

Contrarian Contraception:

Radical Feminism and *The Birth Control Handbook* in late 1960s Montréal

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Introduction

In 1967, a few months before being elected Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau famously declared, “There’s no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation” (CBC Digital Archives). He spoke in defense of his 1967 Omnibus bill which called for a revision of the Canadian Criminal Code such that homosexuality, medically approved abortion, and contraception be decriminalized. His revision reflected a shift in societal values whereby Canadians’ views on sexuality and personal responsibility were changing dramatically (Owram 249). Along with this reorientation in values came a resurgence of feminist activity. Though it is often referred to as a singular movement, “the ‘second wave’ of Canadian feminism in the 1960s developed and organized through two separate entities, which followed two distinct dynamics, within the context of two distinct histories” (Bégin 24). Montréal, with its mix of Anglophone and Francophone universities, provided the perfect setting for both the English-Canadian and Québécois women's movements to thrive.

At McGill University, student activists frustrated by the lack of access to sexual and contraceptive health resources took matters into their own hands. In 1968, they published *The Birth Control Handbook*. This little-known yet wildly successful publication served both an informative and political purpose. On the one hand, it provided women with vital information on sexuality, contraception, and abortion. On the other, it defied the Criminal Code under which the sale and distribution of such information was illegal. Moreover, the handbook advanced an ideological message. As described by Christabelle Sethna in *The Evolution of the Birth Control Handbook: From Student Peer-Education Manual to Feminist Self-Empowerment Text, 1968-1975* the controversial introduction section addressed gender-based health

inequalities from a radical feminist and socialist perspective (90). The result was an ardently anti-American text which denounced patriarchy and capitalism as the sources of women's oppression (Sethna 100).

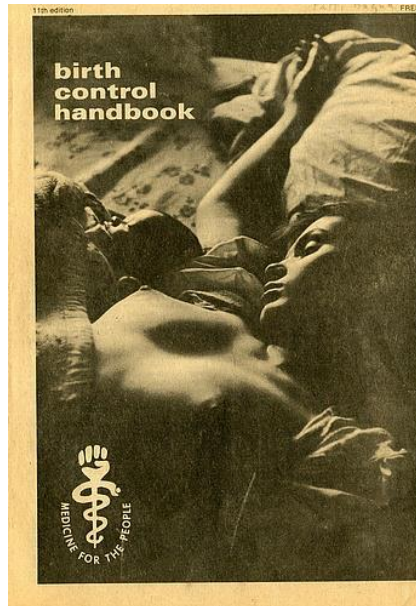


Fig. 1. Cover page of the 4th edition of The Birth Control Handbook, 1970. Photograph by André Giguère.

In 1970, English-Canadian feminists united with the radical Québécois women's movement to produce a French version of the handbook. The content of this edition was almost identical to its English predecessor but for the introduction section. The Québec sovereignty movement had crystallized with the formation of the Parti Québécois in 1968 and this resonated deeply with members of the Québécois women's movement. This close association permeated the introductory text in which it was asserted that Québécois women's freedom was inextricably linked to the independence of their nation. Accordingly, the right to abortion and contraception were elaborated as preconditions to both Québec's and women's independence. The handbook thus laid bare the ideological currents defining Québec in that period.

Although *The Birth Control Handbook* initially acted as a rallying point for the two groups, the relationship was short-lived (Sethna 112-113). The languages and political convictions distinguishing each movement proved too difficult to reconcile. The bridge linking the two groups would collapse in 1971 when the Québécois women's group voted to cease collaborations and expel Anglophone members from their group. Nevertheless, *The Birth Control Handbook* reified a defining moment in English-Canadian and Québec history. It is notable both as milestone for the democratization of sexual health information and as a symbol of the collaboration between two distinct yet intimately related political movements. This paper will trace the emergence of the handbook and elaborate how it joined, and subsequently disconnected, the radical English-Canadian and Québécois women's liberation movements. To conclude, it will examine how this fleeting attempt to unify over women's health issues was an early manifestation of the fractionated advocacy that characterizes feminist associations today.

