The few women who did talk about the pill were conservative or sceptical for religious and medical reasons. In 1975 –the year of Franco's death– *ABC* offered a breakthrough, as female journalists started to write about controversial issues related to women, such as single motherhood, or later on, family planning and female sexuality. In *La Vanguardia*, the feminist movement's fight for legalization of contraceptives received some, but rather unfavourable, attention in the late 1970s (Castillo García 2010).

The vast majority of the articles and news items published in both daily newspapers were dedicated to the side-effects of the pill (Ortiz and Ignaciuk, in press). This is similar to the media coverage in Britain and the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s, when the initial emphasis on the socially liberating effects of the pill was replaced by a more careful examination of the risks related to its consumption (Junod 2007). As historians of the contraceptive pill indicate, the potential health hazards related to the pill had to be carefully evaluated from its earliest stage of commercialization, considering that the pill was being used by healthy women to prevent pregnancy (Junod and Marks 2002, 120). The scientific debate on the side effects of the pill was long and confusing, along with its representation in the media, which often published contradictory information about its safety.

The first known side effects of the pill such as nausea, breast tenderness, weight gain and breakthrough bleeding were reported during the first large-scale clinical trials performed on women in Puerto Rico, Haiti, Mexico, Hong Kong, Australia, Ceylon or Japan (Marks 2001b, 96-106). These side effects, considered similar to those experienced during early pregnancy and/or menstruation, were underestimated by researchers and medical professionals as minor and temporary (Watkins 1998, 77), and also were often represented in a similar manner on various occasions in *ABC*. Lara Marks (2001a, 219) and Elizabeth Watkins (1998, 79) pointed out that the evaluation of these side effects was generally dependent on the concept of pregnancy, either as a natural or as a potentially hazardous condition for women.

The side effect of the pill that received the most coverage in the reviewed newspapers was thrombosis. The news reporting was confusing and contradictory, and there was a constant interchange of articles that either underlined the risks or reassured the public of the pill's safety. In the 1970s, the concern about the potential relationship between the pill and cancer began to appear. These articles expressed opinions both for and against the carcinogenicity of the pill, and cited both national and international experts to support their positions.

Another important aspect of the medical debate on side effects of the pill, as represented in the daily press, was the repeated plea that women should take the pill under medical surveillance. Medical experts often quoted in *ABC* referred to the need for medical control concerning the use of oral contraceptives. This opinion seemed to reflect a need to maintain the privileged position of doctors in relation to their female patients. This hierarchical relation was being challenged at that very moment by feminist activists and feminist doctors working in the first family planning centres established in Madrid and Barcelona (Ortiz and Ignaciuk 2010).

The pill in the medical press

The scarce amount of information published in *Tribuna Médica*, the most widespread Spanish professional medical journal in the late sixties, seems to indicate, first, that the pill was not a great concern for medical professionals and, second, that the main opinions being expressed about the pill were the same voices as those in the general press: medical doctors and priests. Despite the fact that doctors could legally prescribe hormonal drugs, including the pill –even if not explicitly for its

contraceptive properties—, since 1965, very little attention was paid to oral contraception in *Tribuna Médica*. The editors of the magazine were generally indifferent to the pill, and when discussed, it was in the broader context of population concerns or according to the official position of the Catholic Church.

During the years of 1964 to 1969 only two references to the pill were published. In May 1967, within the context of a report about a conference organized by the Association of Medical Writers [*Asociación de Escritores Médicos*] on social, legal and ethical aspects of population growth. The authors (a sociologist, a lawyer, and two priests) discussed overpopulation in terms of “responsible parenthood” as defined by Paul VI, or reproduction as “the most basic natural function” of the human kind. None of them mentioned oral contraceptives as a possible solution to the “population problem.” This is very similar to the medical discourse published in *La Vanguardia* during the early 1970s in which the pill was often depicted as a threat to the survival of the human kind (Castillo 2010, 92).

The medical version of the topic was given by Professor Botella Llusia, which displayed a more technical approach than did his contributions to the general press. He described the pharmacological action of the oral contraceptives available in the Spanish market at the time, and established a clear division between sequential, mixed and progesterone-only contraceptives. For moral reasons the author considered the use of the progesterone-only pills unacceptable since they stopped the implementation of the blastocyst in the uterine wall, which he considered to be the same as inducing an abortion (Adroer 1967).

