

**“Before Roe, a women called to account for seeking an abortion was typically accused of murdering motherhood or ruining her femininity. After Roe, the antis initially defined her crime as shameful selfishness, then as outright baby-murder, predicting for her a condemned future, infused with postabortion trauma.”**

growing popularity of neoliberalism. Ziegler maintains that *Roe* “marked a turning point,” but hardly “determined the course” of abortion politics in the decade after the decision was handed down.


Clearly this is a book addressed more pointedly to legal scholars than to historians, of which I am one. A historian would naturally view *Roe* as a reflection and expression of a nexus of historical factors, and simply assume that the authors of *Roe* would have drawn on and channeled the incipient developments Ziegler cites as having contributed significantly (along with many other factors) to the nature of society after their decision. Ziegler’s laborious and earnestly repeated disapproval of the tendency of some legal scholars to pin the unending abortion battles on *Roe* itself, and her attempts to draw the attention of legal scholars to factors beyond the scope of the decision, are thus helpful, if necessary.

But in making the case for the wrongheadedness of assigning so much blame to *Roe*, Ziegler draws on evidence that is partial, overly targeted, and in some cases unconvincing, even as she humanizes and indeed, refuses to villainize the members of any camp. Chiefly, I don’t believe that it’s possible to fully understand the aftermath of *Roe* by depending mostly on materials associated with major, mainstream, largely white anti- and proabortion organizations. For example, Ziegler argues that even though the National Organization

for Women (NOW) and Planned Parenthood had a hard time in the late sixties and early seventies coming to—and promoting—an integrated view of feminism and abortion rights, by the late 1970s, these organizations had made “*Roe* a symbol of an argument for women’s right to fertility control.” She uses this chronology to show that *Roe* did not, as some legal scholars have argued, “hamstring” the women’s movement. But Ziegler’s argument may be rendered moot by strong evidence that other influential parts of the women’s movement were clear, vocal, and effective in making the connection between feminism and abortion rights both before and after *Roe*—illustrated, for example by the suit the Connecticut women’s movement brought challenging Connecticut’s abortion ban, known as *Women v. Connecticut* (and also as *Abele v. Markel*), and decided in the Second Circuit the year before *Roe*.

While Ziegler includes some discussion of radical, racially mixed groups with incipient reproductive-justice agendas, and of emergent activism among women of color during the decade after *Roe*, her research into these domains is thin; several times, for example, she depends solely on a *New York Times* article (February 2, 1978) by the late journalist Judy Klemesrud to make a sweeping assertion about Planned Parenthood’s commitment to racial justice. Indeed, white-led groups were forming positions about the meanings of

reproduction in a decade that saw vigorous resistance to the accomplishments of the civil rights movement and growing hostility to public assistance for poor women (plus an explicit interest in punishing their reproduction)—as well as the considerable vibrancy of the National Welfare Rights Organization, which insisted that poor women had the human right to be mothers.

The social and political context that put reproduction, class, race, and updated strategies of population control at the very center of national politics between 1973 and 1983 did shape the post-*Roe* world, a matter that neither the antis nor the pro-choicers wanted to confront then or, generally, now. The indignity and disrespect that politicians and others heaped on poor, pregnant, and mothering women of color in that decade fueled and overlapped with the indignity and disrespect many Americans aimed at all sexual, fertile females, as legislatures and judiciaries geared up to govern reproductive medicine and access to it. Rather than look to *Roe*—or not—to explain the abortion wars, perhaps the better question is, What has been the impact of *Roe v. Wade* plus *Harris v. McRae*? The world we ended up with combined the limited promises of the former with the negative rights of the latter, an outcome that greased the rails for antiabortion cadres and gave heft to the idea that if choice is for anyone, it’s only for those with privileges of class and race. Ultimately, the world we got has challenged the dignity and safety of all reproducing persons. 

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## Attention Must Be Paid

*On Becoming a Teen Mom: Life Before Pregnancy*

By Mary Patrice Erdmans and Timothy Black  
Oakland: University of California Press, 2015,  
330 pp., \$29.95, paperback

*System Kids: Adolescent Mothers and the Politics of Regulation*

By Lauren J. Silver  
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,  
2015, 198 pp., \$29.95, paperback

*Reviewed by Ruth Sidel*

**T**he denigration of poor families in the United States has been fueled for decades by the denigration of teen mothers. They have been portrayed as reckless and out of control. They have been stigmatized and stereotyped as a problem independent of the larger, structural problems embedded in American society. *On Becoming a Teen Mom*, by the sociologists Mary Patrice Erdmans and Timothy Black, examines the lives of teen mothers prior to pregnancy, particularly the “systemic inequality rooted in patriarchy, poverty, and racism” that they experience. The authors argue that “no group of young mothers has been more demonized than black teens,” and that a “national narrative” ex-

ists “that casts black and brown teen mothers as threatening the societal moral order, bankrupting public coffers, and contributing to high rates of poverty, incarceration, crime, and school dropout.” Through examining the life stories of 108 racially and ethnically diverse mothers living in Connecticut in 2002 and 2003, Erdmans and Black identify several pivotal experiences that can lead to a young woman’s becoming pregnant and deciding to keep her baby: having been sexually abused as a child, living in households with inadequate income, attending poor schools, and experiencing violence in the homes—in short, living a life “mired in violence, deprivation, humiliation, and oppression.”