The rise of second wave feminism in Canada and Québec

In his book on postcolonial thought and political activism in sixties Montréal, Sean Mills eloquently describes the circumstances which spurred the second wave of feminism:

“Beginning in the early 1960s, there was a resurgence of a feminist consciousness in Montréal, as women began arguing that the right to vote – which had been the object of a long and arduous political battle – did not, in itself, guarantee full political citizenship or equal rights” (121). Social norms and policy changes had stagnated following women's suffrage, it was argued, and ripples of discontent began to expand across the country (LeGates 348-349). In 1967, the federal government heeded the growing frustration by establishing *The Royal Commission on the Status of Women*. This formal response to women's demands sought to

"inquire into and report upon the status of women in Canada, and to recommend what steps might be taken by the federal government to ensure for women equal opportunities with men in all aspects of Canadian society" ("Royal Commission" par. 2). Canadian women gathered at hearings throughout the country to share their experiences and demand pay equity, equal rights of citizenship, education, improved access to contraception, and the legalization of abortion. To this point, the experiences of women had "not yet united in any holistic program of social change" (Mills 123). As such, *The Royal Commission* acted as an important rallying point which set the stage for an organized women's liberation movement. The latter would emerge primarily from English-speaking university campuses (Mills 123).

Among students, the issue of birth control access took on particular importance. As described by Sethna, "the reluctance of university Health Service doctors to meet the birth control needs of single students—thereby forcing some women to turn to illegal abortion—combined explosively with the decade's culture of left-wing student protest to make birth control access a major campus issue" (91). Birth control remained illegal under the Criminal Code and, despite being approved in 1957, the birth control pill was reserved for women requiring treatment for "menstrual irregularities" (The Canadian Press). These factors pushed students to organize a women's movement focused on access to reproductive and contraceptive health.

Around the same time, Québec was redefining itself in terms of the Quiet Revolution. The province grew increasingly secularized and policy moved towards the establishment of a welfare state. Meanwhile, the voice of sovereigntist groups pushing for Québec independence grew stronger and louder. In March of 1968, the *Rassemblement pour l'indépendance*

nationale joined ranks with René Lévesque's Mouvement souveraineté-association to create Québec's sovereigntist political party, the Parti Québécois (Lanthier 24). These changes in social and political structure incited a surge of demonstrations in Montréal (Mills 119). In response, City Council passed a bylaw prohibiting the "holding of any assembly, parade or gathering on the public domain of the City of Montreal for a time period of thirty days" ("1969 Bylaw").

The Québécois women's liberation movement burst onto the scene in November 1969, when two-hundred women wearing chains gathered on Saint-Laurent Boulevard to protest this bylaw (Lanthier 49; Mills 119). Following the protest, "English- and French-speaking women came together to form the Front de libération des femmes du Québec (FLF), a group that would become the public voice of women's liberation in Montreal (Mills 119)". The name of the FLF borrowed from the Front de libération du Québec, highlighting the strong connection between these two groups (Baillargeon 176). In fact, many of the women who joined the FLF had been politically awakened by the nationalism movement which "provided women with a political vocabulary with which they could analyze their oppression" (Lamoureux 51). As elaborated by Brodeur,

Les premières militantes du FLF venaient du Rassemblement pour l'indépendance nationale (R.I.N.), du Front de libération populaire (F.L.P.), du Parti socialiste du Québec (P.S.Q.), du Comité ouvrier de St-Henri, du Théâtre radical du Québec (T.R.Q.), du mouvement étudiant ... Le F.L.F. regroupait en majeure partie des femmes pour qui la première prise de conscience politique était passée par la conscience de l'oppression nationale du peuple québécois, et dans un deuxième temps, de l'exploitation de la classe ouvrière. (29)

It follows that the evolution of the FLF as a feminist group was heavily inspired and influenced by nationalist activism. As is made clear from their slogan: “Pas de Québec libre sans libération des femmes mais pas de femmes libres sans libération du Québec!”, its members identified primarily as *Québécois* women and focused their activism on uniting the feminist and nationalist cause (Lamoureux 53).

The Handbook

At McGill University, the debate surrounding contraception and abortion invigorated students and professors alike. In October 1967, a provocative article penned by Donald Kingsbury, professor of mathematics, appeared on the pages of the *McGill Daily*. In *We send her to the butcher shop*, Kingsbury excoriated the Canadian government for its policies on abortion. Commenting on the “immorality of the power elite” he professed:

Judge this world which tortures its own rosey cheeked daughters with humiliation and terror and fear and pain and guilt, which subjects them to unnecessary disease, maiming, and death. Judge this world which talks about the sanctity of an unwanted life that it isn't willing to care for or love or feed or educate ... Judge the Canadian Government which murders a thousand young girls a year in a most horrible way.

