

# ABORTION AND CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

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A critical aspect of the process by which any controversy is resolved, and on whose terms, is the how the debate is categorized. What kind of debate is it? Religious? Class? Racial? A struggle by defenders of the past to deny progress? Put another way, what is the framework of the debate ?

The abortion controversy in the United States provides the example of an attempt by protagonists to define the nature of the debate itself. To the degree that they are successful they get to set the terms by which it will be decided. The pro-life movement has consistently defined the debate as one of civil rights -- the protection of the most basic of all rights, that of life itself. It has also, among other things, defined the debate as one about the family and its future. Different wings of the pro-life movement are divided in part precisely by this question of what sort of emphasis they place in their definition of the meaning of the abortion controversy. Nor is this necessarily a bad thing: the ability of a movement to present its issue in a multitude of frameworks means that it can be salient to a larger number of people.

However, given the dominance in both the media and the academic world of the supporters of unfettered access to abortion, pro-life frameworks within which to interpret the abortion debate are rarely presented to the public. In some of the journalistic interpretations, most notably Andrew Merton's Enemies of Choice and Connie Paige's The Pro Lifers, opposition to abortion is the product of religious fanaticism, a desire to subjugate women or a sinister grab for power by New Right groups.<sup>i</sup> Echoes of these themes can be found in almost any U. S. History text, where the framework for the abortion debate is seen as denominational and political -- "fundamentalists, Catholics and the New Right" on the one hand, supporters of women's rights on the other.<sup>ii</sup>

Aside from these accounts there are a number of studies which have tried, using the techniques and language of social science, to address the abortion debate directly and to define its place in American society. The most influential of these have been Kristin Luker's Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood and Faye Ginsburg's Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community. For Luker the abortion debate is "a referendum on the place and meaning of motherhood,"<sup>iii</sup> with the defense of the status traditionally associated with motherhood as the real source of pro-life energies.<sup>iv</sup> This is a framework which permits sympathy for Right to Life women but ultimately marginalizes them and diminishes the role played by moral concerns in the shaping of pro-life attitudes.<sup>v</sup> In a similar vein Ginsburg sees it as a struggle between women who have a different view of gender relations and roles.<sup>vi</sup>

It is instructive to turn from both the journalistic accounts and from the academic studies which focus directly on abortion to works which have a wider scope. How does the abortion debate figure in accounts of either modern feminism, or American religion or American history and society as a whole? If we confine ourselves to recent works by

authors who are trying to provide new insight, free of the usual platitudes, we can see how some of the best and most original minds in America describe the controversy. We can learn not only from what they say but also from what they omit, and can gauge the degree to which they transcend popular stereotypes. In the end we can see better what obstacles and opportunities lie before the pro-life movement as it seeks to advance its own definition of the situation. This paper focuses on three recent and very significant books. They are united by the intelligence and erudition of their authors, their moral seriousness and their freedom from some of the conventional cant about abortion. They illustrate both the possibilities for and the limitations of debate about abortion in the current American intellectual world.

While the modern feminist movement has produced sheaves of literature, few accounts from within it have been as sharply critical or insightful as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's Feminism Without Illusions. Its subtitle, "A Critique of Individualism," reveals its focus. In her view modern feminism has to a large extent unconsciously absorbed the individualistic assumptions of the larger culture, to the detriment of an appreciation of the needs of the whole society. This is notably the case with abortion:

Many feminists continue to found some of their most important claims -- above all, the right to "reproductive freedom" and abortion -- firmly in individual right, even as they ground others -- above all, comparable worth -- in a repudiation of individualism. And they ground arguments for affirmative action sometimes in one position and sometimes in the other. Either they do not perceive the contradiction or, worse, they cynically assume that others will not perceive it. In either case they serve their cause poorly and insult the intelligence of the American people.<sup>vii</sup>

Her argument contains the assertion, routine in many circles, that "Most opponents of abortion are not, in truth, especially concerned with women's rights at all...."<sup>viii</sup> No evidence is advanced for this claim. She also makes the argument that the discussion of abortion has to take account of the social realities facing poor women. "The hard truth is that our society is not prepared to provide adequately for children, and those who oppose abortion are, in general, those least in favor of expanding social and family services."<sup>ix</sup> Again, this is unsubstantiated.

