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Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood

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BOOK REVIEWS

ABORTION AND THE POLITICS OF MOTHERHOOD. By Kristin Luker. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1984. Pp. 324. \$14.95.

Reviewed by Carolyn C. Rea*

Kristin Luker, in her fascinating study of the abortion debate entitled *Abortion & the Politics of Motherhood*, illuminates the way people's beliefs about the morality of abortion are derived from the social world in which they live. Through a study of historical records, literature prepared by "pro-choice" and "pro-life" organizations, and interviews with 212 California activists on both sides of the issue, Luker traces the history of the abortion debate. Luker's central theme is that the abortion debate has most recently become a debate about the proper role of women in society and, in particular, the importance of motherhood in a woman's life. Luker also discusses how small lobby groups with strong convictions concerning abortion have managed to place the power of the state behind their moral positions on this issue.

A heated public debate on abortion is a relatively new occurrence in history. Luker points out that until the 19th century, an abortion performed before quickening was generally ignored. Methods of abortion were passed down from mother to daughter and advertisements for drugs to bring on a late period were quite common. Pregnancy and abortion were considered to be in the woman's private domain. The question of whether abortion was moral was pondered only by philosophers.

Luker states that the morality of abortion became a public concern in America for the first time in 1859, when physicians claimed that American women were committing a moral crime

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by procuring an abortion. Physicians argued that they were in possession of new scientific facts which proved that an embryo was a child from conception. Lobbying by physicians to restrict abortions was so successful that by 1900 every state in the Union had passed laws which made it a felony to perform or procure an abortion unless it was necessary to save a woman's life. These laws made physicians the only group of people legally entitled to make this decision. Luker claims that this first debate on abortion and the ensuing lobbying activity, was a result of physicians desiring to distinguish themselves from their lay competition and to gain control over the administering of abortions. For nearly a century, physicians were allowed to make decisions about abortion without public scrutiny and the abortion debate once again dropped out of public view.

The abortion debate resumed in the 1950s when technological improvements in medical and obstetric care virtually eliminated the need to perform abortions solely to save the life of a woman. This precipitated a crisis in the medical profession as physicians began to disagree on what constituted a justifiable abortion. In California, physicians became afraid that strict construction of the abortion law would hold them criminally liable for abortions they performed for mental and physical health reasons. These physicians demanded that California's abortion laws be reformed to allow abortion in cases of rape or incest, harm to the health of the mother and in cases of fetal damage. In response to the pressure applied by the California Committee on Therapeutic Abortions (composed of physicians, lawyers, social workers and public health officials), California State Senate Bill No. 462 was passed in 1967. This bill provided that an abortion was legal when performed by a qualified doctor, in a certified hospital, in order to prevent mental or physical damage to the woman and in cases where the pregnancy was a result of rape (including statutory rape) or incest.

Luker points out that after the passage of this bill the number of abortions sought and performed in California increased by 2,000 percent! Luker claims that it soon became apparent that abortions were being performed because women wanted them and not because physicians found them medically necessary.

Luker claims that the perceived weakening of the medical control of abortion opened the door for women to challenge phy-

sicians for control over abortion decisions. In the late 1960s a female "pro-choice" constituency was formed called The Society for Humane Abortions which called for the repeal of all abortion laws. Luker believes that several social changes led to the emergence of women as a powerful constituency in the abortion debate.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was an influx of women into the job market. Women often found themselves ghettoized into unattractive jobs and were denied advancement because they were either mothers or potential mothers. Furthermore, as women entered the workforce in large numbers, unplanned pregnancies came to be viewed, by some, as tragedies. Luker believes that many working women began to feel that they couldn't plan or provide for their future effectively if they were not allowed to control their fertility. Hence, abortion increasingly came to be viewed as a fundamental right of women.

Luker claims that *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 United States Supreme Court decision which established a woman's right to abortion without state interference during a limited time in her pregnancy, was influenced by successful lobbying of "pro-choice" groups who presented abortion reform as a national movement backed by massive public support.

Luker claims that since the *Roe v. Wade* decision, the abortion debate has been dominated by two distinct groups of women with different values, experiences and resources. Luker believes that the abortion debate is no longer in the realm of philosophers or medical professionals. The abortion debate is now centered around personal convictions concerning women's obligations to themselves and to others, and the place and meaning of motherhood in society.

In the most controversial section of her book, Luker presents a profile of pro-life and pro-choice activists based on interviews with 212 California activists. As any student of statistics knows, there are dangers in making generalizations based on a small sample which has not been randomly selected. The profiles she presents are, therefore, bound to be criticized by activists and other scholars interested in the issue.

