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## Book Review: "Seizing the Means of Production," by Michelle Murphy

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# MEDIA REVIEWS

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## Chapter 5

### Book Review: *Seizing the Means of Production*, by Michelle Murphy

Erin Fitzpatrick

In Michelle Murphy's book, *Seizing the Means of Reproduction* (2012), the intersections of feminism, technology and politics are explored within the scope of medicine. This interplay of biological concepts and political interference is referenced throughout the book as *biopolitics*. In her attempt to examine the effects of politicizing the technology used in health fields, Murphy directs the reader's attention to radical feminists in the 1970s and 1980s, whose focus was on creating a revolution in reproductive health. By literally seizing the means of reproduction, feminist health activists demonstrated that such a movement was more than empowering women; it was about using technoscience to shape the politics of health for future generations. Mapping the geography and social context of a rapidly progressing social issue such as reproductive freedom was crucial for insuring the future success of the movement.

To support this claim, Murphy's book operates in the fashion of a timeline. Historical moments when feminism and technoscience became intertwined are highlighted to emphasize the power and influence this combination had on subsequent feminist projects. In other words, as feminists became more familiar with technoscience, they were reshaping how future generations would navigate their reproductive freedom. Murphy focuses her attention on historical periods such as the Cold War, Imperialism, and Neoliberalism to structure her claims. In comparing and contrasting feminist biopolitics within isolated periods of history, readers are led through the

progress of the movement. *Seizing the Means of Reproduction* is dotted with exemplary stories of the entanglements of feminism in the healthcare field. Among these stories, Murphy ultimately argues that technoscience is the core that allowed the feminist health movement to move towards fruition. Murphy invites feminists working in the healthcare field to consider how playing with politics and technoscience can help or harm their cause. By the end of the book, Murphy convinces readers that it is impossible to accurately talk about feminism in the healthcare field without mentioning the role technoscience has played.

In addition to proposing unique arguments, *Seizing the Means of Reproduction* highlights broader anthropological themes. As a professor of Women's Studies herself, Murphy presents her case through a feminist lens, an often-criticized perspective regardless of the truth of the argument. The distinct voices of feminist pieces such as Murphy's can also cause these stories to stand out. For example, in "Cancer Butch," an article by S. Lochlann Jain (2007), readers may detect a tone similar to Murphy's, in which feminism is presented in the face of biopolitics. Like Murphy, Jain expresses these views in a matter of fact way: "Of course gender signifiers offer an easier conversation topic than does mortality. Shit, I am a person—human, animal, mortal. The focus on pink and breasts and comfort may be, quite simply, a convenient way to displace sheer terror: after all, what would it mean to really acknowledge—really acknowledge—the fact that 41,000 people each year die of a disease from which one literally rots from the inside out..." (Jain 2007, 505). Here, Jain explicitly merges feminism into the politics of breast cancer by exposing the harsh realities of the disease rather than focusing on the sexualization of it. Murphy similarly removes the sexualization of women's health by including photographs of feminist self-help groups from the 1970s in her book. The photographs capture women helping one another explore their reproductive health in a safe, women-centered environment. She explains that

before radical feminists inserted themselves in the healthcare field in the 1970s, women's reproductive health was either not spoken about or spoken about in a controlled patriarchal environment (Murphy 2012, 25–26).

As well as covering feminism in biopolitics, *Seizing the Means of Reproduction* embodies a theme that the medical anthropological community continues to revisit: the biomedical gaze. In Seth Holmes' ethnography, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies* (2013), the biomedical gaze is discussed in the context of Triqui migrant workers navigating medical treatment in the United States. Holmes describes the biomedical gaze as any assumption or preconceived notion a doctor has about a migrant worker that affects the treatment they receive (Holmes 2013, 142). Similar to Holmes' migrant workers who are at the mercy of an antagonistic medical system, the feminists described in Murphy's book challenge the medical "experts" in place. The women who set up mobile self-help clinics with the goal of spreading knowledge about feminist protocol were taking the power back from the patriarchal medical community in place, by "getting together to share experiences and learn about their own bodies through direct observation" (Murphy 2012, 25). So instead of women getting answers to questions about their bodies through the lens of a doctor, they became their own experts. Doing this eliminated the probability that a doctor would devalue a woman's experience or only look at isolated ailments because of a biomedical gaze. Based on her research and observations, it is plausible to say that Murphy is contributing to an ongoing conversation in medical anthropology. Her contribution is based on a historical analysis that provides insight into how the biomedical gaze has operated over time.

With convincing evidence, *Seizing the Means of Reproduction* effectively presents the unique argument that technoscience shaped the feminist health movement. In chapter three,

Murphy backs up her claim by going into detail about the pap smear, and how this specific piece of technoscience shaped the future of reproductive health. “Even the genealogy of the very term reproductive health is attached to the pap smear. Put simply, the pap smear was a medical protocol through which feminism, sex, race, economics, transnational policy, and biomedicine collided in the late twentieth century” (Murphy 2012, 102). Readers learn that the pap smear in combination with another technoscience, the plastic speculum, changed the way women communicated with their doctors. The way Murphy describes it, it makes sense that these technologies would encourage women to become more familiar with their bodies, and in turn express concerns to their doctors more effectively. Another strength of Murphy’s work was the inclusion of pictures to communicate the practice of self-help clinics. These visuals displayed the powerful role technoscience played in bringing women together to examine their bodies. Overall, Murphy’s argument is convincing because her thorough analysis demonstrates a scholarly understanding of feminism in healthcare.

Murphy could have made her argument stronger if the ethnography communicated evidence in a more readable way. Being a very dense book, some of her strong pieces of evidence lost strength in the complex language used. Murphy could have made her argument stronger by including anecdotes from women who were alive during the reproductive revolution. Personal stories would have made her claims come to life, and would have provided context for a greater understanding. Also, I would argue that the conclusion should have been a lot more concise. Where conclusions typically wrap up loose ends and tie the argument together, Murphy left readers with more questions than answers. By the end of the book it is still unclear as to the major effects of birth control or any laws in place that hurt the reproductive rights movement.

*Seizing the Means of Reproduction* discusses a rather abstract and niche topic. If it weren't for the intersections of feminism, technology, and politics throughout the book, the audience would be very small. But because these umbrella topics are intertwined, a wider audience is attracted. With that said, Murphy's book is not a light read; the concepts discussed are for readers that have at least a basic understanding of feminist theory. I would definitely recommend this book to any health practitioner that works with women. This book is also suitable for activists interested in building a movement, and academics that are interested in Women and Gender Studies.

## References

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