Politics of Reproduction in a Divided Europe: Abortion, Protest Movements, and State Intervention after World War II

Lorena Anton, Yoshie Mitobe, and Kristina Schulz

After World War II, European states developed new policies toward human reproduction. The deep transformations that occurred in the debates over abortion and over concepts such as “motherhood” and “reproduction” on both sides of the Berlin wall exemplify the relation of the “politics of reproduction” to the political systems of postwar Europe. This essay presents four case studies of national reproductive policies in Western Europe (Federal Republic of Germany and France) and Eastern Europe (German Democratic Republic and Romania), comparing different states’ involvements in abortion legislation in order to analyze the debates, protests, and silences that divided people and policies along national and bloc lines in Europe after 1945.

Europe and the Politics of Reproduction after 1945

The “Iron Curtain,” which separated war-torn Europe into Western capitalist and Eastern socialist bloc nations for four decades, not only dramatically affected the foreign policies of these states, but also greatly influenced their domestic and private spheres. The reproductive politics and policies which in this period exemplify significant transformations in the overall relationship between public policy and the private sphere in Western and Eastern European countries.

In Western Europe, experiences under the Nazis and other authoritarian regimes during the interwar period, including their far-reaching control over everyday life, led to deep mistrust and suspicion of any form of government intervention in the private sphere following World War II. Following Robert G. Moeller, “Policies that ostensibly protected the family were in fact policies that defined the social and political status of women.” It is therefore no wonder that reproductive politics, particularly abortion issues, remained on Western states’ agendas. In order to mask this state regulation of “private
matters,“ discussion of it in the political sphere was effectively stigmatized to the extent that, in spite of a growing discrepancy between the judicial and practical approaches to abortion, legislation in most of Western Europe remained unchanged until the 1970s, with the significant exception of Britain and the Netherlands. When abortion was legalized in Britain in 1967, large numbers of women from the European continent came to Britain for abortions. In 1973, 57,776 (52.3 percent) of the 110,568 legal abortions in Britain were carried out on foreign women. Of this group, a total of 11,326 came from West Germany and 35,293 from France. The same phenomenon could be observed in the Netherlands. Although abortion there remained illegal until 1981, many were conducted in Dutch nonprofit abortion clinics. These clinics were started by groups that had originally supported legal abortion in England, then moved to the Netherlands, where the operations could be carried out with greater skill and at lower prices. In 1974, 80,000 abortions were carried out in 13 Dutch nonprofit clinics. It was seen that 60 percent of these operations were performed on nonresident women (mainly from Belgium, France, and West Germany). 

In contrast, the reproductive politics of Eastern European countries followed the example of the Soviet Union, which legalized abortion in 1955, two years after Stalin’s death. The official reason the Soviet leadership gave for legalization was that it would reduce “the harm caused to the health of women by abortions performed outside hospital” and “give women the possibility of deciding for themselves the question of motherhood.” After World War II, all socialist countries in Eastern and Central Europe except Albania had passed similar legislation by the 1960s when, again following the Soviet Union, they reinstituted legal restrictions on abortion.

Reforming Abortion Legislation in Western Europe

In Western Europe, repressive legislation concerning contraception and abortion was the subject of political, ethical, medical, and popular debate from the 1960s onward. In many countries, civil society engaged in the reform process through social movements. According to social movement theories, structural strains are a main feature of advanced Western industrial society because of its ongoing functional differentiation. The less able intermediary agents, such as political parties and associations, are to integrate grievances that derive from that structural change, the more likely social movements are to emerge. The women’s movement marked the beginning of a series of new social movements that characterized Western European societies after 1968. The family, traditionally considered the domain of women, underwent particularly rapid change after World War II. The model of the extended family was replaced by that of a nuclear family. In parallel, and in particular during the 1960s, the educational system expanded and was to replace the family as the main instrument of socialization. These structural transformations led to new questions about women’s roles in society, where, despite expanded educational opportunities, most women remained shut out of the competitive labor market and locked into the roles of housewife and mother.