According to Luker, pro-life activists are married, often have large families, and are usually housewives or employed in traditional, poorly-paid female occupations. Pro-life activists

have high school degrees and often an undergraduate degree. Luker claims that pro-life women arrange their lives in terms of the high priority they place on being a mother and a wife. Hence, they usually marry and have their first children at a relatively early age, choosing to forgo a career or higher education.

Pro-life people believe men and women are intrinsically different. Men are best suited for the world of work while women are best suited to raise children, manage homes and care for their husbands. For pro-life people, motherhood is the natural and most fulfilling role for women.

Luker also claims that pro-life activists exhibit a deep seated belief in God and are skeptical about the ability of any individual to understand, much less control, events such as conception, that occur according to a divine plan.

Thus, for pro-life activists abortion is wrong because the ability to conceive and bear a child is what distinguishes women from men. Abortion also breaks the divine law, "Thou shalt not kill," for the embryo is both human and alive. Furthermore, according to Luker, pro-life women believe that when pregnancy is made discretionary motherhood is demoted from the natural role of a woman to merely one job among others. Thus a woman's unique resources as a wife and mother are devalued. Luker also points out that pro-life people fear that if an embryo's life can be terminated at will, an ugly precedent will be set that may allow those in power to take away rights of other defenseless groups, such as the elderly, the physically and mentally handicapped and the economically disadvantaged.

Luker's prototypical pro-choice activist is college educated and usually has a graduate degree. Pro-choice women are more likely than pro-life women to be either single or divorced. Pro-choice activists tend to have small families, and work in high salaried positions. They often postpone marriage and children in order to acquire the skills necessary to be successful in the workforce. Religion is relatively unimportant in their lives. Hence, pro-choice activists are portrayed by Luker as educated, affluent, liberal professionals with a secular outlook on life. Pro-choice activists are concerned with planning and controlling their future in order to improve the quality of their lives.

Luker claims that pro-choice activists believe that men and women are substantially equal and that the reproductive or fam-

ily role of women is a potential barrier to full equality, rather than a natural niche. Pro-choice activists believe that one's sex is not an appropriate criterion for sorting rights and responsibilities among people. Pro-choice activists see involuntary motherhood as an unrewarding role to which women are often confined.

Luker claims that pro-choice activists have a different sense of morality than pro-life activists. Morality for pro-choice activists consists of weighing competing situations and rights and then reconciling them under general moral principles, rather than relying on divine law. Pro-choice activists believe that only individuals, rather than the church or the state, should decide whether or not an individual's action is moral.

For pro-choice activists, abortion should be a private, individual decision, made by women following the dictates of their own consciences. Although pro-choice activists admit that the embryo is both human and alive, they also stress that the embryo is not viable since it cannot survive outside of its mother's womb. Hence, an embryo's rights cannot be equal to those of its mother. Pro-choice activists believe that the rights of an embryo must sometimes be sacrificed to the rights of the mother. For pro-choice women, the ability to have an abortion is necessary to ensure that women can gain the necessary resources for a secure future, including a career and an education. The option of abortion also affords women the opportunity to improve their quality of life so that when they decide to have children they can provide them with the best possible emotional, social and financial resources possible.

Luker also presents her views on the future of the abortion debate. She claims that public support and acceptance of abortion is increasing. At the same time, however, the pro-life movement has recently had several major successes. In 1976, the Hyde amendment was passed, which prohibited the use of public funds to pay for the abortions of the poor. Federal funding for abortions of government employees, military personnel and their dependents has also been cut off. Luker believes these successes are the result of the intensity of commitment exhibited by pro-life activists who feel that their values and lives are under attack. She also believes that the future of the debate depends upon which side captures the majority of people who approve of necessary abortions (such as when a woman's life is in danger, a

pregnancy resulting from rape or incest, or fetal deformities), but are still apprehensive about abortion on demand. Luker believes that the debate will remain heated and the chances for rational discussions and accommodation are slim because the two positions on abortion are not easily reconcilable.

Luker also presents a chilling scenario of the future if Congress continues passing anti-abortion laws. If abortion is severely restricted, the consequences, she predicts, will be similar to those which occurred during *Prohibition*. Those with the money and access to information will be able to get safe abortions. The poor and uneducated will be at the mercy of the unscrupulous and often unqualified "back alley" abortionists. States will regulate abortions without uniformity and the medical profession will be unable to decipher the resulting multitude of regulations. Someone, eventually, will be made an example of and imprisoned for having or performing an abortion for "unauthorized" reasons. Eventually, she also predicts, public opposition to these laws will result in their repeal. Until that future time, however, economically and socially defenseless women will continue to suffer.