Many of Erdmans and Black's young women subjects tell wrenching stories of their childhoods. Ivalessé, who was raised in Puerto Rico and returned to Connecticut when she was thirteen, speaks of being sexually molested when she was under the age of six and trying to hide every time the abuser came to her house. Cassandra and Tameka, too, were victims of sexual abuse as children. They were also beaten by their mothers, who themselves had been regularly beaten by their boy friends. When Cassandra and Tameka were young women, the cycle was repeated, as they were abused by their partners.

This kind of violence was not just personal but an integral part of their environment. The young mothers experience violence in their families, relationships, schools, and neighborhoods. They describe the police as "corrupt, mistrustful, violent, racist, and on the take." At the time of the study, Connecticut was the wealthiest state in the union; however, it had, and continues to have, some of the worst economic disparities in the nation. According to the authors, "Beneath the façade of prosperity, Connecticut exemplifies a state that has been torn apart by economic and social inequality in the past thirty years."

The combination of poverty, institutional neglect, pervasive violence, and racial and gender inequality all too often traps the young women into repeating familiar patterns. In an environment of severely limited choices, many of them turn to socially marginal behaviors—excessive drinking and drugging, stripping at parties, sex work—and view the respected statuses of pregnancy and motherhood as ways to start over. But, as the authors point out, without a good education, finding a steady job with adequate wages and benefits is exceedingly difficult. Moreover, Erdmans and Black point out, "access to day care and accommodating school policies," which are critical to the young mothers pursuing further education, is rare. The girls' failure in school, and the schools and community failure to support them, makes life excessively difficult for the young mothers.

It is significant that approximately one-fifth of the mothers interviewed by Erdmans and Black had not been sexually abused, did not grow up in violent households or in extreme poverty, were not high school dropouts, and did not have substance abuse or mental health problems. "None of [these girls] intended to become pregnant," write the authors. Why then did these young women become pregnant, and why did they carry their pregnancies to term? Asked what would be a desirable life trajectory for their daughters, they echoed mainstream, middle-class values. For example, Damaris, who became a single mother at seventeen, responds, "Finish school, go to college, meet a nice guy, marry, have two kids, and then put them through school. She can't have kids until after she graduates and gets married."

The authors term these young mothers "good girls," stressing that they come from what are conventionally considered "good" backgrounds and—with the huge exception of becoming pregnant and having a baby as a young, unmarried teenager—they have led conventional, often exemplary, lives. Erdmans and Black state that they utilize the "good girl"/"bad girl" dichotomy in part because the girls refer to themselves in these terms and in part to illustrate how young mothers have been demonized by this society. But, does



using this kind of loaded language counter the demonization? Does using value-laden expressions undo the stereotyping, the denigration, and the racialization of the terms—since all too often, the "bad girl" is stereotyped as black or of color and deviant, while the "good girl" is assumed to be white and middle class. Using such terms reinforces them and perpetuates the stereotypes.

The authors explore in some depth why young, achieving women become pregnant—in other words, do not use contraception—and then why they do not have abortions. Having unprotected sex is most often due to "adolescent hubris ('it won't happen to me')," "ignorance," or "naïveté," say the authors. They point out that negotiating the use of contraception with a male partner is often difficult for teenage girls, whose relationships are likely to be characterized by gender inequality. Once they become pregnant, deciding to have an abortion is extraordinarily complex, when the procedure is so controversial, frequently deplored—and expensive and difficult to access.

While *On Becoming a Teen Mom* analyzes the factors and circumstances that contribute to unmarried young women having babies, *System Kids*, by Lauren J. Silver, describes and analyzes one particular program created to help young mothers move from foster care to independent living. Generally, foster children age out of the foster care system at the age of eighteen. Since 2008, the federal government has given states the option to provide services to certain young people in the child welfare system until they reach age 21. They can remain in care if they are completing high school, enrolled in postsecondary or vocational education, participating in a job-readiness program, or employed for at least eighty hours per month.

