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ANTI-ABORTION ACTIVISM AND ADVANCES: A HISTORIOGRAPHY

Haley Wells

Introduction

On November 1, 2021, the United States Supreme Court began hearing oral arguments about the Texas near-total abortion ban.¹ On December 10, 2021, the court returned with a ruling stating that challenges to the ban could continue in the lower courts. However, by refusing to state whether the ban was unconstitutional, the court effectively the ban on abortions to continue.² In December, the Court also reviewed a Mississippi abortion law that banned abortions after fifteen weeks, “about two months earlier than Roe and later decisions allow.”³ As of March 2022, the Supreme Court has yet to return with a ruling on the Mississippi abortion ban, and it is unclear when this ruling will occur. This Mississippi law was enacted in 2018— one year before Alabama governor Kay Ivey signed the Human Life Protection Act, which banned all abortions “unless a woman’s life is threatened or there is a lethal fetal anomaly” and made performing an abortion a felony carrying up to ninety-nine years of jail time.⁴ Although the Human Life Protection Act is currently blocked, it could be reinstated if the Supreme Court rules in favor of the Mississippi abortion ban. Georgia—which signed a heartbeat bill banning almost all abortions after six weeks of pregnancy in May 2019—Kentucky, Ohio, South Carolina, and Tennessee all passed similar restrictions in early 2019.⁵

These laws are all part of a nationwide movement that has been ongoing since before the 1973 Supreme Court ruling *Roe v. Wade* (which made abortion legal in many circumstances): the anti-abortion movement. Since the inception of anti-abortion activism, scholars have written about the ideologies, actions, legislation, and historical impact of the movement—scholarship which reflects as much diversity as the movement itself. While this scholarship has

always been critical to understanding the implications and trajectory of anti-abortion activism in the United States, in light of recent and ongoing legislative developments, examining the work that has been done so far and charting what remains to be done becomes particularly relevant.

Anti-Abortion Activism Before *Roe v. Wade*

Anti-abortion activism predates *Roe v. Wade*. In her book *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community* (published 1989), Faye D. Ginsburg charts some of the earliest known instances of American anti-abortion activism, which took place in the nineteenth-century. She writes, “Abortion was a relatively common as well as accepted practice during much of the nineteenth century.”⁶ However, in the second half of the nineteenth century, male physicians who were “competing with midwives, local healers, homeopaths, and, increasingly, abortionists”⁷ attempted to criminalize abortion to take control of the practice of medicine. The professionalization of medicine began with the founding of the American Medical Association (AMA) in 1847; then, ten years later, “Horatio B. Storer, a Harvard-trained doctor specializing in obstetrics and gynecology, launched a national drive within the AMA to lobby state legislatures to criminalize all induced abortions.”⁸ The role of the AMA in working to criminalize abortions reflects both similarities and differences between the first phase of anti-abortion activism and anti-abortion activism after *Roe v. Wade*. A 2010 article notes how the AMA supported the ban on “partial birth” abortions that passed in 2003 after the Republican Party (which spearheaded the ban) agreed to provide “stronger safeguards for doctors facing criminal penalties.”⁹ However, other medical organizations, such as the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) spoke out

against the ban, arguing that the procedure is “necessary and proper in certain cases.”¹⁰ These two sources show that male-dominated medical organizations, such as the AMA, have a long history of prioritizing their own professional development and interests over the health of American women, while organizations that support women’s health and bodily autonomy often face disapproval from other medical organizations.¹¹