(5)

The *McGill Daily* received numerous letters from students commenting on Kingsbury's piece. In the weeks following, articles focused on women's rights and improved access to reproductive health on campus began to appear in the student-led paper (Mills 123).

The calls to action were answered when the Internal Vice-president of the Students' Council and the President of the Women's Union, Peter Foster and Nicole Leduc, respectively, founded the Birth Control Committee ("Old McGill" 94). The primary objective of the committee was to publish a handbook on contraception ("Old McGill" 94). Their project defied article 179c of Criminal Code which declared that any person who "offers to sell, advertises, publishes an advertisement of or has for sale or disposal any medicine, drug or article intended or represented as a means of preventing conception or causing abortion" was "guilty of an indictable offence and liable to two years' imprisonment" ("The Criminal Code" 80). Two undergraduate students, Donna Cherniak and Allan Feingold, were recruited to author the handbook. The first edition was published in 1968 and distributed to university campuses across Canada and the United States. It was an astounding success. As reported by Sethna "between 1969-1970, 300,000 thousand copies were sold" and by 1971, sales had increased to a whopping 2 million (103).



Figure 2. From the 2nd edition of *The Birth Control Handbook*, 1969. Photograph by André Giguère

The first editions of the handbook are notable both in content and design. Aesthetically, *The Birth Control Handbook* is striking; candid text about anatomy and contraception printed on inexpensive newsprint is punctuated with sensual black-and-white photographs. The images depict women in a variety of mundane yet intimate settings – in their bedrooms, sunbathing, breastfeeding a child, or in an embrace with their partner. They are accompanied by factual and accessible text addressing different contraceptive methods and sexual physiology. Conversely, the introduction is characterized by audacious political language and analysis. In this section, the authors melded second wave feminism and socialist thought, challenging both the political system and societal gender roles of their time (Sethna 95). The result is a radical political text which emphasizes the “liberating potential” of contraception as being contingent upon a social revolution:

Conception control does not necessarily create liberated women, at most it is a precondition for freedom. In Western capitalist states the pill has only served to increase the "value" of women as commodities - objectified human beings serving as non-intellectual sex objects...If women were to assume a position of equality with men in the labour force, as well as in other social processes such as the family, the existing social order would have to be transformed. Therefore the liberation of women cannot occur except as a part of a fundamental social revolution ... ("The Birth Control Handbook" 2nd ed., 2)

By way of this introduction, Cherniak and Feingold voiced the "rhetoric of radicalism, anti-Americanism, and student power" of their generation (Owram 239). It was a strong assertion of the handbook's purpose as both a public resource and a political act (Sethna 100). Their most scathing critique focused on the American-based initiative called the Zero Population Growth which promoted the idea that population control was required to prevent mass famines and social disasters, especially in developing countries (Sethna 100-101). The authors characterized this lobby as an imperialist initiative arising from the "threat to the supremacy of white nations which today, as in the past, are raping the Third World for wealth, resources, and human potential" ("The Birth Control Handbook" 4th ed., 3). Population growth in developing nations, they contended, "brings out fear in the world's white minority, a minority that has, through the ages, exploited all other races with a ferocity and viciousness incomparable to any other human injustice" ("The Birth Control Handbook" 4th ed., 3). Cherniak and Feingold framed contraception as a political instrument of oppression of women and marginalized populations as a whole. They expanded on this point in the chapter on contraceptive devices which included

a specific section titled *The IUD and genocide*. It stated the intrauterine devices were being used as an inexpensive and convenient tool to control the reproduction of non-white people. The section ended with the statement “large scale use of contraceptive measures, applied to women who may not want to control their fertility, approaches genocide and ceases to be birth control” (“The Birth Control Handbook” 4th ed., 21).



Figure 3. From the 2nd edition of *The Birth Control Handbook*, 1969. Photograph by André Giguère.

