

## A Review of *Sex and the Planet: What Opt-In Reproduction Could Do for the Globe*

Reviewed by

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*Sex and the Planet: What Opt-In Reproduction Could Do for the Globe*. Margaret Pabst Battin. The MIT Press, 2024. 264 pages, \$35.00 paperback.

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“What would a world free from *unintended* pregnancy look like, a world where reproduction was always elective—always already chosen?” (Battin, 2024, p. 4). Since the reversal of the *Roe v. Wade* decision, bodies are once again under the threat of being disciplined through state-sanctioned reproductive intervention. The concept of reproductive health is always already instrumentalized for (re)producing institutionally sanctioned harmful discourses in relation to race, gender, and sexuality globally. Even in the dystopian time, Margaret Pabst Battin’s *Sex and the Planet: What Opt-in Reproduction Could Do for the Globe* optimistically takes us into a speculative but realistic future scenario where reproductive problems become almost non-existent for both pro-life and pro-choice groups. The author takes a cyborg and a non-ideological approach in exploring the possibilities that arise from integrating artificial contraceptive technology in humans that could reverse the default outcome of sex— “when sperm meets eggs” (p. 4).

A long history of reproductive violence against African American women, Indigenous women, immigrants, and poor white women by imposing discriminatory policies, forced sterilization, and biased laws to the current rapid growth of nationalism, gendered, anti-trans rhetorics, and racialized rhetorical and material violence could be traced across the globe. The author acknowledges systemic and structural inequalities, while positioning the urgency of exploring the possibilities technology may offer in its radicalized form for reducing the power of oppressive and normative forces.

Battin does not take a reductionist approach to existing reproductive inequalities against marginalized communities. Instead, she explores an imagined world that non-ideologically adapts reproductive technology for ensuring fertility autonomy for everyone. The author intermeshes technological posthumanism for fertility autonomy as a means of envisioning material changes for creating a more inclusive world. Throughout the book, Battin discusses “why the pill isn’t good enough,” major “global reproductive objections and problems,” contested roles of normative forces—such as men, religion, and money—as well as the problematic assumptions about sex and reproductive consequences. In this conjectural journey, Battin shows us “how there could indeed be easy answers to global reproductive problems” (p. xv).

Battin views technology-mediated medical intervention for managing human fertility as ensuring access to bodily autonomy. She also critically examined reproductive injustices and the violation of reproductive rights against different bodies including sexual assault, unintended pregnancy, and reproductive coercion that result in catastrophic body-mind health issues. Battin highlights manifold exploitations of the planet Earth caused by human transgressions, connecting Anthropocene concerns back to the core issues of the capitalized reproductive system. Combining the concerns of public health and the global reproductive health politics as well as the Anthropocene, Battin demonstrates multiple possibilities that may emerge from using a “Long-Acting Reversible Contraception” (LARC) method as she conjectures an achievable solution for the world’s most concerning reproductive issues (p. 23). Fundamental to this conjecture is the speculation that “what if virtually everybody had reliable, long-acting, reversible contraception that they could reverse, or have clinically reversed, whenever they wanted, contraception with no side effects and a failure rate near zero, all the time” (p. 33).

In part one, “What If Human Reproduction Were ‘Always Elective,’”

the author presents intricate details as well as infographic (e.g., charts, data, diagrams, and maps) of reproductive problems around the world including—“abortion, pregnancy in adolescents, pregnancy resulting from coerced sex, pregnancy in medically high-risk circumstances, and concerns about population growth and decline” (p. 4). While describing unintended pregnancy around the world, Battin shares the stories of some women who were forced to reproduce as victims of coercive sex, contraception failure, and warfare rape, suggesting that “if there were a way to ensure that pregnancy was almost always opt-in, almost always elective, these pregnancies could be avoidable” (p. 7). Both social and biological reproductive discourses are politicized and instrumentalized globally to regulate gender and bodily autonomy. The invasions of social and religious mandates, state laws, and gendered restrictions into the personal and familial spaces impinge on having reproductive freedom (p. 21). Battin shares that “abortion is illegal in about two dozen of the world’s countries” (p. 7). And yet, no reproductive methods offer an option for “always elective” reproduction (p. 21). She refrains from taking sides to any contentious ideologies about reproduction as she focuses on imagining a collective cure to solve the puzzle of the world’s most complicated reproductive issues.