Having taken these standard swipes at the pro-life movement, she goes on to raise some suggestive points:

But it is difficult to shake the impression that the right to choice is increasingly being presented as identical not merely to the right to freedom from all forms of sexual oppression, including rape and incest, but to women's right to liberation from the reproductive consequences of their own sexuality -- their right to the male model of individualism. And now we are hearing claims -- admittedly not yet all that widespread -- that pregnancy "colonizes" a woman's body.<sup>x</sup>

She distinguishes, as she claims others do not, between pregnancy and child rearing:

"pregnancy itself does not long interfere with a woman's opportunity to live the life she chooses; child rearing frequently does."<sup>xi</sup>

She goes on to argue that opponents of abortion, like its supporters, have ignored these issues. In doing so she quotes freely from the works of Luker and Ginsburg to establish that the pro-life movement is really based on a desire to preserve traditional patterns of marriage and motherhood. She asserts as well that pro-lifers, like feminists, argue within the constraints of an individualist philosophy. This is only partially true, as some, such as many associated with Feminists for Life have sought a more communitarian ethic.<sup>xii</sup>

Her real fire, however, is directed at feminist supporters of abortion: "It is not easy to reconcile the feminist metaphors of motherhood and community with the feminist defence of abortion on the grounds of absolute right. Surely the special sense of human connection and nurture that so many feminists attribute to women derives primarily from women's special roles as the bearers and rearers of children."<sup>xiii</sup> But this raises a question: if feminists seek to break down the privacy surrounding the family in order to protect women and children, how can they invoke an absolute right of privacy to defend abortion?

It is not to be thought that Fox-Genovese suggests that all abortion be illegalized. Rather, it should be subject to some collective -- as opposed to an individual -- definition of life. She suggests that "Most Americans would probably accept a definition of life linked to the notion of viability and accept abortion on demand up to the twentieth week of pregnancy." In the absence of a collective definition of life the logic of the feminist position on abortion points to an alarming possibility: "the specter of any individual's right to kill those who depend upon her and drain her resources -- elderly parents, terminally ill or handicapped children. Without some such agreement, the right to abortion -- the woman's right to sexual self determination -- can logically lead to the right to murder with impunity."<sup>xiv</sup>

She denies the notion that an abstract dichotomy between life and death is an inappropriate framework to decide on abortion. "The main difficulty with this position lies in its repudiation of any attempt to define life in the abstract. For if a rigid and abstract definition of life embodies dichotomous male thinking, it also embodies the highest standard of civilization -- the greatest respect for human life in all its diversity -- that human beings have been able to devise."<sup>xv</sup> She then ties the issue to capital punishment and notes the opposition to it by pro-choice feminists.

She rejects as well the idea that one human being can decide for another whether they would wish to die. "To say... that we have a right to decide which living being would and would not want to live under which conditions is to assume precisely that arrogant disregard for another's subjectivity for which feminists condemn men's attitudes toward women."<sup>xvi</sup> Given rapid advances in medical technology it is imperative that a collective definition of life be made, "for if we leave the definition of life to individual consciences or convenience, we open ourselves to the worst consequences of atomization."<sup>xvii</sup>

Her preference for the claims of communities over individuals is apparent in her remarks about teenage abortion:

Americans have moved inexorably toward the casting of all members of society and polity as individuals -- toward the introduction of public norms into what had been viewed as the private sphere. For how else are we to understand the implications of the current debate about the right of girls under eighteen to obtain abortions without the consent of their parents? This "progress" has inescapably depended upon the complementary destruction of the rights of community -- understood as binding claims upon individuals.<sup>xviii</sup>

Fox-Genovese can hardly be called a pro-lifer, and she makes a point of disparaging the motives of pro-lifers. This in a sense is irrelevant. What is significant is that from a feminist perspective -- and as a very significant feminist -- she has attempted to recast the abortion issue. Even while accepting the flawed Luker-Ginsburg conception of the pro-life movement she has tried to move beyond the conventional terms in which it is debated. In essence she claims that abortion is currently locked into a framework of two competing claims about individual rights. A new framework would see the power of the community as the new locus of discussion. While this is hardly a position which in itself is enough to satisfy the pro-life movement, pro-lifers would be wise to engage this perspective in a dialogue. In such a discussion it would become clear that her view of the pro-life movement is a caricature and that there are pro-lifers who are indeed focused on the community. More to the point, the fact that abortion is not merely an individual decision with individual results, but an act with profoundly destructive consequences for the community, which the community has a duty to oppose, needs to be established. Fox-Genovese offers a framework within which that case can be made.