The Supervised Independent Living (SIL) program described by Silver was established by the local child welfare agency in an unnamed city and funded by a federal government contract. The program was expected to facilitate residential, educational, and social services for teen mothers. The author, who describes herself as a "researcher-

advocate," has the significant advantage of having worked as a program manager with SIL, and she uses her insider/outsider status to examine how the program really works, not just how it is supposed to work. Using in-depth interviews with case managers, program managers, and the young women themselves, Silver vividly brings to life the hopes, frustrations, and reality of how the program functions for both clients and workers. While she points out the program's serious flaws, she makes it clear that her critique should not become an excuse for terminating such efforts but rather an impetus toward improving them.

The SIL program Silver studied placed young mothers and their children in apartments, supposedly providing social services that would enable them to continue their education. The goal was to help them manage to live independently by the time they were 21. While well meaning, the program had serious flaws. Most of the apartments were in unsafe areas, which made both the young women and their case workers anxious. The mothers' boyfriends, usually the fathers of their children, were not supposed to stay overnight, yet they often did—in part to protect the mothers and their children—although some of them were abusive. Services such as child care, which were necessary if the teen parents were to attend school, were not usually provided. In addition, almost every mother Silver spoke with felt the program's \$62.00 per week stipend for a mother and her child was not sufficient.

While the girls were often members of minority groups, their social workers were generally white. The supervisors, too, were mostly middle-class whites who lived in the suburbs, where they had little interaction with or direct knowledge of the circumstances of their clients' lives. Silver describes the "social distance created as those in power dictated bureaucratic procedures while not experiencing or understanding the 'reality' of SIL environments." Moreover, virtually all personnel felt overworked and unable to do their jobs the way the program intended. In a microcosm, the SIL program illustrates many of the key problems with the US child-welfare system, and the social welfare system in general. This reform initiative, which attempts to help young mothers move to independent living, is hamstrung by fundamental flaws in American society such as continuing discrimination on the basis of race and class, inadequate access to social services, inadequate material resources for the neediest families, inadequate numbers and training of social service workers, and an often-punitive attitude toward the poor and near-poor.

While these books are important in understanding the underlying causes of teen pregnancy and how young mothers and their children could be helped to develop healthy, productive lives, it must be stressed that over the past quarter-century, teen pregnancy has decreased markedly among all groups. As Erdmans and Black note,

[T]een pregnancy, abortion, and birth rates have fallen precipitously for all racial and ethnic groups. Teens are managing their sexuality better, using contraception more effectively, and having fewer babies than at any time in US history—half as many as in 1991.



Still, the United States has a higher rate of teen pregnancy than other industrialized countries. The authors claim this is because we have “bigger and deeper pockets of disadvantaged communities”: millions of young women and their children are neglected by this rich society. Blaming the teenager is truly blaming the victim, which is not fair, viable, or productive. According to the *New York Times* (September 13, 2015), income has fallen for low-wage workers and much of the middle class, and risen to extraordinary levels for the top one percent

and, again according to the *Times* (November 18, 2015), nearly 16 million Americans, the “poorest of the poor,” live below fifty percent of the poverty line. Erdmans and Black argue that “reducing inequality, poverty, and family instability would decrease the teen birth rate,” strengthen at-risk families, increase opportunities, and “give women more freedom and control over their lives.”

The authors of both of these first-rate, illuminating books recognize that for the lives of teenage mothers and their children to improve,

significant policy changes must be made by the wider society. As Willie Loman’s wife Linda famously says in Arthur Miller’s play, *Death of a Salesman*, “Attention must be paid.”

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# Mental Illness Then and Now

*White Matter: A Memoir of Family and Medicine*

By Janet Sternburg

Portland, OR: Hawthorne Books, 2015, 238 pp., \$18.95, paperback

*The Last Asylum: A History of Madness in Our Times*

By Barbara Taylor

Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015, 295 pp., \$20.00, paperback

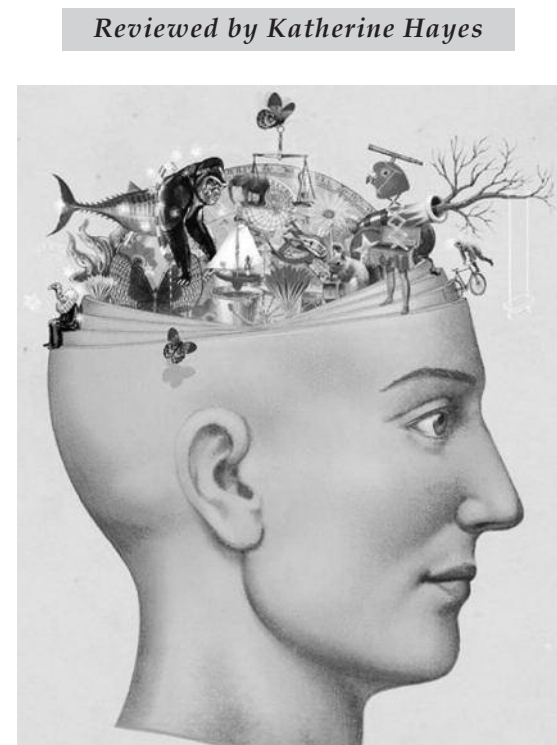
The mess of madness defies description: the interconnected webs of personal distress, medical treatment, diagnosis, psychotherapy, stigma, discrimination, injured relationships, trauma, and sociocultural restriction require care and creativity to navigate. *The Last Asylum* and *White Matter* are very different stories of women navigating these questions for themselves, from inside and outside the experience. Barbara Taylor, the author of *The Last Asylum*, tells her own story of distress, treatment, and recovery with the authority of a firsthand observer, in the context of her wider historical investigation into our sociocultural priorities, beliefs, and actions around mental health and treatment. Janet Sternburg, the author of *White Matter*, in contrast, tells her family’s story through the obstacles of distance, generation, fear, stigma, and silence. Through the narrative, she works to construct an understandable, authentic story in the blank spaces of her family’s narratives about itself.

