

Rachel Carson Prize: Nelly Oudshoorn
The Male Pill: A Biography of a Technology in the Making
Society for Social Studies of Science

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Have you ever wondered why there is no birth control pill for men? As the father of four children, I certainly have, at least right up until that vasectomy. However, as Nelly Oudshoorn forces once to ask while reading *The Male Pill: A Biography of a Technology in the Making*, was this sort of wonder in any sense innocent? Was I, for example, enacting an emergent masculine identity of the “responsible, caring man,” as I sometimes hope is the case, who was generously acknowledging that his partner Marta had had difficulties with oral contraceptives in the past and had long ago abandoned them? Or, was I enacting a hegemonic masculinity, as I am all too often forced to admit, grudgingly, in the sense that, now having tangible proof of my virility I was now fantasizing about having greater control over my participation in reproduction, this time so I could guarantee sexual pleasure without the risk of more college tuition to pay?

Indeed, as Nelly shows us, the operations of hegemonic masculinity here cut two ways, for the fitful development of a male pill that restrains sperm production also makes all-too-visible the hegemonic male predisposition to make sexual fulfillment dependent upon, as they say, shooting bullets, military metaphor wholly intended. After all, I said I wondered about a male pill. I didn't say I would actually use it.

And indeed, remembering the fact that after I got the green light for the vasectomy it actually took me another six months to undergo the procedure makes me cringe.

Damn you, Nelly. You see, one of the reasons that *The Male Pill* deserves the Rachel Carson prize from the Society for Social Studies of Science is because it makes a cultural move that enables, and forces, readers to address questions such as these in their own lives. The distinguishing feature of the Rachel Carson prize is social and political relevance, and one sense in which this book is supremely relevant lies in how it transforms vague expressions of wonder, desire, and fear into informed analysis of how the prospect of an emerging reproductive technology, as well as constituent features of that emergence, reinscribes identities, producing both changes and continuities and forcing attention to their relation.

But *The Male Pill* also deserves the Carson Prize because it successfully integrates the cultural move into a full-blown historical and ethnographic account of network building in technological development, directly, thoroughly, and decisively formulating and answering the question: Why is there no male pill? The pharmaceutical industry took itself out of the game early on, with the evidence indicating concern with the fact that it's much more difficult to inhibit sperm production 24-7 than egg production once a month (and where zero emissions seems to be as unattainable in ejaculation as it is in the burning of fossil fuels), with the prospect of liability suits in failed cases (due to a cultural desire for a

Delaney Clause limiting pregnancy risk to zero), and with the idea that men wouldn't use it anyway because of the shooting bullets thing (my term by the way—as a good ethnographer, Nelly successfully resists the myriad of opportunities to resort to cheap humor, knowing that any such attempt would turn out to be at the expense of someone whose experiences she's faithfully recounting ethnographically—she understands the problem of audience)

So the author was faced with the challenge of accounting for a technology-in-the-making not by looking backward from its achieved stabilization but by investigating and accounting for a technological absence. The question “why does a technology not exist?” is a new one for STS research.

To answer this question, Nelly Oudshoorn painstakingly introduces all the players and documents the networks, science, and gender and other cultural work involved in efforts to achieve an oral contraceptive for men. And what you will be able to explain, if you want to be configured as a better user of the book and join Nelly, Adele Clarke, Leigh Star, Wiebe Bijker and myself tomorrow at 1:30 at the Author-Meets-Critics session in Pasadena II, is how public-sector organizations, especially the World Health Organization, were the main actors to take up the challenge, how their strategy was to build a protected space, how getting men to go to the doctor for other than the treatment of diseases is requiring some creative gender work—privileging once again the heterosexual male in a stable

relationship, how emergent reproductive clinics for men offer more health services than are offered by clinics for women, how journalism has served interestingly as a voice of resistance, and what it was that got the pharmaceutical industry turned around and on board for an oral contraceptive for men. In sum, *The Male Pill* deserves the Carson prize because it successfully configures its users so that after seriously engaging this work, which effectively lives both inside and outside of STS at the same time, they are able to cogently formulate and answer questions, such as why do I fantasize about or fear a male pill and why exactly is it not here, that before were only vague expressions of interest and wonder.

On behalf of the Society for Social Studies of Science, I am pleased and honored to award the Rachel Carson prize for a “book length work of social or political relevance in the area of science and technology studies” to Nelly Oudshoorn’s *The Male Pill*.