If Fox-Genovese could be characterized as politically left and culturally on the right, then a similar label could be used for one of America's best known social commentator, Christopher Lasch. His The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics is a major reevaluation of American history and culture. It is difficult to summarize the whole of this very large work in a few lines, but in essence Lasch is deeply critical of the belief in progress which he sees at the heart of our culture. It promises us a world free from limits, able to conquer the whole of nature and to endlessly multiply and satisfy wants and desires. What Lasch values is a sense of limits and he find this in the lower-middle class. Accordingly he speaks of "the positive features of petit-bourgeois culture: its moral realism, its understanding that everything has its price, its respect for limits, its skepticism about progress."<sup>xix</sup>

In a personal vein Lasch reveals the ways in which the experience of parenthood changed his social views:

The unexpectedly rigorous business of bringing up children exposed me as it necessarily exposes almost any parent, to our "child-centered" society's icy

indifference to everything that makes it possible for children to flourish and to grow up to be responsible adults. To see the modern world from the point of view of a parent is to see it in the worst possible light. This perspective unmistakably reveals the unwholesomeness, not to put it more strongly, of our way of life: our obsession with sex, violence and the pornography of "making it"; our addictive dependence on drugs, "entertainment", and the evening news; our impatience with anything that limits our sovereign freedom of choice, especially with the constraints of marital and family ties; our preference for "non binding commitments"; our third rate educational system; our third-rate morality; our refusal to draw a distinction between right and wrong, lest we "impose" our morality on others and thus invite others to "impose" their morality on us; our reluctance to judge and be judged; our indifference to the needs of future generations, as evidenced by our willingness to saddle them with a huge national debt, an overgrown arsenal of destruction, and a deteriorating environment; our inhospitable attitude to the newcomers born in our midst; our unstated assumption, which underlies so much of the propaganda for unlimited abortion, that only those children born for success ought to be allowed to be born at all.<sup>xx</sup>

For Lasch abortion is "first and foremost a class issue."<sup>xxi</sup> An upper class fully committed to the mystique of progress believes that the future is and ought to be controllable and supports abortion as a necessary means of exerting that control. The lower middle class on the other hand does not believe that the future can be controlled or that abortion is a legitimate means of trying to do so. "Conflicting attitudes about the future, much more than abstract speculation about the immortality of the embryonic soul, underlay the controversy about abortion touched off by the Supreme Court's decision in Roe v Wade."<sup>xxii</sup> In his judgment, "the debate about abortion illustrates the difference between the enlightened ethic of competitive achievement and the petty-bourgeois or working class ethic of limits."<sup>xxiii</sup>

At the heart of the movement in support of abortion Lasch sees something far more than support for women's "rights": he sees an "impatience with biological constraints of any kind, together with a belief that modern technology had liberated humanity from those constraints and made it possible for the first time to engineer a better life for the human race as a whole."<sup>xxiv</sup> For liberals, he says, opposition to abortion "amounted to a betrayal not only of the rights of women but of the whole modern project: the conquest of necessity and the substitution of human choice for the blind workings of nature."<sup>xxv</sup>

It is apparent that Lasch has a deep revulsion for abortion and is sympathetic to the viewpoint of the pro-life movement. With much of what he has to say the movement would be in profound agreement. This being said, however, some cautionary notes seem in order. One is that Lasch does not advance a coherent defence of unborn life, but rather a critique of the mentality which supports abortion. A defense of life may be implicit in his remarks but it is not really his concern to advance one. Rather he is proposing a class analysis of American society, although a rather different one than is usually thought of. This class

conflict is really also a philosophical conflict, and Lasch thus places the abortion debate in a wide setting of progress and its critics. Necessarily the pro-life movement assumes the role of a bit player in a larger drama.

For his account of the pro-life movement Lasch relies very heavily on Kristin Luker's Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood. Unfortunately that work presents at best a fragmentary account of the movement. Much of the opposition to abortion is indeed socially rooted in the kind of traditional lower middle class communities celebrated by Lasch, communities which place a premium on duty, fidelity, hard work and the acceptance of responsibilities, even those not asked for. However, it is more than only that and has a more diverse cast of supporters than is conceded by its opponents or realized even by a friend like Lasch. As much as with Fox-Genovese, Lasch presents a caricature -- even if a friendly one -- of the pro-life movement.