The Growth of Anti-Abortion Activism after Roe v. Wade

In the years following Roe v. Wade, anti-abortion activism exploded. Whereas the first generation of anti-abortion activists had predominantly been physicians attempting to criminalize abortions to professionalize their practices, anti-abortion activists after the ruling were typically ordinary people attempting to enact change at the legislative level. In an article published in 2006, Richard L. Hughes argues that anti-abortion activists in the years immediately following the ruling drew heavily from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.¹² He traces this Civil Rights-inspired activism to Chuck Fager, an activist from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the National Youth Pro-life Coalition (NYPC), which espoused nonviolent civil disobedience to fight abortion.¹³ Additionally, he discusses the contributions of Black civil rights activist Reverend Jesse Jackson who compared arguments about abortion being a private choice to pro-slavery arguments, stating, “That [privacy] was the premise of slavery. You could not protest the existence or treatment of slaves on the plantation because that was private and therefore outside your right to be concerned.”¹⁴ In her recent publication, *Tiny You: A Western History of the Anti-Abortion Movement* (2020), Jennifer L. Holland also notes that the anti-abortion movement used the rhetoric of anti-slavery abolitionist to argue against the legalization of abortion : “Activists fashioned themselves as morally upstanding

abolitionists, not Confederates subject to the whims of an oppressive North.”¹⁵ Referencing anti-abortion activists John and Barbara Wilkes, authors of the Handbook on Abortion, Holland writes, “The Wilkes argued that both cases [Roe v. Wade and the Dred Scott decision] made some groups ‘less than human’ and both practices—slavery and abortion—degraded life.”¹⁶ Whereas Hughes focuses on politically progressive activists who saw anti-abortion activism as an extension of their previous social justice activism, Holland argues that, “Through such rhetorical work, activists created a moral whiteness, where conservative Americans assumed the role of freedom fighters and justice warriors.”¹⁷ Therefore, Holland suggests that “Anti-abortion activists continued to develop a new type of white identity—one based on their claims to common sense and morality. They claimed white conservatives were the true inheritors of the black civil rights movement.”¹⁸

Although both Holland and Hughes identify liberal civil rights rhetoric utilized by the anti-abortion movement, they differ when identifying the motives and political backgrounds of those who used this rhetoric. Hughes points to a small but vocal minority who genuinely saw legalized abortion as a new way of oppressing people of color, while Holland argues that the majority of anti-abortion activists were white conservatives who co-opted progressive narratives while simultaneously excluding people of color. For example, Holland shows how white Catholic anti-abortion activists frequently excluded Catholics of color from the movement. Though they were “demographically speaking, ripe for pro-life politicization” because they “generally had ‘traditional’ families and opposed abortion personally,” they were never incorporated into the anti-abortion movement en masse because they preferred to focus on a variety of social reforms, while abortion became the “single issue” for white Catholics.¹⁹ Because white Catholics “missed the ways that ethnic



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Mexicans encouraged social justice campaigns, campaigns from which the church's anti-abortion crusade often distracted," and "tried to shoehorn Mexican Catholics into the mold of European Catholicism," they kept their movement predominantly white and conservative.

Holland also notes the anti-abortion movement's use of Holocaust rhetoric. She writes, "Comparisons to the Holocaust became the common refrain of pro-life Mormons, Protestants, and Catholics alike; by the 1970s, the Holocaust had become a central moral reference point for Americans."²⁰ In observing how Holocaust rhetoric was also incorporated into the movement, Holland charts the rapid evolution of anti-abortion rhetoric and ideologies. Karissa Haugeberg has also observed the usage of Holocaust imagery, writing, "The Holocaust analogy permitted antiabortion activists to criticize the entire apparatus that allowed abortions to continue, including abortion providers and clinic staff, as well as the police officers, judges, lawyers, and prison guards who enforced the law."²¹ Haugeberg takes her analysis of Holocaust rhetoric farther than Holland does, explaining why this particular rhetoric was so effective and how it affected extremist anti-abortion activism. She states, "By highlighting

how dozens of categories of professionals and bureaucrats conspired in the effort to make abortion permissible" —which is similar to what happened during the Holocaust, when Jewish genocide was state-sponsored and organized— "pro-life activists justified their use of aggressive tactics as part of a larger battle to dismantle a corrupt system."²² While Hughes does not examine how the shift in rhetoric endorsed the shift from more peaceful activism to violent actions, he does briefly note how the rhetoric of civil rights became less popular: "[Randal] Terry [the founder of the anti-abortion organization Operation Rescue] also dropped the civil rights term 'sit-in' in favor of 'rescue,' which was more acceptable among a conservative movement less comfortable with overt references to sixties activism."²³ Hugh's article supports Holland's thesis, as he notes how conservatives co-opted civil rights rhetoric. He traces the trajectory of Randal Terry, noting how Terry moved from progressive feminism to conservatism, eventually espousing civil disobedience within Operation Rescue to "bring an end to the biological holocaust."²⁴ Whereas Hughes recounts Terry's holocaust rhetoric without drawing attention to or analyzing it, Holland draws attention to it and notes its racial undertones. Thus, Holland's intervention focuses more explicitly on the racialized components of the movement than any other source examined.

