

A Bun in the Oven: How the Food and Birth Movements Resist Industrialization

Barbara Katz Rothman

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REVIEWED BY FLORENCE PASCHE GUIGNARD

Barbara Katz Rothman offers a relevant and detailed comparison of two social movements, their origins, their aims and their most recent developments and potential: the food movement and the birth movement. The latter has been a central focus in her work as a sociologist throughout the last decades, whereas her explorations in food studies are more recent. This book reminds us that the ways in which we, as humans, are born, give birth, and eat have consequences reaching much further than the domestic or private sphere, or the notion of personal experience.

Katz Rothman is not, however, the first author to consider such issues through an illuminating comparative perspective. Already in 2004, in his essay *Le fermier et l'accoucheur*, Michel Odent, a French obstetrician and yet an advocate for a less interventionist approach to birth, had pointed out this parallel between the industrialization of agriculture and of childbirth. Katz Rothman does not refer to Odent (except for her brief criticism of Odent's figure of the "ridiculous knitting midwife," 44). While Odent mainly considered the technological developments and social changes through which such an industrialization became a norm, Katz Rothman places more emphasis on resistance to the latter. In addition to providing some historical background to her "tale of two social movements" (1), she highlights both similarities and discrepancies in advocacy and activism aimed at changing the ways we feed ourselves and give birth in the 20th and early 21st centuries. Emerged as forms of resistance to neoliberal imperatives of profit above people, both movements aim at bringing back to the center values, authenticity, meaning, personal experience, and individuals. Both aim at changing mentalities and battle against powerful corporations, whether the food industry or the medical industry. The author examines how both movements fight for another vision of various actors, including mothers, in a culture where the leading role has become that of "consumer" (101). Though the author recognizes that globalization is an issue in both instances, her analysis rarely ventures outside of the cultural settings of North America.

According to Katz Rothman's assessment, the food movement has been altogether more successful, over the last decades, than what she calls throughout the book "the birth movement." One of her main arguments is that the

latter should learn from how the former gained some influence in changing systems of food production and preparation that lead to social and economic injustice, with plenty of other unsustainable aspects, and that do not result in healthy diets. Indeed, the impact of the mostly consumer-based social movement to change the food system (in the U.S., but also globally) is greater, or, at least, more visible than what birth activists have achieved so far.

In her conclusion, she calls for an evolution of the birth movement, beyond second wave feminism, to address the needs, worldviews, and expectations of a new generation of (future) mothers who live in a different world where “information is no longer a scarce resource” (204), but choice remains a contentious issue. Katz Rothman underlines such changes within the feminist movements themselves, especially around issues that concern embodiment, sexuality, and childbirth.

Food studies scholars might remain perplexed as to why Katz Rothman writes about “the” food movement as a unified one (in spite of giving many concrete case studies and examples), whereas diverse trends coexist within it, with emphases that sometimes even contradict each other. In contrast, she correctly points out that the “strange community that we brought together in the home-birth movement” (126) is diverse, with actors holding values ranging from traditional or even conservative (religious), to more liberal ones: “There’s a lot that we will never agree on, but this matters to us” (127). Katz Rothman lays much emphasis on home-birth, within “the birth movement,” whereas other types of midwifery-attended childbirth are developing, too, as a result from activism.

From a perspective of motherhood studies, readers will appreciate Katz Rothman’s attention to bringing back to the center the stories and experiences of mothers themselves. The author pays close attention to authority, power, and gender and acknowledges issues around race and class, as well as the contentious notion of “choice” within and around feminist debates (see, for instance, 167-172). In this book, she also uses a personal voice and offers moving accounts of some of her own experiences with pregnancy, birth, death, grieving, food, and with dealing with many trends and ideas around motherhood within and outside of feminism.