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# Review of A History of the Birth Control Movement in America, by Peter C. Engelman.

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PETER C. ENGELMAN

*A History of the Birth Control Movement in America*

Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011. xxiii + 231 p. \$44.95.

In his Introduction Engelman hints at the goal of this history of the American birth control movement: "In the last decade especially, opponents of reproductive rights have highlighted the birth control movement's association with eugenics... and condemned the pioneer birth control activists, Margaret Sanger in particular, as racist." Engelman, the associate editor of the Margaret Sanger Papers Project at New York University, is in an excellent position to deal with the provocative "Sanger" quotes one finds on the many pro-life internet sites that link Sanger to racism and eugenics, and then link Planned Parenthood to all three. Planned Parenthood, the country's leading provider of women's reproductive health services, dates its beginnings to the Brooklyn birth control clinic that Sanger established in 1916. This connection allows today's pro-life advocates to use quotes from Sanger to "uncover" these supposed roots of Planned Parenthood and the entire pro-choice movement. Engelman does an admirable job of confronting this evidence by examining the most frequently discussed quotes and events and placing them in historical context. For example, Margaret Sanger did speak at a New Jersey rally of Ku Klux Klan wives in 1926 (p. 151). But she wasn't advocating birth control for the nation's blacks at that rally, but providing these women with basic birth control information for their own use. If she had an ulterior motive, it wasn't a racist one. She was trying to win the support of anti-Catholic groups to fend off Catholic opposition to birth control legislation then being debated in New Jersey. In Engelman's account Sanger appears as an adroit political operator intent on finding allies, whoever they may be, for a birth control movement that she considered to be largely her own creation.

As a history of the American birth control movement, this is a narrow one. Chapter 1 presents a brief account of early-nineteenth-century birth controllers and then focuses on the passage of Federal and State "Comstock laws" in the 1870s and 1880s that conflated contraceptive literature and devices with obscenity and restricted their distribution. The "birth control movement" that Engelman chronicles is the early-twentieth-century movement led by Sanger to overturn this criminalization of contraception. Chapter 2 treats the initial "free speech" challenges to Comstock laws by Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger, William Sanger, and others who were arrested for publicly discussing birth control or mailing birth control literature. Chapter 3 deals with the real emergence of the movement with the opening of the first birth control clinic in 1916, its forced closing, and the judicial decisions that allowed a physician-staffed permanent clinic to open its doors in 1923. Between 1916 and 1923 Sanger consciously broke ties with the movement's radical feminist roots and sought new support from the medical establishment and eugenicists. Chapter 4 documents the public acceptance of the movement's goals by the late 1920s and its rapid organizational growth and medicalization during the 1930s. Engelman ends his story in 1942 when the Birth Control Federation of America changed its name to the less-provocative Planned Parenthood Federation of America. His Conclusion is a very brief overview of subsequent developments from the 1940s to today. It ends with the upbeat pre-

diction that present-day challenges to women's reproductive rights might be overcome by advances in medical technology that provide women with better contraceptives, emergency contraception, and pharmaceutical abortifacients. Engelman defines America's "birth control movement" in a precise, if narrow, way and offers an excellent chronicle of its history. What is missing is Sanger's ardent Neo-Malthusianism. Her belief that smaller families benefit both couples and societies was lifelong and influenced many of her movement's decisions. The reader will have to go elsewhere to find a detailed consideration of this factor.—D.H.

**KARL ITTMAN, DENNIS D. CORDELL, AND GREGORY MADDOX (EDS.)**

*The Demographics of Empire: The Colonial Order and the Creation of Knowledge*  
Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010. ix + 292 p. \$28.95 (pbk.).

This collection of essays by historians contributes to the sparse literature on African historical demography. Its subject, however, is not so much the demography itself but, as the introductory essay puts it, "how colonial regimes apprehended the demographic regimes of societies that they administered and how they produced the demographic data on which they based policy and action." The imperial powers of most interest are Britain and France. Cordell ties a fall-off in studies of African population history to the heightened suspicion of colonial documentary sources deriving from the influence of postmodernism and postcolonialism—undermining the naïve positivist analyses of traditional demography. He characterizes most writing on African demography as "astonishingly ahistorical" and regards the new perspectives as likely in the end to be for the good. Ittman delves into Britain's Colonial Office records to trace the emerging concern with population pressure, replacing earlier populationist views, with responses seen initially in forced resettlement away from crowded regions and eventually in family planning. (Independent African governments often reverted to populationism.) Other chapters recount the systematic French approach to census-taking—allied to *corvée* labor exactions—and colonial impacts on women, gender relations, and sexuality—allied to Christianizing missionary activity. The only straightforwardly demographic analysis in the volume is the concluding chapter by Patrick Manning, "African population: projections, 1850–1950." Manning's investigations arrive at a view of population growth over the period that is "strikingly at variance with the picture given in previous global assessments of African population." Essentially, he posits an 1850 population of 140 million, higher than most estimates, and not much changed until a marked acceleration begins in the 1920s. His calculations include detailed estimates of the demographic significance of the Atlantic and trans-Saharan slave trades. An elaborate statistical appendix to the chapter is available online. Each chapter of the volume has extensive endnotes, together constituting a valuable source of references to a scattered and sometimes fugitive literature. They would have been much more valuable to the reader had they been assembled into a bibliography. The editors are based at University of Houston, Southern Methodist University, and Texas Southern University. Index.—G.McN.