Origins of Post-1973 Anti-Abortion Activism

Among examined sources, Holland uniquely points to the origins of the post-1973 anti-abortion movement in previous sexual moralist movements. She writes, "It was the anti-porn and anti-birth control movements where they [pro-life activists] formed the intellectual frameworks that would later translate into anti-abortion politics."²⁵ Holland concludes, "Ultimately the story of the anti-abortion movement is not one of activists who lost their liberalism, but rather one of sexual moralists who found their party."²⁶ Therefore, although Holland's argument does concur with Hughes' and Ginsburg's

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In tracing the roots of the post-Roe v. Wade anti-abortion movement back to the anti-birth control and anti-porn movements, Holland, like Ginsburg, places the movement within a larger historical context and frames the pro-life movement as the logical next step in a series of sexually moralistic movements.

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Holland, however, Haugeberg does not identify the role of sexual moralism and social conservatism in each of these movements. Holland agrees with Ginsburg on party politics, stating, “These nascent social conservatives did not have a single partisan home; some were Democrats...while others were avowed Republicans.”²⁹ But she identifies a concern over sexual morality rather than an interest in the right to life as the basis of the movement. In tracing the roots of the post-Roe v. Wade anti-abortion movement back to the anti-birth control and anti-porn movements, Holland, like Ginsburg, places the movement within a larger historical context and frames the pro-life movement as the logical next step in a series of sexually moralistic movements.

Holland takes her analysis beyond a discussion of long-standing moralistic (and patriarchal) movements; she also grounds her examination of these movements in an examination of racial politics. She explains how concerns about errant sexuality became racially charged in the years leading up to Roe v. Wade:

Beginning in the 1960s, social critics no longer pointed to errant white men or poor migrants, but rather to black people—and black women in particular—as primary culprits...In the comments on the 1965 birth control bill, conservative white Coloradoans renewed the link between women and irresponsible public assistance. While conservatives named the sex of the ‘undeserving poor’ in their comments, many surely had race in mind as well.³⁰

She connects the racism implicit in the anti-birth control movement to the racism found in the pro-life movement, writing, “It was moralists—those white Middle Americans—who would protect society from both white elites and black deviants.”³¹ Her book adds to the history of the anti-abortion movement by showing how the movement foregrounded race

to a degree (all three note the initial utilization of civil rights rhetoric, though they differ in their interpretations of that utilization), it also differs from them by pointing to the origins of the post-Roe v. Wade movement. Whereas Hughes argues that some of the earliest pro-life activism was spearheaded by former civil rights activists, and Ginsburg argues that the National Right to Life Committee (NRLC) was (initially, at least) composed of “a diverse constituency from right to left united around the single issue of the ‘right-to-life,’”²⁷ Holland argues that the movement was predominately composed of social conservatives from its inception. Karissa Haugeberg briefly references how many anti-abortion activists opposed birth control before turning their attention to fighting abortion, but she focuses on how these anti-birth control activists turned anti-abortion activists “questioned the legitimacy of organized medicine itself”²⁸ as a way of arguing that both birth control and abortions endangered women’s lives. Unlike

far more than scholars had previously supposed.