In *White Matter*, Sternburg compares her own combination of ignorance and knowledge that both her aunt and her uncle had had prefrontal lobotomies to other children’s that a grandfather had fought in a war. She describes the eerie normalcy of family gatherings:

The years came back to me when my aunt and uncle were driven to our house, my uncle in a corduroy car coat like the ones my father and other uncles wore, my aunt dolled up by her other sisters, her hair Spray-Netted stiff. They were greeted; they sat blankly on the couch—Bennie at one end virtually unmoving, my aunt crumpled into the far corner—while my mother made dinner, my aunt brought over a Bundt cake, my father and uncles played cards, all of them through the years succeeding, or failing, or something in between.

Later, friends were aghast at her casual disclosure of this part of her family history, and they raised the questions that drive this story: how did this happen twice in one family, and how did Sternburg fail to realize the horror of it?

She dives into memory, research, conversation, and imagination to construct answers to these questions, while reflecting on the impossibility of



finding any comforting or trustworthy truths in the combination of unreliable sources, including personal imagination, that “inevitably lean toward fiction,” she writes.

Sternburg weaves her evolving understanding of the history and science of lobotomy into the story of her family in a way that makes their decisions seem understandable and even inevitable. She vividly paints the chaotic home that the siblings grew up in, their fear of their brother Bennie as he grew up and became frighteningly violent and unpredictable, their hope and conflict about the possibility of a lobotomy, and their guilty relief when he emerged from the procedure in a persistent state of quiet sleepwalking. “We weren’t scared anymore,” admits one of her aunts—but this is both true and false. With lobotomy now an acceptable option for the family, the climax of the story unfolds in a sickening, inexorable slide toward the second surgery, as the siblings slowly lose patience with their youngest sister’s emotional fragility. Framed in Sternburg’s reflections on her own fear growing up that she would be lobotomized like her aunt and uncle if she could

not control and hide her own feelings, it is clear that fear was not removed from the family, but transformed and passed on.

*White Matter* builds with the suspense and gathering unease of a horror story. Some of this is due to the nature of the content. The reality of prefrontal lobotomy is jarring and disquieting, pulling on primal fears. Promoted in the early twentieth century as a cost-saving and humanitarian surgery, the lobotomy took America by storm. The surgery sent people seen as hopeless cases home from the asylum, saving taxpayer money, and keeping families (more or less) intact. Patients subjected to the early versions of the surgery—like Sternburg’s Uncle Bennie—usually lost their ability to function independently, as well as their sense of self, of time, of personal will and decision making. The physical process of the surgery—described by Sternburg in gut-wrenching detail, as she reflects on it not as a bland procedure, but as “what was done to Bennie”—is the stuff of nightmares.

The structure of the book contributes to the tension. Sternburg outlines her main question early and reveals the deeply personal stakes of her exploration: “If my relatives had been so good and kind, how could they have done this to their siblings?” Over the course of the book, this question extends beyond her family to the doctors, researchers, and society that made the lobotomy decisions seem rational and unavoidable. Her hesitancy to explore these questions and her fear of what she may find lend a poignant honesty and vulnerability to the narrating voice, as well as a sense of urgency. In some passages, I found myself hooked much as if I were reading a ghost story, dreading but needing to know what might be on the other side of each door.

Sternburg’s historical anecdotes and notes on medical conceptions of mental disorder and neurology are interspersed throughout. While these are always intriguing, I was frequently reminded of Sternburg’s statement in her introduction: “[A]ll this research, while compelling and an intrinsic part of the story, was also a way for me to stay at a safe distance from the implications of what was close to me.” At its strongest points, *White Matter* is not the history of lobotomy as told through the story of a family, but the story of a family, as told in part