In chapter two, “The Opt-In Conjecture and the Real World,” Battin shares reproductive injustices stemming from “interlocking systems of race, gender, class oppression, with huge variation from one society to another” (p. 17). Due to the roles of men, religion, and money as well as the circulation of discourses about different reproductive dilemmas, the author demonstrates concerns regarding institutionally sanctioned restriction too. The imperial, political, and religious impositions against reproductive freedom create obstacles to receiving lifesaving reproductive health care and education for disenfranchised communities globally. For example, the “global gag rule” prohibited US aid recipients’ foreign organizations from accessing and advocating for abortion rights (p. 18). By addressing “the normative forces and the imperfect world,” Battin shows us what reproduction would be like for everyone if there is “a partial way” to deal with these tensions through technological intervention (p. 16).

In the chapter “Why the Pill Isn’t Quite Good Enough: Modern Methods of Fertility Management,” Battin outlines the unreliability and incorrect use of condoms, birth control pills, patches, shots, and rings, as these methods “fail for as many as 10 % of couples per year or more” (p. 20). Furthermore, different reproductive abuses, such as intentional manipulation of

condoms by pulling them out or creating holes or lying about taking pills for pregnancy without spousal consent are not uncommon to force reproductive decisions. Battin acknowledges that the pill, the patch, the vaginal ring, and the shot have been used widely to manage fertility. However, she also addresses their conflict with accessibility “because they depend on resupply and reindorsement, sometimes in the face of barriers to access, and on human memory and consistency in practice” (p. 23). The author then introduces the readers to a more liberatory contraceptive method, the subdermal implant and the IUD—Long-Acting Reversible Contraception to allow choices of intentional reproduction if anyone wants it (p. 23). At the same time, in contrast to the pill, the patch, and the ring, LARC is 20 to 100 times more effective (between 20 to 100 times) in controlling unintended pregnancy (p. 28). LARC offers a choice of being in an Opt-in situation voluntarily with its access to self-removable technology.

In chapter four, “How to Solve the Wars over Abortion,” the author identifies the harm-inflicted medical, religious, and medical reproductive rhetorics that affect the reproductive rights and health of women, transgender, and non-binary people. For example, rhetorical disagreements even in word choices regarding what to call “the gestating entity” show the extreme discursive polarization in defining reproductive rights. Considering the medical, cultural, and religious wars and disagreements about mothers’ safety and rights in the event of coerced reproduction, and healthcare inaccessibility, the author seeks an alternative solution through an Opt-In Conjecture: What if a new method ensures reproductive freedom where pregnancy is initiated only through an active choice? (p. 47).

Chapter five, “Adolescent Pregnancy around the Globe: Child Brides and Teens Taking Chances,” discusses the effect of early pregnancy and its consequences for marginalized communities who don’t have access to medical care around the globe. In chapter six, “Coercive Sex, Coerced Reproduction,” Battin further emphasizes critical recognition of different types of reproductive coercion such as sexual, physical, financial, and emotional and their effects on genders, arguing that all coercions including “contraceptive sabotage,” “lying about vasectomy or contraceptive abuse,” and “piercing condoms,” contribute to enforcing unintended reproduction (p. 81). While nothing can completely prevent physical harm, the opt-in conjecture offers a method of exercising bodily autonomy. LARC protects both men and women to have children when they want them. From chapters seven to twelve, Battin identifies the importance in focusing on all genders as well as low-

ering the health care coverage options to ensure reproductive freedom. She imagines a world in which LARC were “the societal norm,” as this would help protect against unintended pregnancy while still having the freedom to change a reproductive decision (p. 161).

In chapter thirteen, “Thirteen Problematic Assumptions about Sex and Its Reproductive Consequences,” Battin debunks the flawed assumptions about reproduction by providing us with informed responses that would help public health sectors, policymakers, grassroots organizations, health care workers, health and medicine rhetoricians conjecture the possibilities of using LARC to at least reduce the issues that restrict reproductive freedom. She recognizes that LARC cannot prevent reproductive violence, white supremacist reproductive discourse, circulation of anti-trans rhetorics, and racialized and gendered inequalities; however, “the Opt-in conjecture” helps reduce reproductive consequences (p. 84). Reproduction remains a site of multiple oppressions. Informed by Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger, Zakiya Luna, and Deirdre Cooper Owens, among others, we know how reproduction is instrumentalized to establish racialized heteropatriarchal norms. Battin assures us that “our long thought experiment allows us to think big, even while we’re still observing the seeming reproductive chaos of the current real world” (p. 201).

In this speculative book, readers can visualize reproductive autonomy from a non-ideological approach. Guided by a visionary approach, this conjectural journey demonstrates what strategies could lead to the materialization of reproductive freedom for all genders worldwide. The author’s methodological global turn would benefit interdisciplinary scholars who work at the intersection of public health, the rhetoric of health and medicine, technofeminism, and technical and professional writing in understanding borderless multifaceted reproductive violence. Her provocative thought experiment could also be used as an invitational methodological tool for readers who want to explore technological solutions to issues that are inherently political and ideological.

## References

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