Religion in the Post-1973 Anti-Abortion Movement

The sexual moralism Holland describes often found its home in religious circles. Over the years, many scholars have noted the centrality of religion to the anti-abortion movement. Ginsburg writes, “Although much of the movement originated or ultimately developed independently of the Catholic Church, that institution was and continues to be crucial as a support system.”³² She argues that this support system “helped mobilize the movement in its early stages into a national presence.”³³ Haugeberg concurs with Ginsburg’s assessment of the Catholic Church’s involvement, adding that the Church was involved in the anti-abortion movement even before *Roe v. Wade*: “In the late 1960s, when state legislators debated whether to reform criminal abortion statutes, the Catholic Church began an impassioned campaign to stem the movement for legalization.”³⁴ But Haugeberg complicates the picture by examining the collaboration between Catholic women and Protestant men in the movement. She argues, “Catholic women...developed the aggressive strategies that later came to be associated with evangelical Protestant men in the grassroots pro-life movement.”³⁵ She also demonstrates that some of the most prominent leaders in organizations such as the National Right to Life Committee were not Catholic, portraying the movement as more religiously diverse than scholars once believed. Jennifer Holland further complicates our picture of the role of religion in the movement by examining the roles of Catholicism, Mormonism, and western American Protestantism. She argues that Mormons and Protestants assimilated into a movement that was initially dominated by Catholics. She writes, “Utahns borrowed heavily from Catholic pro-life culture, and thus argued their moral superiority was akin to that of other socially conservative white Americans.”³⁶



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Therefore, Holland identifies a religiously diverse movement whose unity and action belied the different belief systems encompassed within it. She further notes that traditionally marginalized religions, such as Mormonism, took advantage of this homogeneity to incorporate into mainstream American culture. She writes, “For Mormons, those religious and political maneuvers were a part a racial assimilation process, whereby they gave up (a little of) their distinctiveness for something that unified them with other socially conservative white Americans.”³⁷ With this observation, Holland complicates the picture of anti-abortion activism beyond simply identifying those religions that participated in the movement; she also shines light on how the movement became about more than fighting to “save lives”—it also became about assimilation for certain groups, reconstituting a racial and national identity, reconstructing whiteness, or fighting for a religiously-inspired sexual morality.

Holland also notes religious divisions among pro-life organizations, writing, “Right to Life groups tended to be dominated by Catholics, while groups like Operation Rescue tended to be dominated by evangelicals.”³⁸ She argues that these religious divisions occurred “not simply because people preferred their own, but because activists disagreed on

whether proselytizing should be a central part of their work.”³⁹ Thus, she shows how anti-abortion organizations became centers of religious disputes. Ultimately, she notes how activists downplayed religious differences to further the main goal: ending abortions. She states, “They [religious coalitions] accentuated the claim that this was not a Catholic movement; they helped support the argument that theirs was a moral movement representing all Middle (white) Americans; and it helped build real political power that could sway elections.”⁴⁰ This observation hearkens to Ginsburg’s assertion that, although the movement was technically independent of the Catholic Church, the Church acted as a crucial support system for activists and organizations. By arguing that religious coalitions were necessary for pro-life activists’ public image, Holland questions the unity of the movement and the relative influence of each religious sect.

Operation Rescue

During the 1980s and 1990s, Operation Rescue was one of the most prominent and aggressive anti-abortion groups in America. Due to its prominence in the movement, many scholars, including Karissa Haugeberg, Caroline Hymel, and Jennifer Holland, have researched and written about this organization. Haugeberg argues that, “Scholars have overlooked the Catholic women who conspired to terrorize abortion providers beginning in the 1970s and have instead emphasized the role of evangelical men who rose to prominence in the 1980s.”⁴¹ Hence, Haugeberg adds to the discourse about the rescue movement in two key ways: she notes the instrumental actions of women within the rescue movement, and she traces their contributions to a time before Operation Rescue became known for its vocal male leaders. These interventions place her work in league with works like Hughes’, which examines the anti-abortion movement in the 1970s.