Of what value is the framework offered by Lasch? At first glance it might not seem too helpful for the pro-life movement to be cast as part of a crusade against progress. However, Lasch is perfectly correct in seeing that abortion flows out of the central thrust of "progress" as that is conventionally understood -- as the growth of human power over the world, including the human world. Lasch asserts that the supporters of abortion refuse to accept limits on human activity and argues that an age of looming social and environmental calamity needs precisely such a sense of limits. At a time when the abortion-supporting advocates of population control have taken to a fashionable preaching about "the limits to growth," Lasch provides a framework within which it can be seen that pro-lifers have a far more profound sense of the nature of human limits than their opponents. Indeed a "limits of growth" rhetoric divorced from a recognition of moral limits is worse than hollow -- it is dangerous.

Other commentators besides Fox-Genovese and Lasch have seen in the abortion issue a reflection of profound divisions in American society. In The Restructuring of American Religion Robert Wuthnow notes the way in which the years since 1945 have seen a profound realignment of religion along liberal and conservative lines. He notes that with respect to abortion liberals and conservatives differed fundamentally over whether morality was essentially public or private. "The abortion issue provided an especially heated controversy around which this broader debate could focus."<sup>xxvi</sup>

A more wide ranging examination of the split in American society can be found in James Davison Hunter's Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America. He argues that the old divisions of Catholic and Protestant have ceased to be central. Rather, the division is between what he calls orthodox and progressivist impulses. What is common to the orthodox "is the commitment on the part of adherents to an external, definable and transcendent authority."<sup>xxvii</sup> On the other hand, "what all progressivist worldviews share in common is the tendency to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life."<sup>xxviii</sup> Orthodox Catholics, Evangelical Protestants and Orthodox Jews find themselves united in a number of common causes. These disputes are

not a series of isolated events but are part of a major cultural divide in American life, a "comprehensive and momentous struggle to define the meaning of America."<sup>xxix</sup>

For Hunter America is in the middle of a Culture War and abortion is just one of a number of manifestations of that war. That war is not to be seen as primarily political, although it has political manifestations; nor is it a class war, although

those holding orthodox commitments can be found among the disenfranchised lower middle class, the old petite bourgeoisie who have incurred losses in power and privilege.... The conflict is prepolitical and it precedes class. What ultimately explains the realignment in America's public culture are allegiances to different formulations and sources of moral authority.<sup>xxx</sup>

Hunter has some very insightful things to say about this struggle -- on the role of organizations in sharpening differences, about the ways in which the two sides try to delegitimize each other, about the almost complete breakdown of real dialogue in a situation where there is almost no common ground for discussion, and so on. It is also clear that there are some weaknesses as well. For one thing, he does not make very clear the linkages between the fundamental viewpoints about authority and the political and social positions to which they are tied. This is particularly true of the economic and foreign policy stands characteristic of the two sides. On the abortion issue as well Hunter seems to accept Luker's account of the centrality of motherhood to the pro-life movement. This is disappointing, since one could expect from an observer as astute as Hunter a sharper critique of a flawed analysis.

It must be noted that Hunter does indeed recognize the existence of pro-lifers who go against the general ideological flow:

Some notable ideological cross-currents flow against the larger cultural tendencies. First, even if their numbers are relatively few, one cannot ignore the presence on the public scene of, among others, pro-life feminists and libertarians, Mormon and Pentecostal homosexuals, Evangelical Christian pacifists, and secularists who are politically conservative.<sup>xxxi</sup>

In general terms, Hunter is profoundly right. American culture is divided, and along the lines described -- noting, as he does, the many in the middle who resist sharp polarization. He is right in seeing in most pro-lifers a belief in a transcendent and immutable authority which establishes a right to life.

The problem for pro-lifers with Hunter's framework is this: does the movement really wish to frame its arguments in a fashion unacceptable to a large, growing and powerful sector of the public? If pro-lifers enlist on only one side of the Culture War, what are the prospects for victory? Does it really wish to carry all the baggage of other issues? This is of course part of the classic debate within pro-life: single issue or part of a general

conservative alliance?

Perhaps it should also follow the route of those pointed out by Hunter who go against the flow - who frame their argument in terms of values associated with the modernist side of the culture war. In this case it either finds arguments from within the modernist view, or else it makes clear that without a commitment to the basic right to life, the modernist view is incapable of defending its own core value of respect for the individual.