A more explicit mention of the pill appeared in a letter to the editors of *Tribuna Médica* by a paediatrician (Javier Oroz 1967), where he discussed the co-existence of doctors for and against oral contraceptives in his medical speciality.

The pill in the feminist press

As stated above, women’s voices concerning the use of the contraceptive pill were practically absent from the daily and medical press that we analyzed until the late 1970s. Only then did articles on the pill authored by women start to appear in *ABC* and *La Vanguardia* following the wave of liberalization and the growing impact of the feminist movement. Nevertheless, the dominant role of the male medical expert remained undisputable. However, female journalists and activists used alternative media spaces to discuss their opinions and preoccupations related to family planning, such as the newly created liberal daily *El País*, some magazines published during the period of democratic transition (*Triunfo*, *Cambio 16*) and the first feminist magazine, *Vindicación Feminista*. Founded in 1976 by Lidia Falcón (born 1937), a feminist philosopher and lawyer. She became one of the key figures of radical feminism in Spain during the transition to democracy (Larumbe 2009, 23). The magazine’s ambition was to construct a plural and autonomous space for the Spanish women’s movement. *Vindicación Feminista* was published in Barcelona from July 1976 to December 1979, and all the articles that appeared in the magazine were authored by feminist journalists.

The pill did not appear in *Vindicación Feminista* as an issue of concern on its own, though the pill was discussed within the broader debate on the legalization of contraceptives and abortion. The eleven articles that mentioned the pill also spoke about abortion, contraception and family planning. In contrast, there were eight articles that focused solely on the issue of abortion in Spain. When discussed, oral contraceptives were presented as the most widely used contraceptive method by middle class, educated women, who were able to get the pill from private gynaecologists as a therapeutic drug, not as a contraceptive. This semi-legal way of obtaining the pill was criticised since it was out of reach for women from marginalised neighbourhoods and regions, who did not have easy access to doctors (Begoña 1977). While accessibility to the pill was considered a class privilege, it also appeared to be the only available method in Spain used by women who should have been discouraged to do so for health reasons. It is worth noting that general newspapers like *ABC* or *La Vanguardia* expressed the opinions of priests and male doctors, while alternatively *Vindicación Feminista*, being a feminist magazine, cited mostly women’s opinions on the pill, both as consumers and as feminist activists. These women often questioned and problematized the role of doctors and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in their debates on oral contraceptives. They discussed issues such as doctors’ reluctance to prescribe contraceptives, the internal disagreements within the Church following the publication on the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (Larrauru 1977, 3), and the efforts of certain priests to prevent women from using the pill (Begoña 1977).

Vindicación Feminista gave much importance to the negative discourses and attitudes towards the pill. Side-effects were strongly emphasised (Encuesta 1979), sometimes with the support of the authority of doctors, such as José Badía Serra, from the Department of Gynaecology and Obstetrics of Sant Pau Hospital in Barcelona (Falcón 1978). The consumption of oral contraceptives was considered as a form of excessive medicalization of the female body (Taboada 1978). Only one author considered the bias and negative representation of the pill in the media (Belaguer 1977).

Conclusions

The presence of numerous publications concerning the contraceptive pill in the Spanish daily press during the time that it was illegal proves beyond a doubt the existence of a public debate on oral contraception in this country as early as the

late 1960s. During the initial period of democratic transition there was a great increase in the number of publications that reflected the political climate of the time. The frequent references to British, American, and, to a lesser extent, French and Italian studies and practices suggest the presence of a vivid interest in the international debate on the pill, and especially its safety, which constituted the main argument in the debate represented in *ABC* and *La Vanguardia*. The debate on oral contraceptives in the reviewed daily press was dominated by the concern of side effects with doctors being the primary experts. The religious and moral discourses were also present, especially in relation to the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, but they were neither dominant nor homogenous. In *Tribuna Médica*, there was scarce coverage on oral contraceptives in the late 1960s, and articles that were published did not differ from what appeared in the contemporary daily press. In contrast, the feminist press focused on issues that were not reflected in daily or medical press, such as access to other possibilities for women from different socio-economic backgrounds, or the pill being the only contraceptive choice available. By the late 1970s *Vindicación Feminista* openly criticized both the pill and the medicalization of contraception on the female body.

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