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Furthermore, Haugeberg notes how law enforcement obscured women’s role in the movement by assuming that “violence was the pursuit of male renegades who operated alone” and refusing to investigate whether the violent attacks that occurred between 1977 and 1993 were propagated by a group.⁴² She writes, “Indeed, in 1984, FBI director William Webster explained that the federal government did not classify antiabortion violence as terrorism because the crimes were not committed by a ‘definable group or activity.’”⁴³ Her intervention not only contradicts several decades of the dominant opinion from law enforcement, but it also contradicts the argument Faye Ginsburg puts forward when writing about violent activism within the pro-life movement. Ginsburg states, “The histories of those activists apprehended thus far for bombing and arson of clinics

since 1983 suggest that the destructive violence at clinics is being carried out by fanatic individuals peripheral to the mainstream, both locally and nationally."⁴⁴ Her observations on extremist pro-life activism lack the big-picture perspective that books with greater distance from the events allow. Whereas Haugeberg's book works in hindsight, Ginsburg's book emerges from the period of extreme conflict, where she tries to make sense of the activism without full possession of the facts.

However, Ginsburg makes a crucial observation about these violent activists by noting that "the shift to violence is part of a consistent pattern in American history."⁴⁵ This argument builds on what her book does particularly well: placing current (as of the time she published) anti-abortion activism within a broader historical context and identifying violent activism not as some sort of anomaly, but as the logical next step in an escalating series of actions intended to end abortions in America. Although her observations fall short of identifying violent activism as a cohesive movement, she does lay the groundwork for these later observations by framing violence as part of a repeated pattern in American activism.

Holland's discussion of Operation Rescue focuses on the group's politicization of children. Holland writes, "In 1991, during Operation Rescue's blockades of abortion provider George Tiller's clinic in Wichita, children took center stage—and young children at that. During those months of protest, child radicals stood out from the rest."⁴⁶ Holland argues that utilizing children did not endear Operation Rescue to the public, as, "The young people in the story came across as either fanatical, brainwashed, hysterical or coerced."⁴⁷ Her observation about public perceptions of children in the rescue movement parallels Haugeberg's observations about how the public viewed women like Shannon. Haugeberg writes,

Shelley Shannon's family and friends did not believe

she could have committed the crime spree without help...Even though she had spent the past several years cultivating a place for herself in the extremist abortion movement, Shelley Shannon's family's responses to the shooting indicate that they could not conceive of her as a person who was capable of violence.⁴⁸

Both Haugeberg and Holland note how many people viewed women and children involved in extremist activism as pawns of radical pro-life men. They believed male activists had coerced women and children into violent action. Both Haugeberg and Holland disprove these notions. Holland writes, "What observers missed was that many young people willfully joined this movement and found meaning in it."⁴⁹ Similarly, Haugeberg notes how radical rescuers like Shannon found "personal fulfillment and a sense of community in the extremist wing of the antiabortion movement."⁵⁰ Their interventions hearken back to the work of Faye Ginsburg, who notes how the pro-life women she interviewed used their activism "for interpretation of the self in relation to cultural understandings."⁵¹ She argues that in "a historical moment when there is no clear hegemonic model for the shape of the female life course in America," being involved in activism gave women on both sides of the aisle a purpose and a way to create a sense of self.⁵²

Crisis Pregnancy Centers

On the less physically violent side of the anti-abortion spectrum, we find crisis pregnancy centers (CPCs). In her book, Ginsburg explores Fargo's version of CPCs: "problem pregnancy centers," which were orchestrated through groups like Birthright (a national group that runs CPCs across America) and offered support to pregnant women seeking an alternative to abortion. Ginsburg notes, "Each group [in the problem pregnancy industry] has a different understanding

of the ‘problem’ and the ‘solution.’”⁵³ This quote highlights the tensions that emerged in the CPC movement as a whole: who or what should be cast as the problem—the unwanted pregnancy or the sexual “deviancy” of the mother?—and what was the appropriate solution to that problem—increased sexual education, better birth control, abstinence only sexual education, or resources for already-pregnant women? Ginsburg also comments on how many pro-life organizers argued that the pro-choice position was “due to ignorance of fetal life.”⁵⁴