It is not clear that a commitment to the sanctity of life is ultimately compatible with a world view which rejects the sacred. Nonetheless, pro-lifers should avoid casting their lot with the most extreme polarization of the culture war, and to the extent possible frame the abortion argument in ways accessible to the largest portion of the public. For pro-life this points to a multiple framing of the issue, and this in turn points to the vital role in the movement of diversity -- institutional, ideological and stylistic.

What of the frameworks offered by the three authors examined here? All have something to offer pro-lifers, whether it be a fresh basis for dialogue, a sharper critique of the intellectual roots and moral claims of their opponents, or a clear and comprehensive view of the current cultural battle lines in America. Nevertheless, they tend, particularly Fox-Genovese and Lasch, to a simplified and two-dimensional view of the abortion debate and of the pro-life movement. Even Hunter, who is far more aware of diversity, tends to flatten the abortion controversy and to accept a view of the nature of the movement which does not fully encompass its complexity.

The authors we have looked at are not stupid, not malicious, and hardly advocates of the conventional pro-choice position. What they have to say is insightful -- often brilliantly so, and of real value in the process of rethinking the pro-life movement's engagement with the American public. If they sometimes slip into a view which caricature or simplifies the movement, relegating it to a marginal role, and thus potentially prejudicing the resolution of the abortion conflict, what is happening? In part, the logic of any dichotomous social analysis flattens subtleties. In part, America's intellectual class is so removed from direct contact with the pro-life world that it readily accepts such seemingly plausible accounts as Luker's. The answer would seem to be that pro-lifers must do a better job of telling their own story -- of who they are in all their diversity, and why they believe as they do. They must do this not only in publications directed at other pro-lifers, but in media which will reach the larger society, particularly the elites who shape opinion. To pose the problem is, of course, easier to do than to solve it, but the works which we have just examined give hope that there are some in that world who are open to discussion.



## NOTES

- i. Andrew Merton, Enemies of Choice: The Right To Life Movement and Its Threat to Abortion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981); Connie Paige, The Right to Lifers: Who They Are, How They Operate, Where They Get Their Money (New York: Summit Books, 1983). For a very effective critique of Merton's book, see James Kelly, "Turning Liberals Into Fascists: A Case Study of the Distortion of the Right to Life Movement" Fidelity 6:8 (July /August 1987) 17-22.
- ii. See for example Arthur S. Link, William A. Link and William B. Catton, American Epoch: A History of the United States Since 1900, Vol. II, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1986) 667: "The president, elected in 1980 with the support of Protestant fundamentalist and New Right groups, was strongly committed to reversing the liberalization of restrictions on abortion."
- iii. Kristin Luker, Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) 193.
4. Luker 194: "While on the surface it is the embryo's fate that seems to be at stake, the abortion debate is actually about the meaning of women's lives."
5. For a critique of Luker's argument see Michael W. Cuneo, Catholics Against The Church: Anti-Abortion Protest In Toronto, 1969-1985 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989) 82.
- vi. Faye Ginsburg, Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate In An American Community (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
7. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Feminism Without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) 57.
8. Fox-Genovese 81.
- ix. Ibid.
- x. Ibid. 81-82.
- xi. Ibid. 82.
- xii. See Gail Grenier Sweet, ed., Pro-Life Feminism (Toronto: Life Cycle Books, 1985) and some of the essays in Sidney Callahan and Daniel Callahan, Abortion: Understanding Differences (New York: Plenum Press, 1984).
- xiii. Fox-Genovese 83.

xiv. Ibid. 83-84.

xv. Ibid. 84.

xvi. Ibid. 84.

xvii. Ibid. 85.

xviii. Ibid. 38.

xix. Christopher Lasch, The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics (New York: W. W. Norton Inc., 1991) 17.

xx. Ibid. 33-34.

xxi. Ibid. 491.

xxii. Ibid. 488.

xxiii. Ibid. 489.

xxiv. Ibid. 490.

xxv. Ibid. 491.

xxvi. Robert Wuthnow, The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 212.

xxvii. James Davison Hunter, Culture Wars: The Struggle To Define America (New York: Basic Books, 1991) 44.

xxviii. Ibid. 44-45.

xxix. Ibid. 51.

xxx. Ibid. 118.

xxxi. Ibid. 105.