After the handbook was published, Cherniak and Feingold were flooded with inquiries for information about abortion providers in Montréal. In response, they began an abortion referral service which they managed out of their shared apartment (Sethna 103). In 1969, they would help establish the Montréal Women's Liberation Movement (MWLM). With financial

support from renowned abortion rights activist, Dr. Henry Morgentaler, the MWLM moved into a house on Saint-Famille where they would manage both the referral service and the new editions of the handbook (Cherniak).

Their new headquarters were conveniently located in the same house as offices for the FLF. With this proximity came partnership. Together, members of the MWLM and of the FLF began providing abortion referral services in French and English and worked together to produce a French version of the Handbook. In 1970, they published *Pour un contrôle des naissances*. The introduction of the French handbook, like its English predecessor, was highly political. However, in contrast to the English version, the FLF's handbook was written from a staunchly nationalist perspective. *Pour un contrôle des naissances* called for a different kind of social revolution, one which would free Québécois women from mothering numerous children – children who would provide “capitalist exploiters” with “cheap labor”:

Les Québécoises n'auront plus alors pour fonction d'assurer la perpétuation du 'cheap labour' ; les enfants qu'elles choisiront d'avoir grossiront les rangs de ceux qui combattent actuellement pour un mode d'existence plus juste, dans un Québec libre. (“Pour un Contrôle des Naissances” 3)

By employing the English expression “cheap labour”, the authors took aim at the Anglophone minority accused of oppressing the Francophone majority. As noted by Sethna, “the implication was that this cheap labour could no longer serve the needs of anglophone capitalists” (109). The introduction ended with a call for Québec women to control their pregnancies in order to raise children that would swell the ranks of sovereigntist fighters for an independent Québec. In

this way, it emphasized the idea that women's liberation could only be achieved "through the creation of an independent and socialist Québec" (Mills 127).

The seemingly fruitful relationship between Anglophone and Francophone feminists ended abruptly when in September of 1971 the FLF decided to expel Anglophones from the group. They cited Anglophone women's "colonialist attitude" as the main reason for this decision. Members of the FLF felt that Anglophone women were exerting too much influence without recognizing the unique oppression experienced by Francophone Québécois women. The announcement was made in their monthly bulletin:

Malgré leur bonne volonté, les anglophones ont une attitude colonisatrice vis-à-vis les francophones. Leur connaissance de l'anglais leur donne libre accès à tous les textes américains sur la libération des femmes et elles parachutent dans le groupe l'idéologie "Women's Lib" sans l'appliquer à la réalité québécoise. De plus, il nous semble urgent que les québécoises francophones définissent entre elles les luttes qu'elles doivent mener dans le cadre de la lutte de libération nationale. (O'Leary and Toupin 19)

The FLF subsequently took over the abortion referral service, and began providing referrals in French only (Mills 135). Despite uniting over the same issues, the difference in language and ideology produced an irreconcilable rupture.

Conclusion

In retrospect, the split between the FLF and the MWLM was an early manifestation of interactions between English-Canadian feminist and Francophone feminist of Québec to come. Today, in both Québec and English Canada, women's groups are divided into a number of

independent organizations which represent the diverse population of women from LGBT women to First Nations, to Québécois and beyond. While many of the groups collaborate, there is no centralized, national organization dedicated to women's issues (MacFarland).

The Birth Control Handbook acts as reminder that though women share many of the same concerns, a centralized organization may not be suited to the diverse challenges faced by women across Canada. Nonetheless, its success emphasizes the need for collaboration in shared areas of concern, while highlighting the fact that sociopolitical contexts create hierarchies between men and women as well as between women and other women. As described by Lamoureux "it seems increasingly reductionist to claim that all women suffer the same oppression. We must speak, instead, of several oppressions ... by recognizing that there is a complex system in which difference forms of domination overlap" (64). From a broad perspective, this intersectional approach empowers individual groups to define their priorities independently and enter into alliances with others when their interests align. Moreover, a diversity of organizations creates a strong network of advocates dedicated to supporting women in an individualized and sensitive manner.

In conclusion, *The Birth Control Handbook* represents a remarkable accomplishment of student activism and second wave feminism in late 1960s Montréal which captured a defining moment in the history of Québec. Practically speaking, it disseminated crucial and no doubt life-saving health information to millions of women across Canada and the United States. Finally, the history of *The Birth Control Handbook* serves as a valuable reminder that although health is a transcending force, it must always be considered in terms of the political, social, and cultural factors which affect and define it.

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