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Haugeberg and Holland also touch on the presumed ignorance about the “truth” of fetal life in their discussions of CPCs. Haugeberg argues that many CPCs believed that women would not have abortions if they knew their fetuses were “alive.” She writes, “The women who worked at CPCs commonly asked women to hold replicas of fetuses at various stages of development while they asked them about the circumstances influencing their decision about whether to carry their pregnancies to term.”⁵⁵ Forcing women to hold ephemera that cast fetuses as living, breathing babies was intended to discourage abortion. Holland also discusses pro-life ephemera, stating, “Anti-abortion activists would continue to use fetal bodies to tell biological stories...A discussion of heartbeats and brainwaves confirmed the humanity of the fetuses pictured and the fetal bodies authenticated the biological similarities people could not otherwise see.”⁵⁶ Therefore, this ephemera reinforced fetal life as a biological

fact and framed abortion as murder. According to Arizona pro-life activist John Jakubczyk, “Women deep down know that it’s a baby.”⁵⁷ Holland concludes, “In CPCs, it was white pro-life women’s job to reconnect ‘lost’ women to this biological truth.”⁵⁸ This assertion parallels Ginsburg’s observation that pro-life advocates in Fargo believed women would not have abortions if they knew the “truth” of fetal life. All three books, then, chart how CPCs had a vested interest in convincing pregnant women their fetuses were alive. Haugeberg also notes that CPCs tried to convince women not to abort by framing abortion as serious health risk: “Staff warned women that abortion placed them at risk for infections, uterine and bowel perforation, endometriosis, breast cancer, and sterility.”⁵⁹ If CPCs could not convince women that their fetuses were babies, then, they also had the fear of bodily harm to hold over pregnant women’s heads.

Furthermore, both Haugeberg and Holland highlight the deceptive and exploitative nature of CPCs. Haugeberg writes, “CPC staff placed misleading advertisements in the yellow pages and classifieds, hoping to deceive women seeking abortions into calling or visiting their pro-life clinics.”⁶⁰ Similarly, Holland states, “They [CPCs] depended on vague advertisements, refused to refer women to abortion providers, and offered few, if any, medical services.”⁶¹ This deception was intended to lure pregnant women into the CPCs, where workers would guilt, shame, and lecture them into not having abortions. However, despite their exploitative tactics, the CPCs painted themselves as a caring resource. Holland writes, “In CPCs, activists tried to play the role of mothers or friends to women seeking abortions.”⁶² By forming “a personal relationship with an anti-abortion activist,”⁶³ who supposedly had their best interests in mind, pregnant women were less likely to have abortions. However, neither Haugeberg nor Holland fully explore the duality of this identity: CPC employees masqueraded as both legitimate

medical providers and caring friends, meaning that they had to balance professional sterility with friendly warmth. Haugeberg does note that volunteers at CPCs were “often clad in medical attire,”⁶⁴ and Holland writes, “Even though crisis pregnancy center volunteers rejected the gendered alienation that came with being ‘professionals,’ they employed the authority of medicine to make their appeals.”⁶⁵ Yet, neither further explores the contradictions and tensions bound up in playing both medical professional and surrogate mother figure, which leaves a gap for future scholarship about the ideologies and identities of pro-life activists. A further exploration of the racialized component of CPCs would also be instructive. While both Haugeberg and Holland note that CPCs were a woman-only domain “because pro-lifers believed no man could speak from the well of his ‘womanhood experience,’”⁶⁶ only Holland discusses the racial implications of CPCs.

The Recent Anti-Abortion Movement

In more recent years, the contours of the anti-abortion movement have evolved. In writing on the battle over abortion in Louisiana (and examining events there through a nationwide lens), Caroline Hymel argues that “since the legalization of abortion in 1973, [Louisiana’s abortion wars] have passed through three phases that correspond to the shifting tactics of the anti-abortion movement, with each shift reflecting a changing legal environment at the national level.”⁶⁷ Unlike past works, Hymel’s examines the post-1973 movement broadly and creates a methodology for fitting seminal moments into a series of stages. The first phase covers all anti-abortion activism before the 1980s. She marks the second phase of anti-abortion activism as occurring “from the early 1980s to 1994”⁶⁸ and involving “the use of direct-action

protest tactics and violence aimed at clinics, doctors, and women seeking abortions.”⁶⁹ Finally, Hymel states that the third, current phase of anti-abortion activism began in 1994. She writes, “In this final phase, anti-abortion forces returned to the legislative and judicial realms, where the abortion wars persist today, and where, at least until recently, they have scored several decisive victories.”⁷⁰ At this moment in history, scholarship on this third phase of anti-abortion activism is needed more than scholarship on any other phase of the anti-abortion movement. Hymel’s observations about the third phase of activism broadly trace the contours of this historical moment, but lack the depth that comes from a wide body of scholarship. Furthermore, I argue that more research should be done on the usefulness of dividing the movement into phases, as all violent activism did not end in 1994. As Haugeberg discusses in her epilogue, the murder of Dr. George Tiller occurred in 2009, “when popular political commentators routinely vilified the physician.”⁷¹ Haugeberg proves that such acts of violence were accepted tactics of a cohesive, extremist movement. How, then, do we conceptualize violent activism that occurred after phase two of anti-abortion activism supposedly ended? Do we reconsider the divisions between each phase and how we draw those lines? Do we characterize each phase based on the dominant type of activism that occurred during that period and characterize other types as anomalous? Such categorization is by no means straightforward, denoting how further research and examination is necessary for us to understand how the movement has evolved in present times, is still evolving, and where it may shift in the future.

One recent debate in phase three of anti-abortion activism has revolved around “partial birth” abortions. Hannah Armitage states, “The debate over partial birth

abortion has become an effective surrogate for the larger issue of the legal standing of abortion itself.”⁷² She contends that an argument of postabortion syndrome (regret/grief over having an abortion) was one reason given for why partial birth abortions should be banned. She writes, “This reasoning ignores the fact that many women do not come to regret their abortion decisions and for others, different factors are more pressing.”⁷³ Her observations parallel Haugeberg’s and Holland’s, both of whom discuss postabortion syndrome and how it was used to support banning abortions: to “protect” women from resulting grief and regret. In her narrative, Armitage charts how this rhetoric of protecting women from themselves was adopted by those arguing against partial birth abortions: “The argument was that the needs of the mother and child are linked, not adversarial.”⁷⁴ She asserts that this rhetoric “allowed anti-abortion groups to recast themselves as protectors of women,”⁷⁵ but Haugeberg and Holland suggest that anti-abortion activists had always considered themselves protectors of women. Holland shows that anti-abortion activists tried to avoid demonizing women seeking abortions, as demonizing vulnerable women would not help their long-term goals. Instead, they left pregnant women out of their rhetoric completely—for example, “The early anti-abortion group in Colorado rarely discussed pregnant women in its literature”⁷⁶—or attempted to convince pregnant women that keeping their babies was in their own best interest.

Conclusion

As long as abortion remains a contested issue in American society, scholarship on the pro-choice and pro-life movements will continue to be relevant and necessary. While potential topics of study are too numerous to list, scholars should focus on the racial dimensions of the anti-abortion movement and the most recent phase of the movement. For

example, before Shelley Shannon attempted to assassinate Dr. Tiller, she “became friendly with local militiamen and white supremacists,”⁷⁷ including the Aryan Nation. Is there a more concrete link between the extremist wings of the anti-abortion movement and American white power paramilitary groups, beyond the personal connections of one activist? Both white supremacists and anti-abortion extremists organized themselves through cells and participated in terrorist activities to erode the status quo in America. It is possible, if not probable, that some concrete connection between the two movements exists, but only further research can answer this question. Further research should also address how recent developments in anti-abortion activism (such as the Texas and Mississippi abortion bans) fit into the larger historical context of anti-abortion activism and how this broader historical framework informs our understanding of contemporary activism. This is not an abstract field of scholarship; women’s bodies are at stake, and knowledge is just one way to combat current developments. The immediacy of current anti-abortion activism makes further scholarship particularly critical. Knowing why the world is the way it is constitutes the first step in combatting any societal problem—just like the first step in fixing a machine is understanding how it works and what has gone wrong. Until we take steps to expand on that knowledge, we cannot fight for women’s rights and inspire permanent change.

ENDNOTES

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